



Empire State Pride Agenda

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The Empire State Pride Agenda is recognized as among the strongest statewide glbtq lobbying organizations in the United States. Incorporated in 1990 as the result of a merger of two organizations--the Albany-based New York State Lesbian and Gay Lobby and the New York City-based FAIRPAC--the Empire State Pride Agenda lobbies New York governments, at both state and local levels, for legal protection and equal rights for glbtq individuals and families.

Gay political commentator David Mixner recently described the Empire State Pride Agenda as "one of the best run state LGBT organizations in the country. With a substantial budget, a powerful legislative agenda, a talented staff, an amazing board of directors and great community support, this organization is changing the nature of New York politics. It is a role model for other state organizations seeking to build political power."

When it was organized in 1990, the Pride Agenda characterized itself as "a non-partisan not-for-profit organization constituted to work on state and local political issues of concern to the lesbian and gay community, leaving action on a federal level to national groups."

Libby Post and Mark D'Alessio were the first co-chairs of the Board; Lisa Parrish served as acting executive director for three months until she was succeeded by Richard D. Dadey, Jr., the first executive director. The organizers declared Pride Agenda's highest priority to be the passage of a statewide law prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment and services, a goal that, after many disappointments, it finally achieved at the end of 2002.

The Empire State Pride Agenda is actually comprised of two separate corporate entities, the Empire State Pride Agenda Foundation, Inc. and the Empire State Pride Agenda, Inc. Although both entities are committed to the cause of furthering glbtq civil rights, certain activities are undertaken by one organization and not the other.

For example, the Empire State Pride Agenda, Inc. engages in legislative lobbying and administers a Political Action Committee. Donations to the Empire State Pride Agenda are not tax-deductible because it engages in direct political action.

In contrast, the Foundation does not endorse or provide support to political candidates and does only a limited amount of lobbying. Hence, contributions to the Foundation are tax deductible and are used primarily for educational purposes.

Dedicated to using professional lobbying techniques, the Pride Agenda early on defined itself against more radical groups, such as ACT UP and Queer Nation, whose angry demonstrations and zaps were not seen as effective in actually moving legislation.

The Agenda's ability to raise large sums for political action has since given it unusual clout for a glbtq

activist organization, as evidenced by the fact that leading politicians, including President Clinton, Vice President Gore, and New York governors have attended its annual dinners. At the same time, however, central to the organization's success has been its grassroots moorings and its responsiveness to its constituencies.

Pride Agenda quickly proved itself effective in the political arena, at first in New York City and then in other urban areas in the state. In its early years, it was influential in the election of Deborah Glick as the first openly lesbian member of the New York legislature and in the election of an openly gay man, Thomas K. Duane, to the New York City Council. In 1998, Duane was elected to the state senate.

Just as the struggle for an anti-discrimination law in New York City was long stalled by a handful of powerful politicians and unions, so the struggle for a statewide anti-discrimination law was stymied for many years by the Republican-controlled state senate. As early as 1993, the Democratic-controlled state assembly passed an anti-discrimination measure, but senate leaders repeatedly refused to bring the proposal to a vote.

When U.S. Senator Alphonse D'Amato failed to use his considerable clout within the state Republican party to advance an anti-discrimination bill in the state senate, the Pride Agenda in 1998 endorsed D'Amato's opponent, Chuck Shumer. In a very close election, Shumer overwhelmingly carried the gay and lesbian vote and defeated D'Amato, who, in a very controversial decision, had been endorsed by the Human Rights Campaign.

The Pride Agenda's flexing of political muscle, especially its willingness to mobilize its constituency against unresponsive incumbents, was no doubt noticed by Republican Governor George Pataki, who in 1999, at the Agenda's urging, called for the passage of a state hate crimes bill that includes sexual orientation, a bill that he signed into law in 2000, the same year that New York formally repealed its sodomy law.

Over the next several years, Pataki proved to be receptive to the Pride Agenda's lobbying. In 2001, he addressed the Pride Agenda's annual fall dinner and pledged not only to issue an executive order granting surviving same-sex partners of the victims of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks the same benefits received by surviving spouses, but also to support the passage of an anti-discrimination bill.

