

**COMMENTS BY ROSS D. LEVI, ESQ. OF
THE EMPIRE STATE PRIDE AGENDA
TO THE EASTCHESTER TOWN BOARD
OPPOSING REPEAL OF DOMESTIC PARTNER BENEFITS
FOR TOWN EMPLOYEES**

January 4, 2005 – Eastchester Town Hall, Eastchester, NY

Thank you. My name is Ross Levi and I am Director of Public Policy and Governmental Affairs for the Empire State Pride Agenda, New York's statewide lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender civil rights organization. On behalf of our tens of thousands of members and their families across New York State, and especially our members here in Eastchester and in greater Westchester County, I urge the Town Board to allow your municipal employees to retain health benefits for their domestic partners.

From a civil rights perspective, domestic partnership benefits are about equal pay for equal work. Employees who share their lives with a partner should not be denied insurance for the loved one they care for when similarly situated co-workers get that benefit for their spouses. It is simply a matter of equality and fairness, nothing more and nothing less.

Both the public and private sectors have understood for years now that offering domestic partner benefits makes good business sense, which is why extending them has become such a well established trend. Domestic partner benefits are an extremely cost-efficient way for an employer to remain competitive. Public and private entities that have added domestic partner benefits have seen enrollment rise usually only 1% and always less than 2%. This translates to a similar rise in cost for the health benefit of usually 1% and never more than 2%. This small cost is offset by the lower hiring and training costs that are created by a higher employee retention rate. Of course, there is no way to accurately quantify rises in productivity that result from increased morale or employees who can concentrate on their work instead of caring for or worrying about an uninsured, ailing loved one.

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It is difficult to illustrate just how out of step Eastchester would be with its neighbors and with New York's business community if it were to pull back domestic partner benefits for its employees. The State of New York has been providing insurance for the domestic partners of executive branch employees since 1993. Four years ago, Senator Joseph Bruno extended domestic partner benefits to employees of the State Senate, removing that body's distinction of being the last branch of state government without such a benefit. Already over a dozen localities across New York State offer domestic partner benefits to employees, including Westchester County, Albany County, Nassau County, the City of Rochester, the Town of Greenburgh and the Village of Port Jefferson. In just the last year, Suffolk County on Long Island and your neighbor, Rockland County, added domestic partner benefits for their employees.

Even with this progress, the public sector to a large degree has lagged far behind the private sector in providing domestic partner benefits. Eastchester should recognize what national and area businesses have recognized a long time ago: discrimination is inefficient and simply put, bad for business. By one count, over 3,500 employers nationally extend health care benefits to domestic partners, including such esteemed Westchester-based companies as Pepsico and Starwood Hotels and Resorts, and other New York companies like IBM, Time Warner, Montefiore Medical Center and the Xerox Corporation. In fact, nine of the nation's ten biggest companies offer domestic partner benefits. WalMart and Home Depot understand that supporting the families of ALL of their employees is the smart thing to do; it seems strange that Eastchester does not.

In today's *Westchester Journal News*, an opponent of domestic partner benefits was quoted as saying that he was glad that Eastchester is fighting back. I must ask, fighting against what? Why is the Town seeking to fight against loving partners who are trying to take care of each other? Why is the Town fighting parents who are attempting to provide for their children? Why is the Town fighting people who seek only fair and equal compensation for serving their neighbors? It comes down to this: Eastchester should not be a community that leaves one set of families out in the cold to fend for themselves by denying them the health coverage they need. It's anti-family, it's bad public policy and it's just plain unfair.

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I urge you to not make unions negotiate away the benefits of their members. I encourage you to heed the wisdom of the scores of New York localities and private business who understand that treating employees equally is the smart thing to do. The Empire State Pride Agenda stands ready to assist in any way we can by providing data and answering questions about domestic partnership benefits. I thank you for the opportunity to address the Town Board this evening.

Founded in 1990, the Empire State Pride Agenda is New York's statewide civil rights organization committed to achieving full equality and justice for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) New Yorkers and our families. With thousands of supporters, the Pride Agenda has offices in NYC and Albany and is the largest statewide LGBT organization in the country.