



National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF)

by Donald P. Haider-Markel

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Former President Bill Clinton greets attendees at a National Gay and Lesbian Task Force fundraiser in Miami, Florida in 2006. Courtesy National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

The Task Force is the oldest continuously operating national gay and lesbian interest group in the United States. Formed in 1973 as the National Gay Task Force by members of the Gay Activists Alliance in New York City, including Bruce Voeller, the group has played a central role in the development of the glbtq movement for equal rights.

Over the years the group's executive directors have often been key figures within the glbtq movement, including Voeller, Virginia Apuzzo, Matt Foreman, Lorri Jean, Jeffrey Levi, Jean O'Leary, Torie Osborn, Melinda Paras, and Urvashi Vaid.

The Task Force lobbies the federal government on glbtq issues, but the group emphasizes its work with state and local glbtq groups, especially through its nonprofit Policy Institute, which is an information center for education and organizing. The Policy Institute's publications on glbtq civil rights, voting and elections, and state legislative activity, among others, have been indispensable for activists and researchers.

The group addresses many issues, including antidiscrimination, anti-gay ballot initiatives, general homophobia, harassment, violence, sodomy laws, issues for gay and lesbian families, and ensuring AIDS funding. The Task Force also builds connections with other civil rights groups focused on race and ethnicity, gender discrimination, abortion, and even the death penalty. Goals and strategy are decided in the national office. The group does not have local chapters.

Accomplishments

The Task Force grew rapidly in the 1970s and 1980s and built an impressive record of accomplishments. In 1975 the group convinced the U. S. Civil Service Commission to allow homosexuals to serve in government employment. That same year the group helped convince Representative Bella Abzug (D-NY) to introduce the first gay rights bill in Congress.

In 1978 the Task Force released the first-ever study of sexual orientation discrimination in private companies.

The group's name was changed to the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF) in 1985, and the central office was moved from New York City to Washington, D. C.

In the early 1980s the Task Force became the first national group to give significant attention to hate crimes against glbtq people by launching a national project on hate crime and producing a series of reports on anti-gay hate crime. The group led the national hate crimes coalition, which passed the 1990 Hate Crimes Statistics Act.

In 1991, the Task Force began a national anti-discrimination campaign against the Cracker Barrel restaurant chain and developed the Fight the Right Action Kit, which has been used by thousands of activists.

The NGLTF started its Policy Institute in 1995, with John D'Emilio as director. In the same year, it hosted the first Progressive People of Color Grassroots Organizers Summit.

Growth and Retrenchment

By 1996 the group had a budget of \$3.1 million, 35,000 members, and a staff of 21. In the late 1990s the Task Force began publishing historic reports on everything from glbtq voting to glbtq-related legislation in the states. In addition, in 1997 the Task Force sponsored the founding of the Federation of Statewide Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Political Organizations, with the hope of building statewide organizations in all 50 states.

In 1999 the Federation sponsored Equality Begins at Home, a campaign that organized 350 rallies and events in all 50 state capitals.

By 2000 NGLTF had a full-time staff of 35 and a budget approaching \$4.4 million. In 2001, however, the group's budget dropped to \$3.6 million; membership levels remained at about 35,000. The budget declined further in 2002 to \$3.2 million, but after a series of staff turnovers in top positions from 2001 to 2003, the Task Force now seems poised to enhance its role of mobilizing the movement at the grassroots through foundation grants and contributions that fund its unique programs.

Indeed, through a variety of special organizing projects in 2002, the Task Force helped local activists introduce new local and state legislation to protect glbtq rights and helped defeat a number of anti-gay ballot initiatives.

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About the Author

Donald P. Haider-Markel is Associate Professor of political science and Director of the Survey Research Center of the Policy Research Institute at the University of Kansas. His research and teaching is focused on public policy, public opinion, and political participation. He has authored and co-authored several articles, book chapters, and a book in a range of issue areas, including the environment, gay politics, gun control, abortion, hate crimes, and citizen militia groups. He has been a recipient or co-recipient of grants from the EPA STAR program, the NSF, and the American Psychological Foundation.