



DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC HEALTH  
CITY OF CHICAGO

**OPEN LETTER TO ILLINOIS HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES:  
THE PUBLIC HEALTH CASE FOR  
MARRIAGE EQUALITY**

April 8, 2013

**As Illinois residents, community leaders and public health advocates, we urge you to pass the Religious Freedom and Marriage Fairness Act or Senate Bill 10. As the Chicago Department of Public Health's (CDPH) LGBT Health Advisory Council, we understand all too well the profound intersection between social justice and public health and that in order for our state to achieve one, we must also have the other.**

Marriage equality is often referred to as a civil rights issue. We agree, but it is also a public health issue. History shows that some of the greatest advances in public health, and subsequently the well-being of all people, have been the direct result of increased social justice. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965 desegregated schools, hospitals, public places and workplaces and banned discriminatory voting practices. These laws did more than that as they have been credited with increasing life expectancy and reducing infant mortality for African American women and babies.<sup>1,2</sup> Civil rights are important for health because the social differences that result from inequalities — in areas such as income, education, neighborhood conditions and the experience of stigma — actually have more impact on the health of an individual than even medical care.<sup>3</sup>

Today, the Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) population suffers from poorer health than the heterosexual population. Stigma and a long history of discrimination are at the heart of these poor health outcomes.<sup>4</sup> Risk of poor mental health outcomes, including the likelihood of general psychological distress, depression, anxiety, the need for psychiatric medication and the risk for suicide attempts is higher for the gay and lesbian population. As often cited in the media, LGBT youth experience violence, victimization and bullying at higher rates than other youth.<sup>5,6,7</sup> LGBT adults are less likely to have health insurance or to report having excellent or good health. Members of the LGBT community are more likely to delay or not seek care; to go without needed prescription medication and receive health care in emergency rooms; meanwhile, they are more likely to smoke and more likely to have cancer.

**Passing the Religious Freedom and Marriage Fairness Act will help reduce these disparities and improve health for thousands of LGBT people across Illinois.** Marriage has been shown to lead to both physical and mental health benefits and a longer life expectancy.<sup>8,9</sup> LGBT couples who have the same option to marry can expect long-term health benefits through the increase in social support, the financial benefits of marriage, decreased stigma and discrimination



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and the protective effects of a stable relationship and increased intimacy.<sup>10</sup> Predictably, studies of the impact of the legalization of same-sex marriage in other states already show health benefits.<sup>11, 12</sup>

A vote for this bill is a vote for public health. By passing the Religious Freedom and Marriage Fairness Act, you will be improving public health in a way that no public health organization or doctor can. LGBT Illinoisans deserve the same rights and opportunities as everyone else – including not only the right to marry but also the right to live a healthy life. As Illinois residents concerned with the health of all our neighbors, we ask you to vote YES and make a positive difference.

Sincerely,

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Health Advisory Council  
Chicago Department of Public Health

## CITATIONS

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- <sup>12</sup> Wight, RG, LeBlanc, AJ, Badgett, MV. (2013). Same sex legal marriage and psychological well-being: findings from the California Health Interview Survey. American Journal of Public Health. 103(2):339-346.