



## Equality California (EQCA)

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Equality California (EQCA) is one of the largest statewide glbtq advocacy and civil rights organizations in the United States. With approximately 50,000 members and a staff of ten in 2005, EQCA has chapters throughout the state and maintains offices in Sacramento, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Following a period of upheaval after the passage of Proposition 8 in 2008, the organization seems to have regained stability with the appointment of a new executive director in 2012.

Originally known as California Alliance for Pride and Equality (CAPE), Equality California is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, grassroots-based, statewide advocacy organization with a mission to ensure the dignity, safety, equality, and civil rights of all glbtq Californians. EQCA leads efforts for glbtq civil rights at the state level by lobbying legislators, building coalitions, and empowering other organizations and individuals to become involved in the legislative process. It sponsors bills relevant to its mission and leads efforts to ensure their passage.

### History

In its first years of operation, CAPE successfully sponsored three key pieces of legislation that focused on employment and housing discrimination, safe schools, and a domestic partner registry. However, as CAPE began to establish itself as a statewide organization, in 2000 the first anti-gay marriage initiative in California (Prop 22) was introduced and adopted by a wide margin.

Disheartened over the passage of Prop 22, the glbtq community was critical of CAPE for not having opposed it more effectively. In 2001, Jean Harris stepped down as Executive Director of CAPE. After serving as interim Executive Director, Geoffrey Kors became Executive Director in 2002.

A 1986 graduate of Stanford Law School, Kors served as Assistant Regional Counsel for the United States Environmental Protection Agency for five years. He then went on to serve as Director of the ACLU of Illinois Gay and Lesbian Rights and AIDS and Civil Liberties Projects. Kors then returned to California to work as Chief of Staff to San Francisco Supervisor Leslie Katz and also as a partner in a small civil rights law firm.

While on the Executive Committee of the Harvey Milk LGBT Democratic Club, Kors was one of the creators of the "Equal Benefits Ordinance," which requires private firms and contractors doing business with the city of San Francisco to provide the same job-related benefits to domestic partners and married spouses of their employees. In 1996, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors passed the Equal Benefits Ordinance making San Francisco the first jurisdiction in the country to address the inequity of benefits for same-sex couples. In 2001, Kors joined the board of CAPE. After becoming Executive Director, he spearheaded the organization's change of name to Equality California.

### Early Successes

In 2002, seven EQCA-sponsored rights bills were passed into law in California, including bills on hate crimes,

domestic partnership rights, and healthcare for people with HIV. In 2003, Equality California sponsored and passed a gender non-discrimination bill, a bill requiring equal benefits in state contracting, and a comprehensive domestic partnership bill.

(In 2005, the new domestic partnership law in California took effect as the most comprehensive in the nation, providing California same-sex couples and their families with many--though not all--of the state rights and protections that come with civil marriage.)

In 2004, five of the six Equality California-sponsored pieces of legislation were passed into law. These bills extended equal insurance coverage to registered domestic partners, strengthened hate crime protections, and improved employment and housing non-discrimination law.

In 2005, the major piece of legislation that EQCA sponsored was the "Religious Freedom and Civil Marriage Protection Act." The bill passed the legislature, but was vetoed by Republican Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger.

### **Equality California Institute**

Equality California Institute was established in 2000 as a non-profit educational organization affiliated with EQCA. The EQCA Institute informs glbtq people and the general public about issues impacting the community and its allies. The EQCA Institute connects various communities working for justice and civil rights and trains them to respond and work proactively for glbtq equality.

Equality California Institute also organizes advocacy training, forums, and legislative briefings in many cities. In its short history, the Institute has already developed an extensive network of activists and allies that can be mobilized quickly to respond to threats or attacks on the civil rights of glbtq Californians.

In 2004, EQCA Institute created Transgender Equality in order to educate the public and legislators about transgender discrimination.

### **Marriage Equality**

In 2004, the Institute integrated two groups into its organization: Marriage Equality California (MECA), a statewide grassroots organization with a membership of over 50,000 activists and volunteers, and the California Freedom to Marry Coalition. The goal is to increase the civic participation of glbtq Californians in the public dialogue over glbtq rights.

During the battle for marriage equality in the golden state, there were 23 volunteer chapters of EQCA throughout the state whose primary focus was marriage equality. The chapters held monthly meetings in order to disseminate information and plan community activities in order to put a face to the issues.

