

Monday, April 20, 1998

Domestic partners: Let's expand the family

By Thomas F. Coleman

For years, the Philadelphia City Council has struggled over the issue of domestic partnership benefits. The council appears politically divided, with some members favoring a "gays-only" proposal, others wanting a more inclusive measure, and still others adamantly opposed to any reform.

After a meeting with gay and lesbian leaders, Council President John Street recently agreed to schedule hearings, possibly by the end of this month. In response, Cardinal Anthony J. Bevilacqua sent a letter to 121 Catholic parishes urging parishioners to sign petitions against benefits for same-sex couples.

But the most important issue is not merely whether the bills should pass, but whether *all* domestic partners should be included. Will the politics of inclusion carry the day, or will we keep trying to see this as special-interest legislation?

Most municipalities offering such benefits extend them to all domestic partners, regardless of gender. Of nearly 40 cities and counties with such plans, only seven restrict participation to gay and lesbian couples. New York and Boston considered and rejected a gays-only approach to domestic partnership.

A diverse coalition of groups supports an inclusive approach. The National Organization for Women supports domestic partnership laws that do not discriminate based on sex. The American Association of Retired Persons and the Older Women's League have lobbied for domestic partnership bills that protect same-sex and opposite-sex domestic partners alike.

Public opinion seems to favor this approach as well. Opinion polls reveal that the public does not believe that two people must be married in order to be a family. (That may well reflect reality in a town such as Philadelphia, in which only 38 percent of households contain a married couple.) Polls also suggest that the public may see this as a fairness issue, with most respondents supporting the notion that single workers should not have to get married in order to receive equal pay at work.

The most vocal critics of domestic partnership legislation, including Philadelphia's Catholic Archbishop, cite moral objections against rewarding so-called sinful sexual behavior. This argument would be diffused if the council moves away from the current gays-only proposals and instead adopts an inclusive plan that keeps sexual conduct out of the picture.

Philadelphia should look at the benefits page in Bank of America's personnel manual. Just this year, the bank expanded its benefits to cover "extended family" members of employees.

Under its program, each bank employee may designate one adult household member to receive benefits, so long as the beneficiary is either a spouse, a domestic partner of the same or opposite sex, or a close blood relative under age 65 who is a federal tax dependent of the employee. If a conservative bank can adopt the politics of inclusion, why can't the Philadelphia City Council?

An inclusive plan eliminates the presumption of sexuality from a benefits reform package. That is why the Conference of Catholic Bishops in California agreed to withdraw opposition to domestic partnership health benefits so long as blood relatives are not excluded from participation.

Other religious support for inclusive domestic partner health benefits is growing. For example, a group of 11 ministers in California — representing the Episcopal, Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, and Presbyterian faiths — recently sent a joint letter to the California legislature supporting an inclusive domestic partner health benefits bill. Even the Catholic Archdiocese in San Francisco now gives health benefits to one member of an employee's household, who can be a spouse, a domestic partner, or a blood relative.

What's good enough for these Catholic and Protestant ministers and bishops should be morally acceptable to the Philadelphia City Council.

An inclusive plan would not have a high price tag. Reliable studies show that plans offering health benefits to both gays and straight domestic partners increase costs, on average, by only about 1 percent. The addition of some dependent blood relatives who live with an employee might increase that percentage slightly, but it won't break the bank.

Thomas F. Coleman is executive director of Spectrum Institute, a national think tank on family diversity and marital status.