

Leon County Human Relations Advisory Committee Report to the County Commission

March 1, 2010

In September of 2009, the Leon County Commission established an advisory committee to research human rights issues and make recommendations to protect our citizens against discrimination. Under the guidelines provided by the Board of County Commissioners the committee has been meeting regularly to develop priorities and to address a wide range of discrimination issues. At the request of Chairman Rackleff, our committee has begun this work by focusing on citizens who still lack protection from discrimination based on sexuality and/or gender. As a result, the HRAC has reviewed relevant research on discrimination in Florida and Leon County, and have prepared an amended draft of the existing County ordinance on human rights for your consideration.

Although sexual orientation was added as a protected class to the housing code over twelve years ago, the code has stopped short of extending these protections to other classes of citizens who experience discrimination, and fails to protect citizens in other vital areas of their lives.

Existing language in Chapter 9, establishes protected classes based on State and Federal laws and also prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation in housing accommodations. However, it does not include protections for gender identity and expression, [defined as appearance of mannerisms that do not conform to societal gender norms] nor does the code prohibit discrimination in employment for either group.

State and Federal laws do not currently provide these protections, so many cities and counties across Florida and across the nation have enacted human rights ordinances to provide expanded protections in their communities for sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. For a list of these, please see attachment 1

The issue of discrimination has been studied by a number of organizations and individual researchers. These and other studies show clearly that discrimination does exist and that Leon County citizens facing this discrimination have no legal recourse when it occurs.

- The Williams Institute report, attachment 2, discusses Florida law and documents cases of discrimination across the state.
- Dr. Petra Doan of Florida State University has also completed a study specific to Leon County in 2006. Attachment 3 is an executive summary of this study.
- The 2009 Knight Foundation "Soul of The Community" survey, (attachment 4) specifically identified "openness" to gays and lesbians as an area of weakness. This study also finds that communities who successfully demonstrate their openness to diversity have greater success in retaining people and jobs in their community.

Our committee also finds compelling evidence that the business community will embrace these changes. As stated in attachment 5, the most successful corporations are already providing employment protections for sexuality and gender. This research polled the top Fortune 500 companies and finds that 87% of them provide inclusive protections from discrimination. The majority of these leaders in innovation and industry have recognized they must protect employees from all types of discrimination to ensure that they are able to attract and retain the most diverse and talented workforce possible. Commendably, the City of Tallahassee and the Leon County School Board are among local employers that provide these protections.

The Leon County Board of County Commissioners has a long history of protecting citizens from discrimination and by your appointment of this committee, we are confident in the Board's commitment to continue this tradition of fostering a county environment where all citizens can prosper. We respectfully request that the Commission accept these findings and the draft ordinance language, and forward this draft to the County attorney for review. We also ask that a public hearing be scheduled to provide citizens with an opportunity to speak on this issue.

James VanRiper
Leon County Human Relations Advisory Committee, Chair

Enclosed:

1. Human Rights Ordinances – Local Policies
2. Memorandum from the Williams Institute
3. Executive Summary – LGBT Discrimination in Tallahassee
4. Gallup Poll – Knight Foundation Soul of the Community survey
5. Fortune 500 survey