

Lawyers for Equality and Diversity

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On September 20, 2007, a group of lawyers, law students and law professors held the inaugural meeting of LEAD (which stands for Lawyers for Equality and Diversity).

LEAD is the brainchild of several lawyers who formed a subcommittee of the RI Bar Association called the LGBT Legal Issues and the Law Committee. Every year since its inception in 2003, the LGBT Committee has requested that the RI Bar Association actively support the legislative package proposed by MERI. Last year the RI Bar Association invited members of the LGBT Committee to address its ruling body, the House of Delegates. After an active discussion and a series of votes, the House of Delegates chose to take no action on any of the bills supported by the LGBT Committee. According to the Rules of the RI Bar Association, no committee may take any legislative positions. All advocacy needs to be approved by and come from the ruling body. Thus, members of the LGBT Committee could take no further action on the bills.

Constrained by the RI Bar Association from advocating for the expansion of legal rights and protections for the LGBTQ communities through the LGBT Committee, members of the Rhode Island legal community formed LEAD to provide a platform from which Rhode Island attorneys and legal professionals, gay and straight, may support one another, campaign for changes in the law, and perhaps be a voice for those who are not currently being heard.

Since September, LEAD has met almost monthly. In October, we were joined by Jenn Steinfeld, who provided an update on MERI's activities. At a recent meeting the speaker was attorney Lou Pulner, who gave us an update on his efforts to obtain a divorce for Cassandra Ormiston and Margaret Chambers. Pulner was the attorney who argued the same-sex divorce case to the RI Supreme Court, representing Ms. Chambers. In December, we hosted a very successful Holiday Party at DownCity, with about 50 people attending.

LEAD has submitted letters to the editor of the Providence Journal and will continue to do so as our time and energy allows. In March LEAD co-sponsored a Continuing Legal Education Seminar on the Tax Consequences of Marriage in Massachusetts for RI Couples. At our meeting on April 16th, the members of

LEAD strategized for and coordinated an afternoon of lobbying at the RI State House to support this year's legislative agenda submitted on behalf of MERI. We will also be engaging our attorney friends and allies in a letter-writing campaign in support of that platform.

The common drive for everyone involved with LEAD is our dedication to doing more to advance equal treatment of our LGBTQ friends and neighbors.

Some of our future goals include the filing of *amicus* briefs, lobbying formally or informally, testifying at the State House, and the gathering and sharing of our collective information and resources. The members of LEAD have agreed that we need to pick our issues and battles carefully.

At this time LEAD does not provide legal representation to individuals. We are, however, working towards an attorney referral mechanism.

At this point we have about 40 legal professionals on our distribution list and maintain a core group of individuals that attend our meetings and formulate action plans.

If you are interested in further information about LEAD, or are interested in joining us, feel free to contact Barbara Margolis at firstmate50@cox.net, or Martha Holt at MHolt@EAPDLAW.com. ▼

