

## Ill. lawmakers consider gay marriage rights

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By Gary Barlow, Staff writer

After celebrating passage of a landmark civil rights bill in January 2005, many Illinois GLBTs turned their eyes toward the next goal in the struggle for GLBT equality—equal rights for gay and lesbian couples.

That fight has been waged in other states and countries in recent years—Massachusetts, Vermont, Connecticut, California, Canada, Spain, England and elsewhere—and has encompassed battles for full marriage equality as well as civil unions and civil partnerships.

But aside from a few noisy protests, there's been little visible movement on the issue in Illinois. Some legislators and advocates hope that's about to change—perhaps next spring.

"I was ready to push it this year," says Ill. state Rep. Sara Feigenholtz (D-Chicago). "I don't think it would have passed. But I believe that we have to continue pushing forward."

Feigenholtz and other Chicago-area Democratic state legislators, including Sens. John Cullerton and Carol Ronen and Reps. Julie Hamos and Larry McKeon, have been meeting regularly with advocates from Equality Illinois, Lambda Legal and the American Civil Liberties Union to craft legislation that would grant gay and lesbian couples in Illinois some or all of the rights accorded to married couples.

"There's been a lot of work and a lot of meetings and drafting of legislation, particularly around hospital visitation and medical decision-making," Feigenholtz says.

She and other members of the ad hoc group agreed to hold off after getting a bill passed last year to ban discrimination against GLBTs, an effort that began in the 1970s.

"This being an election year, we knew that the General Assembly wasn't inclined to take on anything they didn't have to," says Rick Garcia, political director of Equality Illinois. "There was a general consensus that we had just passed a big bill, so let's get through an election cycle first."

The effort taking shape may go forward one step at a time—first granting couples hospital visitation rights and giving partners decision-making powers if their partners are incapacitated, then moving on to matters such as inheritance and other rights. Depending on the composition and atmosphere of the Legislature, the effort could move more quickly.

“There may be individual pieces of legislation, and there may also be a huge partners bill,” Garcia says.

While Vermont’s legislature was ordered by its state’s highest court to implement civil unions, Connecticut’s legislature approved civil unions on its own, and last September California’s assembly voted for gay and lesbian marriage, though not by enough of a margin to override GOP Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger’s subsequent veto.

With Illinois being one of the bluest of the so-called “Blue States”—a state where Democrats control both U.S. Senate seats, the Legislature, the governor’s mansion and all but one statewide office—how hard could it be to pass civil unions or even full marriage equality?

“I think it’s going to take some time,” says McKeon, the state’s only openly gay legislator. “Public opinion is changing in our favor. Just as it took some time for public opinion to shift in our favor on human rights, I think we’re seeing it shift in our favor on marriage, and I think it’s shifting much faster than it did on human rights.”

On the opposite side of the issue, Illinois has been a difficult place for right-wing groups to pass a statewide constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage. McKeon and Garcia credit Illinois’ moderate leaders for thwarting those efforts.

Just how “blue” Illinois remains after the November general election could impact how far the state goes on gay and lesbian partners’ rights when the Legislature re-convenes next year.

“It depends on how the election goes, on who wins in different districts,” says Ronen, a top Senate Democrat. “If the Democrats win the constitutional offices again, if the governor’s reelected, if we can pick up some legislative seats, then we stand a chance of moving forward next year.”

If that happens, Feigenholtz says she’ll be looking to Gov. Rod Blagojevich (D) for leadership on the issue.

“There are a lot of people in the General Assermbly who, in their tenure there, want to see things move forward,” she says. “I’m hoping that our governor, as he has in the past, will understand the LGBT community, and make a bold step.”