

Official: Diversity a necessary value in government, business

U.S. Department of State Chief Diversity Officer John Robinson speaks to Charlotte Business Guild

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CHARLOTTE — The U.S. Department of State's chief diversity officer told a group of LGBT community and business leaders gathered at Uptown's Crown Plaza Hotel on May 17 that a commitment to diversity and equality is a necessary component of his work and valued by President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

John Robinson, director of the State Department's Division on Civil Rights, is responsible for equal employment opportunity enforcement at the U.S. State Department. Invited by the Charlotte Business Guild, an LGBT business networking organization, and a host of other local LGBT groups, Robinson spoke to community leaders on the necessity for diversity in the federal workforce.

The U.S. State Department has been on the forefront of LGBT equality initiatives. Under President Obama and Secretary

Clinton, the department has instituted various initiatives to provide fair and equitable treatment of LGBT employees and their partners. In June 2009, the Obama Administration extended equal family benefits to both same-sex and opposite-sex domestic partners of civil service and foreign service employees, as well as children of those partners. Similar benefits were offered to all federal employees by presidential memorandum in June 2010. Those benefits include travel arrangements, health and leave benefits and insurance benefits.

Robinson also spoke on the general need for diversity inclusion in business environments, both public and private.

"It is the business case that makes the difference," Robinson told a crowd of close to 100 attendees. "It's nice when people do things because it's the right thing to do but to make progress in your community

you have to find the business case. People have to see that it is in their organizational best interest in order to get the best talent, in order to be elected or in order to get your business."

Responding to critics who say such business-focused initiatives often fail to change hearts or minds, Robinson said there remains room for achievement.

"Start with the behavior modification, then sometimes the heart will follow," he said, "but even if it doesn't, if behavior modification becomes permanent, then that's progress."

Commitments to diversity and inclusion start from the top and work their way down; such leadership is outspoken and intentional, Robinson said.

"It turns out that to be the best diversity manager, you have to declare your values and make them clear to people," he said. "It also means in order to be effective ... you



Director of U.S. Department of State Office of Civil Rights John Robinson speaks to the LGBT leaders and community members at the Charlotte Business Guild.

have to be clear in your commitment — to make it visible, to make it verbal, to make it high profile."

Effective leadership also sets goals and keeps them in mind, Robinson suggested.

"In terms of a policy agenda we are bringing, ask yourself what you want the end in mind for your community to be," he said. "What do you want the end in mind to be here in Charlotte? And, what can you do to bring it about? We're all involved in that ... What's it going to be at the end?"

The key to success, he said, is personal: "As far as a 'magic bullet' — you are the magic bullet. It's us. It's about leadership. It's about community and honesty. It's about being willing to share personal stories even when it's uncomfortable."

Robinson's speaking engagement is the second time in as many months that federal officials have visited Charlotte to speak on LGBT issues. In April, Assistant U.S. Attorney General for Civil Rights Thomas Perez spoke on bullying and LGBT inclusion at Northwest School of the Arts. Afterward, he joined U.S. Attorney for the Western District of North Carolina Anne Tompkins, who is lesbian, in a closed-door meeting with LGBT community leaders.

The Charlotte Business Guild meeting was also sponsored by the local steering committee of the Human Rights Campaign, Equality North Carolina and the Mecklenburg LGBT Political Action Committee (MeckPAC). ::

Corrections

In our April 30, 2011, print edition article on a Charlotte production of the musical "RENT," we incorrectly identified the role to be played by Calvin Grant. He will star as character Tom Collins, a role in which he was also cast on Broadway. We regret the error.

Have corrections to send our way? Feel free to let us know via editor@goqnotes.com or by calling 704-531-9988, ext. 202.

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