

'We Have to Rethink How We Do Our Work'

Leading gay activists discuss future of advocacy, say marriage might be the wrong battle.

By Joshua Lynsen
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Stung by the passage of Proposition 8, leading gay activists are making plans to expand and enhance their advocacy work.

National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Executive Director Rea Carey, Human Rights Campaign President Joe Solmonese and others said their organizations must build stronger advocacy coalitions and give new attention to economic issues.

Carey said the steps are examples of how "we have to rethink how we do our work" and move beyond old activism models.

"Part of this, truly, is our own fault, because we have talked so much about — reactively — about marriage that it's taken over the airwaves for the last eight years," she said. "But we have to start talking about these other issues."

Lisa Turner, a Gay & Lesbian Victory Fund board member, agreed. She noted that activists "won one out of 12 ballot initiatives" on gay issues that were put to voters in 2006 and 2008. "I think it's time now for our community to define the equality agenda," she said. "We have to ask three questions: who, what and where. Who are we? What do we want? And where are we willing to compromise? I think if we can answer those three questions, we will win. We will win policy at the state level. We win ballot initiatives. We will win over legislators. And we will win over the public's hearts and minds over the issues that we know that touch us day to day."

Turner, **Carey** and Solmonese joined Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation President Neil Giuliano to discuss the future of gay advocacy during an International Gay & Lesbian Leadership Conference panel Dec. 6 in Washington, D.C.

The far-reaching, 90-minute discussion came one month after voters in California approved Proposition 8, a measure that stripped same-sex couples of their right to marry.

Solmonese said in the aftermath of that defeat, it could prove difficult for "disparate groups within our community" to move forward together on one set of priorities.

"To come together around a fight for marriage equality is probably the most difficult fight we could come together on in the state of California," he said. "To lay down the foundation of common humanity between communities of color, around mutual life experiences, like inequities to health care or economic inopportunities that we are facing, is the sort of work that we need to be doing if we're going to be so clear about who we are, what we want and how we move forward."

Solmonese and others on the panel agreed that amidst the national recession, a new focus should be placed on the unique economic issues that gay Americans face, such as tax inequities.

"I really do believe that if there is one thing that links us together, it is those economic

disparities,” he said. “Now they may be different degrees of economic disparity, but they’re certainly there.”

Carey said it’s important that gay advocacy groups join general economic discussions because gay Americans, like all Americans, are struggling to afford health care and keep their homes.

“So that’s what I want to focus on,” she said, “is shifting the conversation and the perceptions of who we are as a people so that we are actually part and parcel of solving the problems of our day.”

Giuliano said such integration would help demonstrate the “gay agenda is an American agenda” that seeks to improve the economy, health care and education.

“It’s not about demanding your rights,” he said. “It’s about having the responsibilities and the opportunities to take care of your family. So it really gets down to the basics of delivering our messages and delivering our messages that we know will resonate with people.”

Giuliano told the audience of openly gay elected officials that GLAAD would continue to foster a “culture change” that “enable the kinds of policies, legislation, so forth, that we really want.”

“The reality is that significant change, legislatively or throughout the legal system, is going to be the byproduct of a changing and emerging social consensus,” he said. “Which sort of tells me that, having been an elected person as well, lots of times, and maybe even most of the time, our public policy and our legal issues and framework for the way we live in society is going to follow culture.”

To that end, Giuliano said gay organizations should consider how they can help gay Americans come out.

“Our work needs to focus on providing the encouragement, the support, the infrastructure and the enabling of people to lead authentic lives and tell their stories,” he said.