

Daily Journal

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City to Study Marital Status In Bias Probe

By G.M. Bush

Daily Journal Staff Reporter

A law professor has been named to chair a newly formed task force whose mission is to evaluate the extent of discrimination against unmarried couples and singles in the pricing and availability of goods and services in Los Angeles.

The Consumer Task Force on Marital Status Discrimination, formed by City Attorney James K. Hahn, will hold its first meeting today with Thomas F. Coleman, an adjunct professor at the USC Law Center, presiding.

Meeting with reporters in City Hall East Monday morning, Hahn said discrimination against unmarried couples and singles is widespread in the city. Yet, he said, only 22 percent of Los Angeles households are composed of the traditional family of mother, father and children.

'Think in New Ways'

Public and private organizations must come to terms with today's reality of a changing society, Hahn said, a reality that makes it necessary "to think in new ways."

Coleman said the question is not one of whether such discrimination exists, but rather one of how widespread a practice it is and how it can best be fought and overcome.

He noted that some health spas and airlines have recently changed their rules to extend to unmarried couples and individuals benefits that were previously available only to a husband and wife.

In many cases, Coleman said, such discrimination is already against the law.

Hahn, proclaiming "the face of discrimination in any form is ugly," issued a list of categories the task force will investigate. These include:

- Rental housing, where some landlords refuse to rent to unmarried couples;

- Membership discounts, such as those offered by certain automobile clubs, health clubs and airlines to legally married couples but not to others;

- Insurance — Hahn said he has asked the panel to examine the application of the Unruh Civil Rights Act to the insurance industry as provided for in the Proposition 103 insurance reform measure passed last November;

- Health care services;

- Residential care facilities, some of which deny privileges to elderly or disabled individuals solely because of their marital status;

- Survivors' rights, in which "some individuals have experienced traumatic difficulties in making necessary arrangements with hospitals, mortuaries, and cemeteries when their unmarried partner dies."

The task force will hold monthly public hearings and in March will issue a final report with recommendations to the city attorney, Coleman said. Recommendations could call for a more stringent application of existing state and local laws or the passage of new, tougher standards, he said.

Several lawyers will sit on the 21-person committee, including Deputy City Attorney Sue Frauens, who heads Hahn's Consumer Protection Unit; private practitioner Thomas DeBoe; Joseph Rhine, managing attorney of Protection and Advocacy Inc.; and Deputy City Attorney Alana Bowman, who heads the Domestic Violence Unit in the City Attorney's Office.

Other panel members include Roger Kohn of the American Civil Liberties Union and Christopher McCauley, a member of the city's Human Relations Commission.

Research assistance will be provided by three USC law students: Michael Cautillo, Sharon Sandler and Dan Redman.

Coleman, who is single, said he has experienced marital status discrimination. Hahn, who is married, said he has been an unwitting beneficiary of discriminatory practices, as have most husbands and wives.

Coleman — who teaches a class on the rights of domestic partners and is an advisor to the Legislature on the subject — noted that the state Fair Employment and Housing Commission recently ruled that a landlord cannot legally refuse to rent to unmarried couples, even if sex outside marriage goes against the landlord's religious beliefs.

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Bias Against Single People Is Targeted

By JANE FRITSCH
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Citing concern about "unjust" business practices, City Atty. James K. Hahn announced Monday the formation of a task force to study discrimination against single people and unmarried couples.

The task force will hold a series of public hearings focusing on consumer problems, such as discrimination by landlords, insurance companies and even airline frequent flier programs.

"I'm married and I get a lot of benefits from being married," Hahn said. "Most of us aren't living in traditional American families anymore, and the rights and privileges extended to a few should be extended to everyone."

Only 22% of the households in Los Angeles are "so-called traditional family units" composed of "mom, dad and the kids," Hahn said.

The task force will hold public hearings to determine the nature and extent of "marital status discrimination," Hahn said, and will review the adequacy of existing anti-discrimination laws.

Hahn's office became involved in the issue after a city report published in May, 1988, recommended that the city attorney begin monitoring complaints about "life-style discrimination" filed with the state insurance commissioner and other agencies.

Hahn's task force will be headed by Thomas F. Coleman, an attorney who is single and is an adjunct professor at the USC Law Center.

Coleman said Monday that recent studies have shown that businesses discriminate against single people and pointed out that some insurers refuse to issue automobile insurance policies to single men in certain age groups.

He said the task force will examine a range of consumer issues, including the policies of some airline frequent-flier programs that place limitations on their awards based on marital status. Other issues that will be studied are discrimination in rental housing, automobile and health club membership discount policies, health care services and survivors' rights.

The task force is expected to report back to Hahn by next March. Hahn selected the 21-member task force from a group of nominees proposed by government agencies, businesses and community organizations.