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Report Finds Widespread Bias Against Unmarrieds

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A report documenting widespread and often illegal discrimination against unmarried people in Los Angeles—ranging from higher dues at health clubs to restrictions on visits to hospital bedsides—will be released today by a consumer task force convened by City Atty. James K. Hahn.

"Discrimination based on marital status is arbitrary, inappropriate, illegal and unfair—but it is also a pervasive national problem," said Thomas F. Coleman, chairman of the Consumer Task Force on Marital Status Discrimination and an adjunct professor at the USC Law Center.

"Our report represents the emergence of a new dimension of the consumer protection movement," he added. "Call it singles' rights."

The unmarried—those who are single, divorced, separated or widowed—make up 55% of people of marrying age in the city, Coleman said. The U.S. Census Bureau defines "marrying age" as 15 years or older, he said.

"A sleeping giant is awakening, and once it awakens there are going to be major changes in the way businesses and others interact with unmarried consumers," Coleman said.

Hahn, who called a press conference for this morning, declined to comment on the 126-page report, an advance copy of which was obtained by The Times. But in creating the task force last October, the city attorney said: "Most of us aren't living in traditional American families anymore, and the rights and privileges extended to a few should be extended to everyone."

The report details numerous instances of alleged discriminatory practices in a wide range of situations. Among them: landlords who refuse to rent to single people or unmarried couples; auto insurers who levy higher premiums or will not write policies for singles; credit unions that will not issue joint loans to members and their fiancés; and airlines that restrict the use of frequent-flyer awards to spouses or blood relatives.

"Most of these practices are illegal in California," said Coleman, an expert on family law. In many areas, such as housing, singles and unmarried couples are already covered by fair-housing laws and regulations, the report noted. Where specific statutes are lacking, the report urged more vigorous enforcement of existing laws barring arbitrary discrimination or unfair business practices.

"Most consumer protection programs focus almost exclusively on consumer fraud and virtually ignore the issue of discrimination," the report charges.

Other remedies the report recommends include increased efforts to educate consumers, voluntary cooperation by businesses and, where ambiguities exist, clearer laws and regulations.

"There are signs of change," the report notes. For example, the Greater Los Angeles Zoo Assn. recently liberalized its membership policy to provide admission to any two adults, regardless of marital status; previously, admission was for the member and "spouse."

In cases where bias is not deliberate but stems from unintentional assumptions or inappropriate terminology, a simple letter to the offending business can bring redress, the report said. Last November, for example, Wells Fargo Bank apologized to the task force for using the word "spouse" in a promotional offer to credit-card holders.

"To have been more accurate, the offer should have been made to 'the joint account customer,'" Eric Kahn, a bank vice president, wrote to the task force. "We are grateful for your bringing our misworded letter to our attention."

Some businesses cite economic reasons to justify charging higher prices for single people. For example, in response to new state regulations barring the use of marital status in setting auto insurance rates, State Farm and Allstate recently filed suit against the state charging that marital status, among other factors, "bears a substantial relationship to the risk of loss."

Like other California-based social movements, the drive to secure equal rights for unmarried consumers is being noticed in other parts of the country. "This is a question that begs examination, and Los Angeles has taken a very positive first step," said Virginia M. Apuzzo, deputy executive director of the New York State Consumer Protection Board.

Apuzzo said her agency plans to mount a similar campaign against marital-status discrimination, adding: "People are not being treated equally in the marketplace. It isn't fair." Apuzzo, who has worked on behalf of gay rights, said economic discrimination based on marital status is of special significance to gay people, who are denied the right to wed, though the majority of persons who are victimized are heterosexuals.

The Los Angeles task force held three public hearings and heard testimony from about 30 witnesses, including business representatives, legal experts and politicians.

The task force did not specifically address "domestic partnership" legislation, which was considered by an earlier city task force. After that earlier report, the Los Angeles City Council redefined the term "immediate family" to offer sick leave and bereavement leave to city employees with unmarried partners. Other municipalities, including West Hollywood and Berkeley, have gone even further, granting health benefits to domestic partners of city workers.

Most of the testimony to the consumer task force came from individuals who alleged discriminatory practices by landlords, insurers, banks, credit unions, nursing homes, hospitals, health clubs and frequent-flyer programs.

Valeria Morea, the fiancée of a member of TWA's frequent-flyer program, told the panel that she was denied permission to board a plane with her fiancé, even though he had qualified for an award of two tickets. The airline cited its policy of permitting only spouses or immediate family members to use the second ticket.

TWA has since changed its policy, the task force report noted.

Some other airlines, however, still have restrictions that the carriers say are designed to prevent sale of the frequent-flyer awards to strangers, the report said.

