

NOW: Leading the Fight

Timeline of NOW's Work on Lesbian Rights

1971

NOW expands its policies to include lesbian rights. NOW resolution declares “that a woman’s right to her own person includes the right to define and express her own sexuality and to choose her own lifestyle.”

Through a conference resolution NOW states that forcing lesbian mothers to stay in marriages or to live a secret existence in an effort to keep their children is unjust. NOW commits to offering legal and moral support in a test case involving child custody rights of lesbian mothers.

1973

The NOW Task Force on Sexuality and Lesbianism is established. NOW resolves to introduce and support civil rights legislation designed to end discrimination based on sexual orientation.

1975

NOW members resolve to designate lesbian rights as one of NOW’s top priorities. NOW supports Mary Jo Risher, a lesbian mother, in her struggle for a fair child custody hearing.

The annual funding for the National Task Force on Sexuality/Lesbianism was elevated to a level consistent with other NOW national priority issues.

1977

NOW joins a Dade County, Florida campaign to support an ordinance forbidding discrimination based on sexual orientation. The ordinance attracts national attention when opposition forces coalesce around popular singer Anita Bryant.

1978

NOW chapters help to defeat the Briggs Initiative and Initiative 13, initiatives that would have prohibited lesbians and gay men from serving as teachers in California and in Seattle, Washington.

On Gay Freedom Day, NOW holds rallies and organizes events nationwide to raise awareness and support for gay rights.

1979

NOW calls for the development and implementation of a National Lesbian Rights Campaign. NOW resolves to dedicate staff to lesbian rights organizing.

NOW endorses, helps to organize, and marches in the first National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights.

1980

NOW protests against the U.S. Navy's attempted ousting of eight women based on alleged lesbianism.

1981

NOW commits to increasing action and public education on lesbian rights issues, including opposition to the so-called Family Protection Act, which was being proposed in the U.S. Congress.

1982

NOW appoints a national committee to further the organization's work on lesbian rights issues through intensified education, chapter communication and legislative and legal analysis.

1983

NOW demands a Congressional investigation into the military's discrimination against lesbians.

The NOW National Board moved to officially recognize and give full and public support to NOW members and leaders who choose to be open about their lesbianism, as well as supporting and respecting the decision of others to maintain privacy concerning their sexual orientation.

1984

NOW holds its first Lesbian Rights Conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The theme is power and politics.

NOW PAC develops a program aimed at developing and supporting lesbian and gay candidates.

NOW co-sponsors the National March for Lesbian and Gay Rights in San Francisco on the condition that the march platform include: (1) passage of the Equal Rights Amendment; and (2) the right of women, regardless of sexual orientation or economic status to choose if and when to bear children, as well as the right to safe, legal, and accessible abortion with freedom from forced sterilization.

NOW launches “Lesbian and Gay Rights ’84”, a program aimed at the passage of state level legislation to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in targeted states.

1985

NOW reaffirms its commitment to lesbian mothers by passing a resolution opposing legislation and judicial practices that threaten the rights of lesbian and gay parents and other lesbian and gay people who work with children.

1986

NOW, in cooperation with NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, files an amicus brief in *Bowers v. Hardwick*, a U.S. Supreme Court case challenging Georgia’s sodomy law, and joins in the “Privacy Project” to overturn other state anti-sodomy statutes.

NOW works to defeat the LaRouche Initiative in California, a proposal to quarantine people with AIDS.

NOW members work in the state of Washington to defeat Initiative 490. An initiative that would allow workplace discrimination by prohibiting persons “hereby declared as sexually deviant including homosexuals.”

1987

NOW endorses, helps organize, and marches in the second National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights.

NOW calls for a “Campaign to Free Sharon Kowalski”. After she was disabled in an accident, Kowalski’s parents denied her partner Karen Thompson any access to Sharon or participation in her treatment. Karen eventually won full guardianship rights;

NOW writes an amicus brief in support of Thompson’s lawsuit.

1988

NOW holds its second Lesbian Rights Conference in San Diego, California. NOW commits to publicizing a long history of discrimination against women and “lesbian witch-hunts” in the Armed Forces.

