

national news

Advocacy group decries discrimination against singles

'Unmarried America' calls on gay and straight singles to fight back

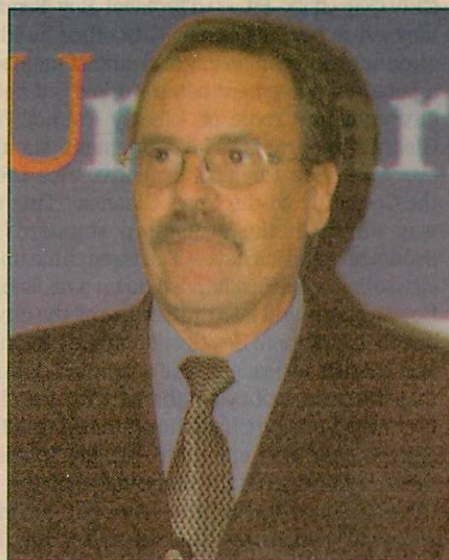
By LOU CHIBBARO JR.

Unmarried Americans, both gay and straight, tend to pay higher taxes and receive fewer employee and government benefits than their married counterparts, despite the fact that they head 49.4 percent of the nation's households, a singles' advocacy groups says.

Unmarried America, which bills itself as a national equal rights organization for unmarried people, is calling on Congress and the Bush administration to put an end to what it says are a litany of inequities faced by single people.

At a Capitol Hill briefing last month, Thomas Coleman, the group's executive director, said unmarried households are "actual majorities" in 13 states, 132 congressional districts, and more than 300 cities.

"With the United States on the verge of becoming an unmarried majority nation in terms of living arrangements, it is time for elected officials to take a crash course on equal rights," he said. "It's time for Congress to define marital status discrimination as an unacceptable form of behavior."



Thomas Coleman, executive director of Unmarried America, said unmarried households are 'actual majorities' in 13 states, 132 congressional districts, and more than 300 cities. (Photo by Michael Wise)

Coleman said he is sympathetic to efforts by gay rights groups to seek legalization of same-sex civil marriage. But he said he is also concerned that gay groups may not be paying enough attention to gay singles.

Single gays are often denied "equal pay" compensation packages available to gay couples through employee domestic partner plans, according to Coleman. Single gays work the same hours and perform the same

MORE INFO

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duties as heterosexual married co-workers and "coupled" gay co-workers, he said. Yet the married workers and gay workers with partners often are eligible for thousands of dollars worth of benefits in spousal and domestic partner programs that are unavailable to the single gay workers.

"The ideal benefit plan would be a 'cafeteria' plan, where singles and coupled people get the full, equal benefits," he said.

He said that Unmarried America seeks to represent a wide range of unmarried people, including gay and straight singles and gay and straight domestic partners.

Officials with Unmarried America said research they conducted uncovered the following inequities faced by single Americans, both gay and straight:

- The U.S. Civil Rights Commission and the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission lack any authority to study or crack down against employment discrimination based on marital status because there is no protection against employment discrimination in federal law based on marital status except in the area of credit from

financial institutions.

- Unmarried workers pay the same Social Security taxes but get fewer benefits out of the Social Security system. If an unmarried worker dies shortly before retirement, for example, the worker forfeits everything he or she has paid into the system. But if a married worker dies just prior to retirement age, his or her surviving spouse is eligible for a survivor's death benefit "for years."

- Although Congress is leaning toward eliminating the so-called "marriage penalty" in the federal tax code, it is unlikely to also eliminate what Unmarried America calls the "singles' penalty" — the requirement of single people to pay income taxes on lower levels of income than married couples, who can file joint income tax returns.

Craig Howell, former president of the D.C. Gay & Lesbian Activists Alliance, said GLAA has advocated on behalf of gay singles since the group was founded in the early 1970s, but has found that few rank and file gays are interested in such issues.

"Very few single people identify as single," Howell said. "They view themselves as either planning to marry or as widows or widowers." Howell said gay and straight singles don't seem to mind losing out on the type of benefits and privileges that Unmarried America is advocating for.

"I believe in their cause," Howell said. "But there is a fundamental problem — a lack of commitment on the part of single people."