

August 21, 1989

THE FAMILY

A new kind of spouse in the house

The hoary greeting "How's the family?" is giving way to "*Who's* the family?" Last week, New York Mayor Edward Koch gave bereavement leave to city workers whose "domestic partners" die. It is part of a trend toward giving homosexual and unmarried couples perks once reserved for men and women with marriage licenses. A half-dozen cities have new laws recognizing some rights for the unmarried. Policymakers "are adopting a concept of family more in line with the way people actually live," says Prof. Arthur Leonard of New York Law School.

The strongest such law is San Francisco's, which lets those who "share one another's lives in an intimate and committed relationship" file a declaration making them eligible for full benefits given to married spouses. New York State's highest court recently said a homosexual can inherit a rent-controlled apartment from a longtime companion. If the new concept of family takes hold, the 2.6 million unmarried heterosexual couples and uncounted other groups may benefit. "Three nuns have been declared a family for zoning purposes," notes Thomas Coleman of the Family Diversity Project in Los Angeles, where traditional marriages account for 44 percent of households.

Yet drastic change will meet resistance. Opponents of the San Francisco plan have forced a referendum in November. The Washington-based Family Research Council will fight the idea elsewhere. "The nuclear family is the central building block of Western civilization," argues the group's Gary Bauer. The question now is how far the bicoastal notion of a family will reach into the heartland.