

National News



by Clint Stelb

Around 100 transgender people, including activist Phyllis Frye, hit Capitol Hill this week to lobby Congressional staffers.

Transgender lobbyists meet with Hill staffers

by Kristina Campbell

Around 100 transgender people and their supporters hit Capitol Hill this week in what one activist called "a coming-out party" for the transgender movement.

The activists met with staffers of members of Congress on Oct. 2 and Oct. 3, with people representing about half of the states in the nation, according to Riki Anne Wilchins of the organization Transgender Menace.

Dubbed National Gender Lobbying Days, the effort's intent was to educate members of Congress about the need for civil rights protections for people whose gender identity falls outside what others consider the societal norm.

Wilchins said that although some activists received negative reactions from members of Congress or their staffs, the event was primarily well-received.

"In the main, we were very, very successful, both in meeting with people and also in educating them," Wilchins said. "Most people would say, 'You're not covered under this? You're not covered under [laws protecting] Gays? You're not covered under laws about gender and women?'"

Wilchins said that the transgender community's presence on Capitol Hill — from a symbolic photo opportunity with all 100 transgender individuals on the steps of the Capitol building to a House office building cafeteria brimming with the activists — made a statement that was yet unvoiced by the community.

"I would say in a sense this was a coming-out party," she said. "This was the first time that I'm aware of of the transgender community as a whole doing something saying we are here, we pay taxes, we are legitimate."

Wilchins said Phyllis Frye of the Transgender Law Conference retained response forms reporting how meetings with different congressional offices went. Frye could not be reached for this story's deadline yesterday.

The lobby days came on the heels of a transgender community victory in reaching an agreement with the Gay political organization Human Rights Campaign Fund, (officially to be renamed the Human Rights Campaign beginning next week), over work on the community's issues. On Sept. 17, HRCF and transgender activists issued a joint statement.

"HRCF has made a commitment to work with representatives of a spectrum of the transgendered community with a specific focus on hate crimes," the statement said.

The Gay lobbying organization has declined to include transgender issues in its legislative efforts to win civil rights protections for Gays, maintaining that sexual orientation legislation should be separate from gender-related legislation. HRCF still, according to the statement, does not plan to incorporate gender identity into its legislative efforts on Gay civil rights, but will consult with transgender activists on how best to achieve their goals.

"The strategy does not include reintroduction of the current [Employment Non-Discrimination Act]; the language of the current bill remains as is," the statement says. "Both groups will work in good faith to continue dialogue and to build coalition in the context of ending violence and discrimination against this community."

Wilchins said the activists also used the occasion of their visit to Washington to protest the handling of the Tyrone "Tyra" Hunter case. Hunter died after emergency medical personnel reportedly stopped treatment and made jokes about Hunter, who was dressed as a female, having male genitalia.

During the protest on Tuesday morning at Judiciary Square, Wilchins said, the activists met with Mayor Marion Barry for several minutes and also met with D.C. Fire Chief Otis Latin. Barry reportedly promised a future meeting with local representatives to talk about their concerns, said Wilchins. ▼