

Panel to Study Issues Raised by 'Sexual Minority'

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SACRAMENTO—An elderly woman in a nursing home pads quietly down the dimly lit corridor shortly after lights out for a rendezvous with her lover, a widower and fellow resident of the facility.

Suddenly a staff member emerges from a doorway, scolds the woman and sends her back to her room, admonishing that sex is not permitted here.

At a community care center, a resident in his mid-20s with both physical and mental disabilities wants to explore his sexuality with another resident who has become his good friend. But there is no privacy, and the young man is told by the staff to repress his feelings and think about something else.

A high school student wants to sort fiction from fact about sex. So she visits her school library and tries to check out an authoritative source. No, the librarian says, such books are not available for children.

What do the elderly woman, the young handicapped man and the curious schoolgirl have in common? They represent what is euphemistically called the "sexual minority," which roughly translates as anyone who is not a married, middle-aged, middle-income, heterosexual American.

Members of the "sexual minority," who also may be homosexuals or unmarried men and women living together, are victims of subtle and not so subtle forms of discrimination and stereotyping.

They may be family members, friends, neighbors or co-workers, but most members of the sexual majority may have no idea what sexual problems and barriers these "out of the mainstream" people face.

Over the last few years, sexual minorities have engaged in a usually low-key fight for what they regard as a denial of their civil rights simply because they are not "normal." In the process, the movement has developed a degree of political power.

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Brown's Executive Order

And its political clout was felt the other day in Sacramento when Gov. Edmund G. Brown Jr., without fanfare, issued a vaguely worded executive order creating the Commission on Personal Privacy.

At first glance, the 25-member commission appeared to be a political sop to homosexual organizations, whose voices have been among the loudest in demanding reforms against discrimination.

But those who pressed for creation of the commission over the last five years insist that if it is operated properly, the new agency of government will examine problems facing the entire "sexual minority"—not just homosexuals—and better educate the public by exposing sexual myths and stereotypes.

Supporters view it as a first-of-its-type effort in the nation and hope it will serve as a model for other states and even the federal government.

The commission's members will be appointed soon from such backgrounds as labor, business, law enforcement, education and other groups. They will be charged by Brown with studying problems of discrimination based on sexual orientation or invasion of personal privacy, documenting the problems, and making recommendations to him and the Legislature by December, 1982.

To Study Adequacy of Laws

Brown also directed the commission to take note of current remedies and protections against sexual discrimination and to study the adequacy of existing law to protect the personal privacy of all Californians.

Advocates of such a commission maintain that once the public and the policy-makers, such as legislators, have clearer knowledge of the problems facing the "sexual minority," the remedial actions by government or the private sector can be implemented.

Proponents of the commission, such as Barbara Waxman of Planned Parenthood in Los Angeles and Tom Coleman, a Los Angeles attorney, hope that the panel will raise the public consciousness of the problems confronting the "sexual minority."

"Now that the disabled community is quite involved in working for legal civil rights, issues about sexual rights are coming to the forefront of our movement," said Waxman, who works with the disabled. "One of those is the right to privacy."

Five years ago, California enacted a law that abolished certain sex acts as crimes and legalized any sexual conduct between consenting adults in private.

However, as in cases such as those of the 72-year-old woman and the handicapped young man, the law doesn't seem to apply all the time.

State Commission Will Examine Problems Faced by Members of 'Sexual Minority'

Myths About Elderly

Jay Kohorn, a law office associate of Coleman, said one of the stereotypes hovering over elderly people "is that old people don't have sexual drives and don't relate well. If more data is gathered in this area, old people might be more positively looked upon, even by their children.

Added Waxman: "What it means to be a whole human being is to feel and be sexual, no matter how this is expressed. Because a person, a man or woman, has one type of disability or another does not preclude their sexuality or their right to be sexual."

Coleman included California teen-agers under 18 in the "sexual minority" because legally "they have the right to an abortion without parental consent, purchase contraceptives, but they have no right to engage in sexual relations under any circumstances."

Coleman, co-chairman of the National Committee for Sexual Civil Liberties, noted also that members of the "sexual minority" face various forms of discrimination strictly because of whom they choose to live with. Often, members of the sexual majority are unaware of such barriers.

Loans, Conjugal Visits

For example, he said, homosexual couples and unmarried couples living together cannot obtain a GI Bill of Rights loan to buy a home and have the house listed in both names unless both are veterans. For a married couple, only one need be a veteran for both partners to be listed as owners.

For people of the same sex or for unmarried couples, conjugal visits in prisons are prohibited, Coleman said. Likewise, such persons have no right to sue for the wrongful death of a mate.

In California, a married woman or man cannot be required to testify in criminal matters against his or her mate. This privilege does not extend to homosexual or unmarried couples, Coleman said.

He said most group medical and hospital insurance plans do not include the worker's unmarried or homosexual mate for benefits. Most hospitals restrict visits to intensive-care patients to family members only. Un-

married or homosexual partners are not considered family, he said.

Kohorn said he would like to see the commission explode such stereotypes as these:

—Homosexuals try to recruit others into homosexuality and impose themselves on their co-workers.

—Gay people are child molesters.

—Paraplegics who come back from war do not have or should not redevelop sexual drives.

—Homosexuality is contagious.

Panel in Pennsylvania

Coleman, one of the chief advocates of the commission, said he got the idea from a similar panel in Pennsylvania, which he described as basically an advocacy group for homosexual rights. He said the panel met with government officials and homosexuals and tried to amicably resolve an issue or controversy.

"This is something that has to be brought back to California," Coleman recalled his thinking. "There are other ways to try to solve problems other than by introducing bills in the Legislature or filing lawsuits in the courts. We've got to go to the executive branch."

Gray Davis, chief of staff to Brown, said the commission's roughly estimated \$100,000-to-\$200,000 in operating expenses to prepare the report would be financed from existing sources of revenue and the administration now does not intend to ask the Legislature for an appropriation.

"We'll suspend judgment on the desirability of perpetuating this commission until its report is completed," Davis said.