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Advances, losses for gays in '98

by Dan Van Mourik
Q-Notes Staff

WASHINGTON, DC—Congress grappled with several gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) measures during 1998 and the results show that the 105th Congress was less than gay-friendly. No gay-supportive measures were passed at all. And while some of the anti-gay legislation was defeated, the mere fact of these bills and amendments being introduced displays the ongoing negativity directed at our community.

In addition to voting on legislation itself, many measures were and still are stymied in committee. The two most widely reported pieces of legislation stuck in this limbo are the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (one vote short of being able to report the bill out of committee) and the Hate Crimes Prevention Act. Similarly, the nomination of openly-gay philanthropist James Hormel as ambassador to Luxembourg died when the Senate adjourned at the end of last year after Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-MS) refused to schedule a vote on the nomination.

The Congressional record on HIV/AIDS-related legislation is far more positive. Several programs received increased funding and most all measures viewed as detrimental to HIV/AIDS prevention and patient care were either defeated or passed and never signed into law.

The states

A record number of GLBT and HIV/AIDS-related measures were introduced in state legislatures across the country in 1998. The Na-

tional Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) tracked 258 measures compared to 248 in 1997 and 160 in 1996. A number of these were related to hate crimes and attacks on same-sex couples and their families.

"Both the right wing and our community understand that the decisions most potently and directly affecting the lives of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people are those that occur at the state and local level. It is no surprise that we have therefore seen an increase in gay-related legislation for the third year in a row," said NGLTF executive director Kerry Lobel. "Our community's challenge for 1999 is to be visible, vigilant and vocal," she added.

Some of the highlights for 1998 include the overturning of Missouri's anti-marriage bill; the overturning of Georgia's sodomy law; the repeal of Rhode Island's sodomy measure; the passage of a hate crimes bill in Kentucky; and the expansion of California's hate crimes bill to include transgender as a category.

Some of the lowlights include the veto by California governor Pete Wilson of a bill that would have created a statewide HIV tracking system that did not include the names of those infected; the repeal of Maine's civil rights law; the passage of anti-marriage bills in six states; the failure of the Wyoming legislature to pass a hate crimes bill covering sexual orientation following Matthew Shepard's murder; overall increase in legislative attacks on GLBT families; and, of course, the passage of anti-marriage ballot initiatives in Hawaii and Alaska that allow the legislature in each to limit marriage rights to opposite-sex couples only. ▼



Newly-elected House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert (R-IL) swears in Baldwin

Photo: Patsy Lynch/Victory Fund

First open lesbian joins Congress

by Wanda Pico
Special to Q-Notes

WASHINGTON, DC—Tammy Baldwin made American political history on January 6 when she was sworn into office as the United States Representative from Wisconsin's 2nd Congressional District. She is the first openly-gay non-incumbent ever to serve in the US Congress.

"Tammy Baldwin's very presence on the floor of the House will have a phenomenal impact on breaking down antigay barriers across the country," said Brian K. Bond, executive director of the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, the only national organization whose sole mission is to increase the number of qualified openly gay and lesbian public officials. "Thanks to live televised coverage of Congress, millions of Americans will now see an extraordinary Congresswoman — who happens to be a les-

bian — fighting for things they care about, like health care and education. And they, like the fair-minded Wisconsinites who sent Tammy to Washington, will be able to move beyond the issue of sexual orientation and realize that good government comes from good leadership — which is exactly what Congresswoman Baldwin brings to the House."

The Victory Fund also hailed Tammy's place in history as an exceptional role model for GLBT youth. "Like all young people, gay kids need someone to look up to, something to aspire to and someplace they can feel safe," said Victory Fund Political Director Kathleen DeBold. "The opening of Tammy Baldwin's congressional office has given them all three."

In related news, Mark Pocan, the openly-gay Victory Fund-supported candidate who won the Wisconsin State Assembly seat vacated by Baldwin, was sworn into office January 4. ▼

Celebrities sought in AIDS war

by Steven Fisher
Special to Q-Notes

WASHINGTON, DC—AIDS Action, the nation's largest grassroots AIDS advocacy organization, is looking to Hollywood for help in reinvigorating HIV prevention efforts. In letters to President Clinton and four celebrity AIDS leaders — Sharon Stone (*Casino*), Tom Hanks (*Saving Private Ryan*), Madonna (*Ray of Light*) and Lauryn Hill (*The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*) — AIDS Action Executive Director Daniel Zingale tried to enlist support for a new era of prevention in a new era of AIDS.