1989

The National Conference endorses the agenda developed at the 1988 Lesbian Rights Conference, including a focus on issues related to lesbians of color and reproductive issues.

1990

NOW passes a resolution recognizing the homophobia and violence that lesbians and gay men face. The resolution recommits to an aggressive education plan and participation in coming-out programs, while taking an official stand against the practice of outing.

1991

NOW mobilizes to pressure Cracker Barrel Old Country Store, Inc. to end its discriminatory hiring practices and to include sexual orientation in its equal opportunity statement.

NOW puts its organizational strength behind a historic national effort to develop a privacy amendment to the U.S. Constitution stating: "The right to privacy in matters of birth control, abortion, and consensual adult sexual relations conducted in private shall not be abridged by the United States or by any state."

NOW calls for a National Day of Action against the Department of Defense policy of excluding lesbian and gay men from the military.

1992

NOW campaigns vigorously against Colorado's anti-lesbian/gay Amendment 2, sending a team of activists to the state.

1993

NOW organizes "Lift the Ban" protests against the military ban on members of the service who are lesbian, gay and bisexual. NOW President is arrested during a protest at the White House.

NOW endorses, helps to organize, and marches in the third National March on Washington for Gay and Lesbian Rights.

NOW declares a national state of emergency on lesbian, gay and bisexual civil rights, including opposing all initiatives and legislation designed to legalize and promote anti-lesbian/gay/bisexual discrimination; NOW reaffirms and continues efforts to pass and implement civil rights legislation banning discrimination based on sexual orientation at the federal, state and local levels.

1994

NOW demands that law enforcement agencies take action to protect the Mississippi feminist retreat camp, Sister Spirit, the target of vicious anti-lesbian and anti-feminist harassment and intimidation.

1995

NOW is one of the first progressive organizations to affirm the choice of marriage as a fundamental right that should not be denied to same-sex couples.

NOW passes a resolution that demands that the Equal Rights Amendment must specifically include equal rights for everyone regardless of sexual orientation.

NOW mobilizes to defeat Question 1, an anti-lesbian/gay ballot measure in Maine.

NOW “comes out” in favor of same-sex marriage rights, and begins to plan a national Day of Action for same-sex marriage for Valentine’s Day.

1996

NOW campaigns against a Maine anti-gay ballot measure, launching a 12-college speaking tour and setting up organizer trainings on campuses.

The Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) passes Congress despite NOW’s active campaign to defeat the measure.

1997

On Valentine’s Day, NOW organizes a day of action in support of equal marriage Rights. A National Conference resolution supports recognition of transgender oppression and calls for education on the rights of transgender people.

1998

At NOW’s Women’s Rights Convention & Vision Summit, members draft a new Declaration of Sentiments which includes a recommitment to ending discrimination based on sexual orientation.

NOW activists work to elect Tammy Baldwin, D-Wisc., the first openly lesbian candidate to win a Congressional seat; NOW PAC sends organizers to turn out votes on the Madison Campus – helping to provide the winning margin!

NOW scores a victory when, after years of lobbying, our allies in Congress add gender, sexual orientation, and disability to proposed federal hate crimes legislation.

NOW joins an amicus brief in the Hawaii case Baehr v. Miike arguing that denial of same-sex marriage was discrimination under the state constitution.

1999

NOW holds its third Lesbian Rights Summit in Washington, D.C.

NOW adopts a campaign launched by Morris County, New Jersey NOW called “Ask and I’ll Tell”. The campaign goals include publicizing the stories of LGBT people and enlisting straight allies to tell the stories of their LGBT relatives, friends, and co-workers.

NOW launches a campaign to pass the Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 1999.

2000

NOW continues voter education concerning the differences between civil unions and civil marriage and the impact of those differences on same-sex couples.

NOW endorses the Millennium March on Washington to support LGBT rights.

NOW calls for the repeal of all same-sex adoption bans and encourages local grassroots activists to work against such bans.

As U.S. organizers for the 2000 World March of Women, NOW insists that the march platform must include the right to asylum for victims of discrimination and persecution based upon sexual orientation.