Nancy Matthews, an account executive with the advertising firm McCann-Erickson in Los Angeles, has lived with advertising copywriter Adam Shreve for nearly four years and has been waging a running battle with the Mid Valley Athletic Club in Reseda to obtain the joint membership discount the club offers to married couples.

BIAS: Discrimination Against Singles Detailed

MARRIAGE IN LOS ANGELES

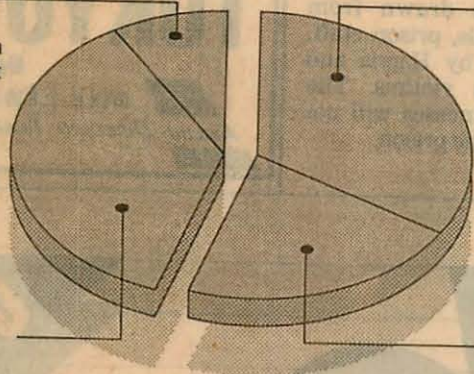
A breakdown of the marital status of those of "marrying age" in the city of Los Angeles. The U.S. Census defines people of "marrying age" as those 15 years or older.*

Married 45%

Unmarried 55%

9% are in their second or a subsequent marriage.

36% are in their first marriage.



33.5% have never been married.

21.5% are currently widowed, divorced or separated.

*A task force on discrimination against singles notes that 49.5% of the people 18 or over are unmarried.

Sources: Office of the City Attorney of Los Angeles, Consumer Task Force on Marital Status Discrimination, and 1980 U.S. Census data.

As singles, Matthews and Shreve each pay \$55 a month for membership, or a total of \$110 a month. Were they married, they would be entitled to a joint membership for \$65 a month—just \$32.50 each.

“Why should a single person, or a widowed person, or a person who is new to town, pay nearly twice as much for the same membership?” Matthews asked.

“As a single person, I take up one-half the room in the aerobics class, dirty one-half as many towels, consume one-half as much shampoo, and flush one-half as many toilets as a two-person married couple,” she said.

“We considered forging a marriage certificate on Adam’s Macintosh,” Matthews continued. “But then we decided that the system was wrong and that we should fight it.”

So far, it has been a losing battle. Despite two meetings with club general manager Harold Wright, a flurry of letters, and public testimony by Matthews before the task force, the club refuses to budge.

“You are either married or you’re not,” Wright said in an interview. “It would be an administrative nightmare to provide joint memberships to unmarried couples,” he asserted.

“This isn’t a moral issue for us,” Wright added. “We’re not trying to impose a value system on our members.”

But societal privilege for married people is very much a moral issue to Beverly Sheldon, whose husband, the Rev. Louis P. Sheldon, heads the Traditional Values Coalition in Irvine.

“Single people aren’t providing the same stability to our country, they’re not providing offspring, they carry more diseases,” said Mrs. Sheldon, director of research for the fundamentalist Christian organization.

Though she said she opposes discrimination, she added: “I feel saddened that [singles] want to take away the help [society grants married couples] simply because they can’t have it, too.”

In response, Coleman accused Sheldon of “vile stereotyping that lumps all unmarried people into one negative category, whether they are widows, gays, divorcees or even members of the clergy.”

“California has a strong public policy to protect the freedom of choice of individuals to marry, or not to marry,” he added. “The state’s policy of granting certain privileges to married people does not imply a corresponding policy to discriminate against the unmarried.”

The Consumer Task Force on Marital Status Discrimination was convened by Hahn after the city’s advisory Task Force on Family Diversity recommended that the city attorney crack down on discrimination against unmarried individuals and couples.

The consumer panel did not investigate workplace discrimination against unmarried people because the city attorney lacks jurisdiction in employment matters.

Members of the panel included attorneys, consumer protection officials, human rights advocates and representatives from such businesses as Pacific Bell and Kaiser Permanente.

Panel members said that perhaps the most compelling testimony was provided by Juan Navarrette, who explained how a nursing home barred him from visiting his unmarried partner, Leroy Tranten, after Tranten fell from a ladder and suffered brain damage.

Although the two had lived together for eight years, Navarrette said he was kept away from Tranten at the insistence of a hostile relative. “I visited him for 10 months in the hospital, but after they transferred him to the nursing home, they wouldn’t let me see him,” Navarrette said.

“I wanted to bring him ice cream. I wanted to bring him food, but they wouldn’t let me,” he said.

Though Navarrette went to court to challenge the forced six-week separation, he was too late. Five days before the scheduled hearing, Tranten died and, without notification to Navarrette, the body was flown out of state.

“They wouldn’t even let me pay my last respects,” he said.



RANDY LEFFINGWELL / Los Angeles Times

Adam Shreve and Nancy Matthews in front of Mid Valley Athletic Club in Reseda. They are demanding discount given to married couples.