

Gay couples deserve perks

■ *Heterosexuals can get married if they want insurance benefits from their live-in partner's employer.*

Asked about his gay partners proposal, Cook County Commissioner Michael Quigley was quick to clarify the name. "It's a *domestic partners* benefits plan. There's a difference."

There is indeed, especially for people who oppose anything they perceive as granting "special rights" or benefits to homosexuals. In such a homophobic climate, a "domestic partners" label is less likely to attract negative attention.

But even if it does raise a ruckus, the county's health benefits package should be limited to same-sex partners of county employees. Those benefits should not be available to heterosexual couples who refuse to make a legal commitment.

The reason is simple: Gay partners cannot otherwise qualify for these important benefits, which include health, vision and dental insurance and family-leave benefits. Legal spouses and children of county employees qualify automatically. Homosexual partners do not qualify because, under Illinois law, homosexuals cannot legally marry. And they never will be able to if religious leaders and others espousing "family values" continue to have their way.

That's why I wholeheartedly support Quigley's resolution, and the full Cook County Board probably will do so as well when it is voted on April 6.

"It's a gesture of acceptance, and a way to attract and retain quality employees," said Quigley, a lawyer and one of three new members of the County Board of Commissioners, explaining his push for benefits for same-sex partners.

As Quigley argued in a letter urging County Board President John H. Stroger and his colleagues to support the measure, benefits make up about 40 percent of employees' total compensation, but those benefits are available only to an employee's legal spouse and dependents. Excluding the domestic partners of gay and lesbian employees, who might be just as loving and

devoted, "creates an imbalance in the equal pay for equal work formula," Quigley said.

Commissioners Carl Hansen and William Moran oppose the plan, saying if benefits go to homosexual partners, they should be extended to partners of all employees—married or not. Bad idea, I say, and a costly one at that. Who knows how many employees have live-in partners already?

Private companies and other municipalities that offer same-sex benefits report that few employees sign up. In Chicago, which began offering such benefits two years ago, only 31 workers have registered. Quigley doesn't expect a-rush to apply for county benefits, either. He said most homosexual employees' partners have benefits at their own companies, and employees must pay federal taxes on the value of those benefits—approximately \$3,000 a year.

Perhaps most important to the low registration rate for these valuable benefits: There remains a stigma on gays and lesbians. Those who sign up must be prepared for scorn and shunning by fellow employees.

Qualifications are simple, but restrictive enough to weed out the flings and other short-term arrangements.

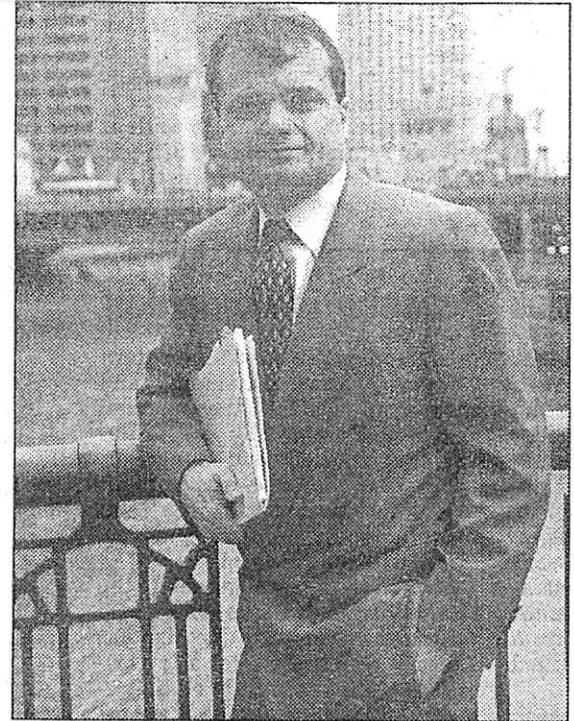
The employee and domestic partners must have lived together for 12 months before applying for benefits, own a house or car together, share a credit or checking account or be named the primary beneficiary in the employee's will. These indicate a serious and committed relationship.

Is it sexism to deny benefits to heterosexual employees' partners? I don't think so. But try telling that to Tom Coleman, executive director of the American Association for Single People, based in Los Angeles. He testified at a committee hearing against the ordinance, calling the same-sex restriction "unfair to a majority of unmarried workers who live with an opposite-sex partner."

Besides, Coleman said, if the commissioners support equal pay for equal work, "they should



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JIM FROST/SUN-TIMES

County Commissioner Michael Quigley says benefits should be extended to same-sex partners.

distribute benefits compensation in a way that is family friendly to all employees, whether they live in a married-couple household or an unmarried family relationship."

That's hogwash. And I doubt that Cardinal Francis George, the Rev. Hiram Crawford and other religious leaders could support Coleman's reasoning. They all tout the benefits of marriage and family. Couples who are "living in sin" without the sanctity of marriage would not get the ministers' blessing.

They should not get the taxpayers' money, either. If heterosexual employees want these benefits for their live-in partners, they can get them easily enough. Just go down to the County Building and get a marriage license. Then get married.