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The Word 'Family' Gains New Meaning

■ **Relationships:** California will now sell a certificate to unrelated people recognizing their status as a household unit. The registration has no tax or legal consequences, but may provide other advantages.

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People seeking to be recognized as a family unit can now register with the state of California under a novel system that supporters say could benefit thousands of diverse households, including gay couples, foster parents and step-families.

For a \$10 filing fee, any family—traditional or not—can receive an ornate color certificate bearing a gold state seal that declares the household an association called the "Family of [Doe]," a spokesman for the secretary of state's office said Wednesday.

The registration, however, has no known tax or legal consequences and confers no automatic benefits beyond the sentimental, according to Anthony Miller, chief deputy secretary of state.

It may, however, help step-parents in case of medical emergencies involving their children, assist domestic partners in obtaining hospital visiting rights and serve as a psychological boost to foster children who may feel keenly the lack of a family identity, said Thomas F. Coleman, an attorney and adjunct professor of family diversity at USC who conceived the idea.

The certificates may also be shown to health clubs, frequent flier programs, and insurance companies to help qualify for "family discounts," Coleman said.

In registering, families declare themselves "unincorporated nonprofit associations" under an existing section of the California



ELLEN JASKOL / Los Angeles Times

This Torrance group is registered with the California secretary of state as a family unit, although it includes two women who are children of other parents. Beppy and John Reynaert are shown with sons, Brian and Henry, and Pamela C. Petrou and Kyeong Chang. Beppy Reynaert says: "We take care of [the women] because their parents can't."

Corporations Code that is now used by such groups as fraternities, garden clubs, and homeowners associations.

"A certificate of registration is a tool that will help families gain recognition and economic benefits in addition to the psychological benefits and personal self-esteem that comes along with social recognition," said Coleman, who has served on several government task forces on changing family configurations in California and the nation.

While the secretary of state merely keeps track of the certificates and does not have

any authority to verify family units, Coleman said families may use the documents to establish proof of their relationships. He suggested that people keep reduced copies in their wallets.

Coleman submitted a lengthy report to Secretary of State March Fong Eu on the idea two months ago, Miller said. After studying the proposal, Eu declared it a "creative and valid use of existing law."

If the idea catches on, Miller added, it could become a revenue-producer for the state. The state makes a \$5 profit on each certificate.

Seven families, ranging from a gay couple in San Diego County to a foster family in Torrance have already been registered.

"This was a chance to somehow tell the whole world that we consider ourselves a family," said John Brown, 40, of Silver Lake, who took in three Guatemala-born boys three

years ago and is now their legal guardian. Because they are still close to their mother, a migrant laborer, he has not adopted the boys. "It's hard for guardian parents because people think in terms of traditional mother-father relationships.

Because of changing economic, social and demographic factors, many children and adults wind up living in households that function as a family, but have no papers to prove it.

Only 15% of the households in the United States now match the once-standard defini-

Herb King, 72, a consulting industrial engineer, and C. Stanley Mahan, 67, an electronic data processing specialist, are a retired gay couple who built a home together outside Vista, in San Diego County, 22 years ago.

"I was closeted during my entire employed career," said King. "But I've shared my life with another man for 32 years. We own property together. I feel that we should be legally entitled to whatever perquisites and other good things in life are available to people like me whose only difference is that they are of opposite sex and have a marriage certificate."

King said he also believes the registry will benefit elderly heterosexual couples who live together without marrying for fear of losing Social Security and pension benefits.

Cathy Howard, 34, an instructional aide in Victorville, and her husband Pat, 49, also applied for a certificate for the benefit of her biological daughter, Shannon Gibson.

"My daughter has a good relationship with her dad," Howard said. "What brought our interest to this project was that my husband could not and would not adopt Shannon because Shannon's father is a very big part of her life. But if anything ever happened to me, or if I were out of town, my husband would have nothing showing they even know each other because their names are different."



DON BARTLETT / Los Angeles Times

C. Stanley Mahan, left, and Herb King, retired gay couple at the home that they built together near Vista in San Diego County.

FAMILY: A New Meaning

tion of a family as a working husband, homemaker wife, and children, studies show. California families particularly those in Los Angeles, are even more diverse.

Just 22% of households in the city are composed of a heterosexual married couples and children, according to a report issued in 1988 by the city's Task Force on Family Diversity. Another 22% are married couples without children.

That means a large number of households—55% in Los Angeles and 42% in California—are people living alone, adult siblings or other blood relatives living together, roommates, single-parent families, unmarried couples living together, and other configurations.

Debbie Deem and James Riley of the San Jose area have lived together for nine years. Deem, 39, is a crime victim advocate with a nonprofit agency. Through her work, she said, she has seen wife and child abuse take place under the umbrella of a marriage certificate. She said she also has seen many unhappy marriages, and decided for philosophical reasons that she did not want to marry the man she loves.

Two years ago, she said, she moved from Alaska to Arizona, where she applied for a job as a probation officer and found, to her astonishment, that despite extensive experience she could not get the job because Arizona was one of several states in which by cohabitation by unmarried couples remains illegal.

"I'd always been told if you go to school, work hard, get good grades, doors will open up," she said. "Instead, it got slammed. I was being called a sex offender when I'd worked hard to put people like that in jail."

She and Riley moved to California, heard about Coleman's idea, and decided to register.

"It was a way of doing something positive after our negative experience," she said. "I wanted more validation from society than what I had had before. We just got a copy of the certificate and celebrated. It's the best I've felt in two years."

California is the first state in the country to register such families. But, Coleman said, at least six other states—Oregon, Michigan, Wisconsin, New Jersey, Virginia

and West Virginia—have similar procedures.

If successful, the current use of the corporations code could substitute for the often-controversial ballot measures promoted by homosexual and lesbian groups to register gay marriages at city halls.

Coleman said he hopes it will also help establish individuals as family members so they might reap benefits from the more than 1,600 California statutes that use the term "family," sometimes loosely.

For example, a new business license is not required if the business is carried on by a surviving family member. Credit unions may only lend money to members and their families. A victim's surviving family member may receive restitution from a convicted defendant. But none of those statutes, he said, defines family member.