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Letters to The Times

Changes in U.S. Families

I would like to add another perspective to the column on the changing family by Tom Coleman (Op-Ed Page, July 26). Many years ago I was licensed as one of the first single-male foster parents in Los Angeles County. Over the ensuing years, my foster sons and I encountered numerous incidents of social, institutional, and governmental discrimination, some of which was humorous, some annoying, and some very serious.

Socially, we discovered that some neighbors and many parents of the boys' friends strongly objected to the very notion of a single-male parent. Several times the boys were offered "good" homes by parents of friends.

Institutionally, our most serious problems were with the schools, Administrators, secretaries, and teachers apparently felt duty-bound to express disapproval of our home to my boys, but never to me.

Our worst problems were with some employees of the County Department of Children's Services. One supervisor "knew in her heart" that the county had made a mistake and that a single man should never be permitted to parent foster children. For 10 years that supervisor made my life difficult. Eventually, this woman, who had never met nor spoken to me, "taught me a lesson" by delaying permission for urgent extraordinary medical treatment for one of my sons. Although he might have died anyway, I will never know to what extent her personal hostility toward me may have contributed to his death. After his death, I gave up my foster parent license.

All of my boys are adults now. Some have gone out of my life, but several are still very much a part of my "family." They are my "sons," but if for some reason I were to be institutionalized or hospitalized in an unconscious state, they would be refused access to me. Members of my biological family, who never approved of my role as foster parent, would gain decision-making control, including the power to refuse my sons any access to me.

The problem is that religions to which I do not subscribe and politicians whom I do not support have the power to decide for me who my "family" should be and unless I pursue expensive, and sometimes contestable legal remedies, there is nothing I can do. Some variation of the "domestic partnership" concept would go a long way toward changing societal and institutional attitudes and protecting the interests and integrity of non-traditional families.

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