Zingale sent letters to the four stars urging them to lead an effort for prevention education through increased funding, truthful behavior education, a national testing campaign and more responsibility in films and television programs that portray risky sexual activity.

"These four continue to demonstrate that real celebrity leadership means simply more than wearing a red ribbon [to awards shows],"

Zingale said. "The paralysis in prevention is the epicenter of the new AIDS complacency crisis."

"The gaping leadership hole in today's war on AIDS is in HIV prevention. The power of several top celebrities could help turn the tide. Today's young people need new role models and [to] hear new voices about HIV and AIDS."

AIDS Action is urging the celebrities to use its 10-point Virtual Vaccine prevention plan as a foundation for a Hollywood effort. Among the proposals are a 25 percent increase in federal prevention spending, condom ads on television programs rated "S" for sexual content, a national testing campaign to reach the estimated 300,000 HIV-positive Americans who

are unaware of their status as well as support for better substance abuse treatment programs.

"Hollywood has a responsibility to portray the reality of sex, not just the fantasy," Zingale charged. "A central component of any serious Hollywood war on AIDS must include a more responsible message about sex."

In his letter to the White House, Zingale also urged President Clinton to increase prevention and substance abuse treatment funding in his Fiscal Year 2000 budget expected to be released by the end of this month. For the past several years, prevention funding has been flat while HIV infection rates have increased.

"Reinvigorated prevention is the missing piece of the Clinton battle plan," Zingale said. "While our investment in AIDS care and research is paying off through lower death rates, our divestment from HIV prevention is creating a new generation of Americans."

Recent epidemiological and anecdotal evidence points to a disturbing increase in unsafe activity among at-risk populations, particularly young people and minorities. Indeed, half of the 40,000 new HIV infections every year are among people under 25. In addition to the flat prevention funding during the last several years, the Clinton Administration and Congress have proposed no new major prevention initiatives.

AIDS Action is concerned about the misperception that new life-prolonging AIDS drugs are somehow a cure. The fact is that the current generation of AIDS drugs have debilitating side effects, require strict adherence to an oppressive regimen and, most disturbing, their long-term effectiveness is a mystery. ▼



Sharon Stone

Photo: Brian Hamill

Report focuses on lesbian health

by David M. Smith
Special to Q-Notes

WASHINGTON, DC—A long-awaited report on lesbian health by the Institute of Medicine illustrates the need for more research even as it details the many barriers to conducting this important work.

"This report is as important for what it doesn't say as for what it does say," observed Kim I. Mills, director of education at the Human Rights Campaign (HRC). "It reveals how little is really known about lesbian health issues and points up the need for much more research. We hope it will break down some of the barriers to more and better research into lesbian health, and that it will send a signal to private and public funding sources that this work is needed and valuable."

The report, entitled "Lesbian Health: Current Assessment and Directions for the Future," is the federal government's first comprehensive assessment of the research related to the physical and mental health of lesbians and examines what is known about lesbians' risks for conditions including cancer, mental illness, HIV infection, substance abuse and sexually transmitted diseases. The report also explains the difficulty in defining the term "lesbian" and thus finding representative sample populations to study, and it discusses reasons why lesbians might not be obtaining the care they need.

"It is historic that the nonpartisan Institute

of Medicine has recognized the importance of setting a lesbian health agenda within the context of women's and gay men's health," Mills added. "This publication establishes that lesbians have unique health needs and challenges the scientific community to learn about them."

Many lesbians may be at greater risk for certain conditions, such as breast or cervical cancer, because it is believed they don't bear children at the same rate as heterosexual women, or because they may use more tobacco or alcohol, according to the report. "However, we still don't have sufficient data on any of these questions, which means the health care system is not meeting lesbians' needs because it has almost no idea what they are," Mills observed.

Plus, the report notes, researchers believe that lesbians are less likely to access the health care system for a variety of reasons, including lack of insurance, insensitivity and/or homophobia by health care providers, and the growth of managed care systems that may limit lesbians' access to lesbian-friendly providers. In addition, the report notes that there is a stigma associated with conducting lesbian research.

"It is a disgrace that in 1999, researchers are afraid that their careers will be wrecked by studying lesbian health," Mills said. "We hope that this study will help change those attitudes and that the government and other funding sources will heed this report's recommendations and actively solicit the research it suggests." ▼