Not surprisingly, Pataki became the first Republican to be endorsed by Empire State Pride for a statewide office when he ran for reelection in 2002. Shortly after his reelection, the state senate finally approved the anti-discrimination bill, and Pataki signed it into law the very day it passed. Thirty-one years after an anti-discrimination bill was first proposed, New York became the thirteenth state to prohibit discrimination against gay men and lesbians in employment and public services.

However, passage of SONDA (the Sexual Orientation Non-Discrimination Act) was not without controversy. The failure of the bill to include gender identity as a protected class led to a bitter rift between the Pride Agenda executive director Matt Foreman, who served from 1997 until 2003 when he left to head the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, and state senator Duane, who accused the Pride Agenda of marginalizing transgendered people.

In response, Foreman contended that including gender identity in the bill would doom it to yet another rejection and pledged to increase the Pride Agenda's efforts on behalf of the transgendered.

If the passage into law of SONDA was the Pride Agenda's most visible statewide accomplishment in the early years of the new millennium, the organization also deserves credit for numerous other achievements at both state and local levels, including New York City's domestic partner legislation (1998) and anti-discrimination laws even in such conservative areas of the state as Westchester County (1999) and Nassau

County (2000). Pride Agenda also lobbied successfully for the inclusion of gender identity in the anti-discrimination laws passed by the city of Rochester (2001) and New York City (2002).

The Pride Agenda was also influential in the election of such openly gay politicians as Christine Quinn to the New York City Council in 1999 and Danny O'Donnell to the New York state assembly in 2002. Quinn was chosen Council Speaker in 2006, making her one of the most prominent openly lesbian elected officials in the country.

Much of the Pride Agenda's focus in recent years has been on achieving equality for glbtq families. To that end, it lobbied the New York City Council to pass the Equal Benefits Bill in 2004. When the bill, which requires city contractors to provide domestic partners the same benefits they give to spouses of employees, was vetoed by Mayor Bloomberg, the Council overrode his veto by a vote of 41 to 4.

The Pride Agenda has also won passage of a number of statewide measures, including a law guaranteeing same-sex domestic partners the same rights as spouses and next of kin when taking care of loved ones in hospitals and nursing homes and a law granting domestic partners the same priority as spouses in making decisions about burial of a loved one.

The Pride Agenda has been successful in defeating efforts by some members of the New York legislature to pass a Defense of Marriage Act, and it has persuaded several state agencies to recognize same-sex marriages performed in other jurisdictions, such as Massachusetts and Canada, as valid in New York.

When New York's highest court disappointingly ruled in 2006 that there was no constitutional mandate to provide same-sex couples access to marriage, the Pride Agenda mobilized thousands to protest the ruling at seven rallies across the state and officially began a campaign to achieve marriage equality in New York.

In 2003, Alan Van Capelle was appointed Executive Director of Empire State Pride Agenda and Empire State Pride Agenda Foundation. The youthful Van Capelle created a stir in 2006 when he criticized Senator Hillary Clinton and other Democrats for their failure to support same-sex marriage.

Van Capelle led the effort to secure marriage equality in the state in 2009, when a bill authorizing same-sex marriage passed the Assembly but failed in the Senate, despite the strong support of Governor David Patterson.

In 2010, Ross D. Levi, who had served the Pride Agenda in a number of capacities, including Legislative Counsel and Director of Public Policy and Education, succeeded Van Capelle as Executive Director.

At Levi's direction, the Pride Agenda joined a coalition of glbtq groups assembled by Governor Andrew Cuomo in March 2011 to work on securing marriage equality as one of the new governor's chief priorities.

The coalition raised money and agreed on a concerted and coherent strategy to increase public support for marriage equality. As a result of the campaign, polls in early June 2011 showed that almost 60% of New Yorkers supported same-sex marriage.

The state Assembly once again passed the marriage equality bill, but the Republican-controlled state Senate remained an obstacle; it was not even certain that the chamber would permit a vote. However, after intense lobbying by Governor Cuomo and the coalition, the Senate majority leader agreed to allow the marriage equality bill to come to a vote.

On June 24, 2011, after the adoption of an amendment specifying religious exemptions, the marriage equality bill was passed by a vote of 33 to 29. That very night Governor Cuomo signed the bill into law.

With marriage equality having been achieved, the passage of the Gender Expression Non-Discrimination Act

(GENDA), which would prohibit employment discrimination on the basis of gender identity and expression, becomes the Empire State Pride Agenda's top legislative priority.

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