

COUNTY LIKELY TO OK SAME-SEX PLAN

By Terry Wilson
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March 19, 1999

An ordinance that would provide medical and other benefits for same-sex couples when one or both are Cook County employees was approved by a County Board committee after an often contentious meeting Thursday morning.

The ordinance, sponsored by Commissioner Mike Quigley and co-sponsored by seven other commissioners including Board President John Stroger, next will appear for a vote before the full board on April 6.

Quigley seemed frustrated at times by members of the audience who demanded they be allowed to voice their opposition, though they had done so at a public meeting last week. One man demanded to be heard "for one minute" though he had already spoken Thursday morning. But once all had had their say, the vote was swift and adjournment of the three-hour meeting even swifter.

"It's about equal pay for equal work," Quigley said to the audience. "This is one step toward that end. The measure has been in place for two years in the city of Chicago, and it has worked well."

While several speakers from religious groups opposed the ordinance and called what it represented "ungodly" and "immoral," others challenged it because it would provide benefits only to same-sex couples and not to opposite sex couples who are living together.

"All single people deserve equal pay for equal work," said Thomas Coleman, director of the American Association for Single People. "You've determined that marital status is irrelevant to job performance. Now, you're asking the county to legalize sexism in its benefits plan."

Byron Cleaves, a former Chicago police officer who has filed suit challenging the City of Chicago's ordinance, asked the commission to include unmarried heterosexual couples in the plan.

He said he was fired from his job when he took a day to support his domestic partner--his girlfriend--when a close relative of hers died. He is suing because the ordinance did not give him domestic partner protection.

"If you have it for one, you have to have it for the others," Cleaves said. "I've been bitten by this."

Commissioner Calvin Sutker said the board could consider adding unmarried heterosexual couples to the ordinance later.

The ordinance, which is patterned after the city's policy, will extend to same-sex couples the same health and family-leave benefits provided to married county employees.

Those interested must fill out an affidavit of domestic partnership that states they have lived together continuously for more than a year and share financial obligations, such as a joint bank account or a joint title to a car.

Quigley said he expects the ordinance to pass.

"It has nine co-sponsors, and we only need nine votes, said Kelly Cassidy, the deputy director of intergovernmental affairs for the Cook County state's attorney's office. "We expect to have more (favorable votes) than that."

Quigley said only 31 of Chicago's 42,000 employees have received domestic partner benefits.

He said that he expects a similar percentage of the county's 28,000 employees would seek the benefits, which could be made available to employees later this year.