### **EQCA PAC**

EQCA PAC endorses candidates and supports their campaigns through volunteers and donations in order to expand the number of glbtq-supportive legislators in California. In the 2004 election cycle, over 85% of Equality California-endorsed candidates won their races.

### **[Proposition 8**

In the summer of 2008, the California Supreme Court ruled that the ban on same-sex marriage in the state was unconstitutional. The result of that ruling was to legalize same-sex marriage. Thousands of Californians, as well as numerous out-of-state couples, soon flocked to the city halls and courthouses to apply for marriage licenses.

The euphoria over the court victory and the new marriages soon gave way to concern when it became obvious that the opponents of same-sex marriage had qualified an amendment to the state constitution limiting marriage to a union of one man and one woman.

Equality California took a lead role in organizing the campaign against the amendment, known as Proposition 8. Although the organization succeeded in raising huge amounts of money to oppose Proposition 8, the campaign itself was widely perceived as tepid and ineffective. The proposition was narrowly approved in November 2008.

After the loss at the ballot box, Equality California was roundly criticized for running an inept campaign that did a poor job in reaching out to minority communities and countering the misinformation and fear-mongering of the opponents of same-sex marriage.

The campaign even failed to use a letter from Presidential candidate Barack Obama opposing Proposition 8. Obama, who carried the state overwhelmingly, declared his opposition to "the divisive and discriminatory efforts to amend the California Constitution, and similar efforts to amend the U.S. Constitution or those of other states." Considering Obama's popularity in the state, especially among minorities, the failure to use this letter, while the proponents of Proposition 8 were trumpeting the opposition to same-sex marriage of both Obama and his Republican opponent John McCain, has baffled many observers.

### **New Leadership**

Geoff Kors is widely credited for its spectacular record in achieving legislative victories. In 2011, for example, the legislature passed and Governor Brown signed the FAIR Education Act, which requires public schools to include the achievements of glbt people in the curriculum.

In 2011, however, Kors also decided to step down as Executive Director. After an exhaustive search EQCA's Board of Directors announced on May 16, 2011 that Kors was to be succeeded by Roland Palencia, an activist who had served as Community Benefits Director for L. A. Health Care Plan and, before that, as Vice President and Chief of Operations of the AIDS Healthcare Foundation.

However, Palencia served for only 3 months before leaving for "personal reasons." Despite his statement that his decision to leave was his own, others attributed the decision to a fractious relationship with Board Members.

After more than a year in which the organization was run by caretakers and seemed to lack a sense of direction, EQCA experienced a steep decline in donations and consequently was forced to reduce the staff. When John O'Connor was selected as Executive Director in December 2012, the organization was widely regarded as broken.

O'Connor shifted the organization headquarters to Los Angeles from San Francisco and stabilized its finances. In 2013, he told Seth Hemmelgarn of the *Bay Area Reporter* that "Revitalizing an organization that had been through so much upheaval at a time when the LGBT movement for equality was shifting so dramatically was very complicated, and identifying strategies for doing that was the most challenging thing. That includes getting people's financial and political support behind what was happening, inspiring a staff to work as hard as they needed to work to make this possible, instilling confidence in elected officials once again, and instilling confidence in the press."

O'Connor's also built close relationships with partners such as the Transgender Law Center and Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund. Under his leadership, Equality California reestablished its effectiveness in lobbying for glbtq-positive legislation and in building public support for gay rights. Among the legislative achievements EQCA deserves some credit for include landmark measures that support the rights of

transgender students in state schools and that forbid licensed professions from offering sexual conversion therapy to minors.

Equality California is now in a good position to exert a positive influence on the movement for equality not only in California but nationally as well.]

## **Conclusion**

In its brief history, Equality California has become one of the most effective glbtq advocacy organizations in the United States. As a result, California has been transformed from a state with severely circumscribed rights for its glbtq citizens to one of the states with the most comprehensive civil rights protections for glbtq people.

[In the fallout from the passage of Proposition 8, however, the organization came under criticism for having allegedly run a campaign characterized by mismanagement and ineptness. Critics blamed the organization for a defeat that may have set back the equal rights movement for years.

New Executive Director John O'Connor seems to have stabilized the organization and it has reemerged as the state's leading advocacy group for equal rights.]

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