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Report details anti-gay bias

Friday, October 21, 2005 - Bangor Daily News << Back

Opponents say accounts of discrimination exaggerated, driven by politics

BANGOR - As voters prepare to consider whether to repeal Maine's gay rights law next month, a report released Thursday found that discrimination against homosexuals is a "serious problem" in the state.

The report, from the Portland-based nonprofit Center for the Prevention of Hate Violence, included 63 detailed - but anonymous - accounts of discrimination from 48 people around the state.

"The impact is deep, and the impact is destructive," Stephen Wessler, the center's executive director, said at a Bangor news conference announcing the report's release less than three weeks before the Nov. 8 vote.

On that date, voters will consider whether to repeal the new state law prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation in the areas of housing, employment, education, credit and public accommodations.

Wessler's study found that discrimination in employment was the most prevalent, accounting for nearly half of the cases. Discrimination in education and public accommodations each accounted for 24 percent of the cases, with housing and credit combining for 3 percent of the cases. Interviews included in the study were conducted over four months, and were limited to incidents occurring after Jan. 1, 2000.

Shortly after the study's release Thursday, those pushing for the law's repeal doubted its veracity and objectivity.

"While some claims are no doubt legitimate, there is simply no evidence provided in the report that any of the claims are true," the Christian Civic League of Maine wrote in a special edition of its newsletter. "[T]he public can only conclude that the report is a politically motivated effort to influence the upcoming referendum."

Wessler, a former assistant state attorney general, said his center chose to conduct the study to give voters more information before the Nov. 8 vote. In previous debates, opponents have maintained that discrimination based on sexual orientation is not widespread in Maine.

Jesse Connolly, spokesman for the pro-gay rights group Maine Won't Discriminate, said Thursday that Wessler's independent study clearly showed otherwise.

"It confirms what we knew all along, that discrimination happens, and it hurts real Maine people," said Connolly, noting the report's findings that low-income Mainers were inordinately subjected to discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Opponents of the law, however, drew different conclusions after reading the report, which they said showed a "phenomenally low rate of discrimination, ... a figure so low as to be statistically meaningless."

But Wessler stood by the significance of the report, which among its accounts of discrimination is the story of "Jennifer," a bisexual woman in her 50s who was fired from a midcoast social service agency after her supervisor told her she did not approve of her sexual orientation. "Jennifer's" co-worker later told her the director said, "That's what happens to lesbians."

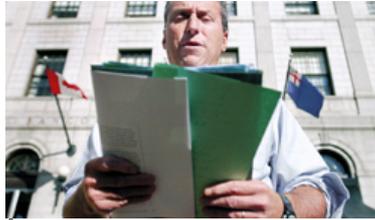
Although the identities of those in Wessler's study were withheld, Adam Flanders of Belfast confirmed Thursday that he was one of the participants. Under the pseudonym "Jason," he described his experience at a midcoast high school, where he said he was subjected to incessant teasing because he was gay.

"[I]t was just hell. It was the worst time of my life," he told one of Wessler's interviewers.

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A Stephen Wessler, executive director of the Center for Prevention of Hate Violence, reads from the study on discrimination against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in Maine. Wessler held a press conference in front of Bangor City Hall on Thursday afternoon announcing completion of the study. BANGOR DAILY NEWS PHOTO BY GABOR DEGRE

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Flanders' account closely mirrored his public testimony to a legislative panel in March in support of the original anti-discrimination bill. When contacted by the Bangor Daily News on Thursday, he said he didn't mind having his identity known.

"To me the most important thing is to get people to understand," said Flanders, 18. "For those who call [the reports] bogus, I think it's just ignorance."

The Maine law, signed in March by Gov. John Baldacci, has been put on hold pending the results of the "people's veto" referendum.

The Nov. 8 vote will mark the fourth time in 10 years Mainers have considered whether to protect gays and lesbians from discrimination. In 1995, voters rejected an attempt to repeal local gay rights ordinances. In 1998 and 2000, they narrowly rejected attempts to add sexual orientation to the state's anti-discrimination laws.

Wessler said his center is taking no stand on the referendum, although he plans to vote against repeal of the law. The center previously has conducted studies on discrimination and harassment targeted at the homeless, Muslims and other immigrant groups.

The Center for the Prevention of Hate Violence report is available at www.preventinghate.org.

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