

**Paper: Oregonian, The (Portland, OR)**

**Title: DOMESTIC PARTNERS City should extend its equal benefits law**

**Date: April 10, 2006**

Put simply, if a city contractor offers either employer-paid or employee-paid benefits to the families of its workers, it needs to offer those benefits equally --regardless of what those families look like.

Let me tell you about Kelly and Dolores. They've been a family for 17 years. While Dolores works as an electrician, Kelly stays at home to care for their 4-year-old son, Avery, and newborn baby girl, Evan.

Dolores' health care policy covers employees, married spouses, biological children, stepchildren, adopted children and anyone an employee is caring for such as siblings, parents, grandchildren, nieces and nephews. But the policy does not cover domestic partners. It does not cover Kelly, her partner of nearly two decades. This is wrong.

I am pro-family. Society benefits when two people like Kelly and Dolores make a long-term commitment to creating a family. Government should encourage the health and prosperity of all such families.

Sadly though, most federal and state laws that are designed to encourage families treat some as second-class. Families headed by married couples of opposite gender are awarded tax benefits and rights for being committed partners. Families headed by unmarried couples or couples of the same gender, who are not allowed to marry in Oregon, receive no tax benefits and few rights for being committed partners.

As a city commissioner, I cannot introduce federal or state changes to bring equality to all families. I can, however, help to end this second-class treatment at the city government level.

Our non-discrimination laws apply "whether carried out by the city of Portland directly or through a contractor." As a result, city benefits have applied equally to all employees' families since we began offering domestic-partner benefits in 1994. On Wednesday I will introduce to the City Council an **Equal Benefits Ordinance** to ensure we are also following this standard when contracting.

Put simply, if a city contractor offers either employer-paid or employee-paid benefits to the families of its workers, it needs to offer those benefits equally --regardless of what those families look like.

If a city contractor does not offer benefits to the spouses and partners of its workers, I would not force them to do so --although I wish they would. But the city's principle of equal pay for equal work is clear. When you offer benefits to one kind of family, you offer benefits to every kind of family.

More than two decades of data speaks for itself; covering domestic partners is of no more risk to insurers --and should impose no additional costs --than covering spouses. Many Oregon insurers do not tack on these extra costs.

This is not a unique piece of legislation. Portland would join 12 other government jurisdictions to enact such policies. Their experiences, from tiny Tumwater, Wash., to sunny Miami Beach has been overwhelmingly positive and met with minimal costs to government and contractors.

Healthy families are the bedrock of our city. I will do all I can to ensure they are considered fairly. As Kelly wrote to my office recently, "If the city of Portland's [equal benefits ordinance] helps set the standard for what's right and decent, then maybe organizations will rise to a new level --and take care to treat everyone equally."

Exactly.

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*Section: Editorial*

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