
**From legal rights
to EQUAL rights**



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CIVIL MARRIAGE : WHY CIVIL UNIONS AREN'T ENOUGH

Civil unions were a great step forward, but same-gender couples and our families won't enjoy full protections and inclusion until we are no longer excluded from civil marriage-- in Vermont and every other state. It's a question of family, and of civil rights. Here's why:

* MARRIAGE IS IMPORTANT.

Being "married" is one of the benefits of civil marriage that's important to many people, gay and non-gay. The term "marriage" means something to many people who have grown up in a world where "marriage" signifies a lifetime committed partnership. "Civil union" simply doesn't pack the same punch. If we told all married, heterosexual Vermonters that starting tomorrow they would no longer be considered legally married-- that they would be called "domestic partners"-- many wouldn't want to give up the title "married." Yet that's exactly what the laws continue to deny couples like Baker v. State plaintiffs Stan and Peter, even though they respect the institution of civil marriage and want to be part of it.

* "SEPARATE" IS UNEQUAL

The exclusion built into the civil union law is harmful. As the Massachusetts Supreme Court acknowledged, ruling that a civil union law would be unconstitutional, "The history of our nation has demonstrated that separate is seldom, if ever, equal." The civil union law gives same-gender couples benefits, but by assigning his parents to a separate line at the town clerk's office, it still tells the child of Baker v. State plaintiffs Nina and Stacy that his family is unequal, and it tells all gay Vermonters that our families are not fully included in the Vermont community. We don't need a separate line for gay people at our town clerk's office; it's not the Vermont way.

* CIVIL UNIONS FAIL TO PROVIDE IMPORTANT PROTECTIONS

Couples joined in civil union are insecure when traveling outside of Vermont. For example, if civil union spouses Bill and Joe travel to New York for the weekend, and Joe is seriously injured in a car accident, Bill's ability to make important medical decisions if Joe can't speak for himself is in doubt. New York should recognize their civil union, but we know from experience that doesn't always happen.

Likewise, Baker v. State plaintiff Holly is currently the primary breadwinner in her family. If she should die, Lois, her partner of 32 years, wouldn't get Holly's social security survivor benefits, but would be left to fend for herself. This disadvantage hurts their family tremendously.

Eliminating Vermont's discrimination in civil marriage won't solve these problems immediately since Vermont can't control the discrimination of other jurisdictions. But we can do everything in our power to make sure Vermont is not part of the discrimination, and to send a strong, clear message that Vermont-- long a leader on matters of important civil rights--in no way supports discrimination against gay citizens and our families.