

Obama calls for LGBT non-discrimination protections

By [Todd A. Heywood](#) | 07.16.10 | 11:49 am

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LANSING — The Obama administration on Tuesday released the nation's first [National HIV/AIDS Strategy](#) (NHAS). That strategy includes a call for state lawmakers to pass legislation preventing discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

That announcement has advocates from [Michigan's](#) LGBT community excited.

Alicia Skillman, executive director of [Equality Michigan](#), says a move to create non-discrimination laws in Michigan would be a welcome development, both for its help in ending such discrimination and in addressing [health disparities](#) for the state's LGBT community.

"I think the lack of protections is a way to give the 'OK' to society at large to see us as second class citizens," Skillman said.

In Michigan the anti-discrimination laws are known as the Elliott-Larsen law, but there is currently no protection against discrimination against the LGBT community. Some local communities do prohibit such discrimination, however.

"The ONAP report would definitely be helpful in making the argument as why Elliott-Larsen needs to be amended to include sexual orientation and gender identity and certainly discrimination against LGBT people in access to health care certainly leads to health disparities," says Jay Kaplan, staff attorney of the [ACLU of Michigan's LGBT Project](#). "Also, studies show that discrimination can have a negative impact upon the victim's physical and mental health."

State lawmakers, however, are split along party lines about the issues.

House Speaker [Andy Dillon](#) (D-Redford Township), a Democratic candidate for governor, noted on Wednesday that he was preparing to study a memo from his staff on how to move Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights amendments — which include sexual orientation and gender identity — through the House.

That legislation was passed out of the House Judiciary Committee in November of 2009, but has languished on the House floor since.

"I would be very bullish in making sure that that passed if there are health disparity issues," Dillon said.

But passage may be difficult. Both state Reps [Mark Meadows](#) (D-East Lansing) and [Barb Byrum](#) (D-Onondaga) said they supported the move to extend state civil rights protections to the LGBT community, but Meadows said he doubted the House would hold a vote on the issue until after the November elections.

"It's likely to be voted on in the House during the lame duck session," said Meadows, chair of the House Judiciary Committee. "I don't think politically we can put it up for a vote prior to the November elections."

State Rep. [Joan Bauer](#) (D-Lansing) said that even if the House does pass it, the bill likely would not make it to the governor's desk. "We continue to look at doing it (passing Elliot Larsen Amendments)," she said, "but, as

you know, it will never get through the Senate.”

Even those viewed as more moderate Republicans in the Senate, like Sen. [Tom George](#) (R-Texas Township), do not seem to have any interest in the bill. George said the call for such a change in the NHAS is “pushing a political agenda.”

“I am not a caveman. I understand there comes a time where we have to look at, or re-look at laws,” said George, who is seeking the Republican nomination for governor. “Maybe sometime, but I don’t think that is now.”

But advocates say the connection between discrimination and the well-being of discrimination victims and the need for such protections is clear.

Sara Van Wormer, project coordinator for [Michigan Project for Informed Public Policy](#), says the health disparities that result from the lack of anti-discrimination laws in Michigan are clear. She said the LGBT community, according to research, experiences numerous mental health-related issues as a side effect of the discrimination they experience in their working lives as well as when they try to access medical care.

“When people are down, when people are marginalized, they might do things that are not in their best interests,” Van Wormer said, noting things such as substance abuse which has been tied to increased risk for HIV. “The research speaks for itself.”

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