2001

NOW rededicates itself to protecting the rights of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people against continued anti-LGBT efforts by the right wing.

NOW speaks out for the reproductive rights of intersex women and girls by passing a resolution at the national conference that called for the medical community to establish a patient-centered protocol under which full, fair, and accurate information and resources are to be provided to intersex women and girls.

NOW supports the right of a lesbian co-parent to seek visitation by filing an amicus brief in the Pennsylvania Supreme Court case *T.B. v. L.R.M.* That right was upheld “where the child has established strong psychological bonds, with a person who ... has ... provided care, nurture, and affection, assuming in the child’s eye a stature like that of a parent.”

2002

After years of advocating for the passage of expanded hate crimes legislation, NOW advocates for the inclusion of “sex, transgender people, and gender identity and/or expression” as protected categories within legislation in Congress, especially the Local Law Enforcement Act as well as all future legislation protecting civil rights.

NOW denounces the introduction into Congress of the Federal Marriage Amendment, which would amend the U.S. Constitution to prohibit same-sex marriage, and would even prohibit states from providing such rights in their own constitutions. NOW launches a campaign to defeat the amendment.

Through an amicus brief, NOW supports the plaintiffs in *In re Adoption of RBF and RCF*, a Pennsylvania case seeking the right to second-parent adoption by the partner of a lesbian mother.

2004

NOW launches a campaign to educate legislators and the public on marriage equality before the 2004 election; The NOW Political Action Committee develops new criteria for candidate endorsements including support for full marriage rights for LGBT people. NOW begins a full marriage equality litigation campaign assisting lawyers and signing amicus briefs that support full civil marriage equality at the state level.

2005

At NOW’s National Conference, NOW passes resolutions to educate the public about the history of activism of LBT women of color, launch a day of action for full marriage

equality and advocate for the inclusion of gender identify and expression in any legislative effort that impacts the transgender community, or impacts anyone who does not conform to gender stereotypes.

NOW joins protest of the Millions More March decision to exclude LGBT speakers and participants; NOW President speaks at counter-rally.

2006

NOW opposes the mis-named “Marriage Protection Amendment” in the Senate.

NOW denounces anti-equal marriage developments in New York and Washington State while applauding a positive move toward equal marriage in New Jersey.

NOW supports Major Margaret Witt’s legal efforts to be reinstated to her position in the Air Force, declaring that her discharge, after 18 years of distinguished military service, was discriminatory and in direct violation of her rights to free speech and due process.

2007

NOW stands with Sens. Ted Kennedy and Gordon Smith as they introduce the Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act. The most comprehensive hate crimes legislation ever introduced in Congress, this law would finally classify as hate crimes certain violent, criminal acts that are motivated by the victim’s gender, gender identity, sexual orientation or disability.

NOW urges activists to lobby their representatives to repeal the discriminatory “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy that undermines the dignity, privacy and integrity of U.S. service members by requiring them to hide or lie about their sexual orientation.

NOW opposes the nomination of Dr. James Holsinger Jr. for U.S. Surgeon General based in part on his history of outspoken prejudice against gays and lesbians.

NOW mourns passing of longtime lesbian rights and NOW activist Del Martin.

2008

In a critical election year, NOW conducts voter education and get-out-the-vote efforts across the country to ensure that leaders who will support LGBT rights are elected to office.

NOW opposes ballot measures in Arizona, California and Florida that would deny equal marriage rights. NOW activists across the country protest the passage of these measures.

2009

NOW, along with California NOW and the Feminist Majority, submits an amicus curiae brief to the Supreme Court of California challenging the validity of Proposition 8. NOW denounces the court's upholding of Prop. 8.

NOW celebrates equal marriage progress in Iowa, Vermont and D.C.

NOW stands with Reps. Jerry Nadler (D-N.Y.), Tammy Baldwin (D-Wis.) and Jared Polis (D-Colo.) in support of legislation to repeal the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA).

NOW sponsors and participates in the massively successful National Equality March in Washington, D.C., on Oct. 11.

NOW applauds the signing of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, which expands the 1969 federal hate crimes law to include sexual orientation, gender, gender identity and disability.