



Gay and Lesbian
Independent Democrats

November 13, 2003

**Personal Testimony on Behalf of the Thrope-Ghossein Family
Submitted to the New York City Council Contracts Committee
Hearing on the Equal Benefits Bill**

Dear Respected Council Members,

My name is Jan Holland. I submit this statement to you on behalf of my dear friends and neighbors, Leslie Thrope, Dominique Ghossein, and their five-year-old daughter Sadie. Although Leslie Thrope had planned to speak to you today, she is unable to be here because of the recent death of Dominique Ghossein (her domestic partner of more than 10 years). The history of Dominique's last two years provides an unfortunate example of the need for this proposed Equal Benefits law.

Dominique was diagnosed with cervical cancer in 1996, prior to the birth of their daughter. During the past four years that I have known the Thrope-Ghossein family, Dominique has fought far too many battles with this disease. She survived extraordinary challenges of various treatments, and many surgeries (including repeated operations on her lungs and brain). Even though it seemed tremendously difficult, Dominique returned to work because it was the only way to retain her health insurance without incurring the prohibitive costs of COBRA continuation coverage. Because Dominique became increasingly ill and was unable to work during this last year, her family was forced to pay for COBRA benefits – a cost of almost \$700 a month.

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Dominique never had the opportunity to be covered under Leslie's health insurance because Leslie's employer (SEIU 32B-J Legal Fund) does not provide domestic partner benefits. Leslie poignantly explains that she has been required to pay out over \$9,000/year for additional health coverage because her employer does not offer the same health benefits to her as they do to other employees. Leslie is one of several lawyers who provide valuable services to 32BJ union members. She has worked for the Legal Fund for almost 9 years. Although Leslie provides the same services as her peers, she receives less compensation than her heterosexual-married colleagues. Ultimately, this has been a burden on the entire Thrope-Ghossein family. They concurrently struggled with the routine expenses that every family has, as well as the many additional expenses related to living with this disease, and now the financial burdens of being a single-parent household.

Over the course of the last few months Dominique's prognosis declined rapidly. She often labored to breathe, was extremely weak, and was not able to be left alone. It was evident and confirmed by medical reports that there was not much time and that much care was needed. She continued chemotherapy at home and often required the use of oxygen just to get through a short conversation.

Approximately one month prior to Dominique's death Leslie (and her family) desperately needed and requested family medical leave under the federal Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA). FMLA would have been granted to a married employee in the same situation. Her employer rejected her request and instead suggested that she take all her vacation and sick leave. In response to much protest her employer provided her with a curiously manufactured type of leave (not FMLA) with absolutely no policy guidelines. Leslie spent two of Dominique's last three weeks fighting with her employer about this lack of coverage. She was once again treated unfairly at the worst possible time – a most precious time that can never be replaced. Leslie continues to be denied requested human resource services that would otherwise be granted if it were not for her nontraditional family status.

This happened to a strong, informed, and supported family. Dominique (like Leslie) was also a lawyer dedicated to fighting for civil and human rights. They are both – experts in navigating such issues and their family has been surrounded by support. The proposed Equal Benefits law would protect many families like theirs but most importantly will protect many families who are unable to fight as arduously as Leslie and her supporters did in those last few weeks. This is especially critical for the many children in nontraditional families who have a disabled or seriously ill caregiver/domestic partner. All families deserve the right to be together during such critical moments without fear of retribution or disparate treatment by their employer.

Like Leslie and Dominique, I am also a lesbian co-parent to a young child. My partner and I are very proud of our family. We are active in our Washington Heights community and the gay and lesbian community. We are both employed by Columbia University, which has long provided the equal benefits that this bill proposes. In New York City, where there is a microcosm of diverse families, it should be assured that all are treated the same. We should all have an expectation of equal benefits – especially those who significantly derive their benefits from New York City contracts or funds. I hope that New York City continues to be in the forefront of providing equal benefits to each and every citizen.

Respectfully,

Jan Holland

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