



Activists want Illinois to OK civil unions

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SPRINGFIELD -- Associated Press In the wake of victories for same-sex marriage in other states, Illinois gay-rights activists plan to push forward soon with legislation to allow civil unions -- but not marriages.

Iowa and Vermont this month became the newest states to let gay couples marry, creating momentum supporters hope will persuade Illinois to take a step in that direction.

"Illinois never wants to be behind Iowa on doing anything," Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, a Chicago Democrat and longtime supporter of gay rights, said Friday.

But Illinois lawmakers aren't discussing gay marriage. Instead, some are pushing for civil unions that would give same-sex couples some benefits of marriage -- like the right to make a partner's emergency health care decisions -- without letting them tie the knot.

The problem, advocates say, is convincing on-the-fence legislators that civil unions are about recognizing relationships, not legalizing gay marriage. They hope approval of same-sex marriages in other states will make civil unions seem like an acceptable compromise in Illinois.

Opponents of civil unions intend to fight any legal recognition for same-sex couples. They argue even civil unions would open the door to gay marriage, which they consider an affront to traditional marriage and religious liberty.

"Counterfeit marriage doesn't play in Peoria, said David E. Smith, executive director of the Illinois Family Institute.

Opponents of civil unions say gay couples can seek a power of attorney to legally dictate who can make those health care decisions, visit them in hospitals, take possession of a deceased partners' remains or inherit their estate.

"They're not being denied anything," said Smith, who predicted other states flirting with gay marriage laws won't make much difference in Illinois.

Supporters feel confident they can find enough votes to pass civil unions in the state Senate. The battleground will be the House.