

GAY RIGHTS

Bill tackles discrimination at work

■ Legislation aimed at preventing workplace discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity has been introduced in the U.S. House of Representatives.

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A bipartisan group of U.S. representatives has introduced legislation that would make it illegal for employers to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity.

"It's about time that working men and women are judged solely on their job performance and not their sexual orientation," said Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, R-Miami, co-sponsor of the 2009 Employment Non-Discrimination Act, or ENDA.

Federal law provides legal protection against employment discrimination on the basis of race, sex, religion, national origin, age and disability, according to Human Rights Campaign, the nation's largest gay-rights group. In 2007, the House passed a version of ENDA that protected on the basis of sexual orientation, but not gender identity, on a vote of 235 to 184.

Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

Action Fund, said the legislation "reflects our country's core values of fairness and equality."

"Passage of this critical legislation would help ensure that people are allowed to participate on a level playing field in the workplace," Carey said.

"People should not have to fear losing their job simply because of their sexual orientation or gender identity."

The current bill does not require domestic-partner

benefits and it exempts religious organizations and the military, Ros-Lehtinen said.

"It doesn't give preferential treatment to people on the basis of sexual orientation. It's a fairness issue. Most people think we have it in place already," she said.

"If you asked people on the street whether it's legal to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, they'd say, 'Of course not.' But it is legal in 30 states based on sexual orientation and in 38 states based on gender identity."

Ros-Lehtinen says that even though many local governments have similar laws, ENDA is needed on a federal level.

"We have so many cases in which people have written to say they've been discriminated because of their sexual

orientation or gender identity," Ros-Lehtinen said.

"Gender identity is so important. We've seen cases, even in Florida, where people have lost their jobs. It should be based on job performance, not an employer's prejudice."

In 2007, Largo commissioners fired longtime City Manager Steve Stanton after they learned

he planned to transition from male to female. It took Susan Stanton nearly two years to find another job. She now works as city manager in Lake Worth.

"It was purely gender identity. I don't think that's what government should be about — discriminating against people," Ros-Lehtinen said of the Stanton case. "ENDA would have given that individual the protection."



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