

Give Benefits to Single Workers with Chosen Families

By Dave White

I am yet another 29-year-old single (bisexual) member of AASP. I would like to see the Singles-Friendly Workplace Campaign recognize unmarried workers who are in my situation.

There is a great focus these days on "domestic partnership" rights and benefits, as if everyone who chooses to remain single still wants to have a relationship that basically looks a lot like marriage.

And, when "non-romantically-involved" singles are discussed, it is in the context of things like the "child-free" movement for people who don't want to contribute to other people's family benefits.

Both of these groups of people have important points to make, but I'm writing to represent a third viewpoint-- that of people who choose not to be romantically involved, or not to have a "domestic partnership" with their lover, but are committed to a family life that involves their friends and their friends' children.

I think that AASP's home page starts out on the right foot-- saying, for example, that "even when single people do not share a household, they often have formed close bonds or mutual support networks with friends, neighbors, or relatives in an

extended family of choice." But when it comes down to the nitty-gritty of public policy proposals, suddenly it becomes okay to only ask for benefits for "blood relatives" and "domestic partners" only. Where does that leave people whose blood relatives were abusive, and what about people who choose to live with, or care for, or raise children with friends instead of a "partner"?

My proposal? "Family benefits" such as family leave, bereavement leave, flextime, daycare benefits, and the like, can require that we name a certain maximum NUMBER of beneficiaries, and require that they stay on the benefits form for a certain minimum amount of TIME, but those limits should be the only limits on who we choose for benefits.

With the numerical and time restrictions, few people will choose anyone cavalierly (or at least, no more cavalierly than many people choose their spouses already!) but it will be entirely up to the individual to decide whom they are closest to, and nobody will get to judge their relationship as "inferior" because it isn't heterosexual, isn't sexual, or is otherwise "different."

The usual response to such a proposal is "friendship isn't as committed as marriage or domestic partnership," to which I say, "maybe that's true for most people, but not for all, and what gives government or employers the right to tell me

Here's a list of how people I know have shown their commitment to friendship lately:

- ✓ I asked for unpaid personal leave for my best friend's first childbirth
- ✓ I am providing money for the birth and to start off a college fund
- ✓ One of my coworkers was denied bereavement leave for a close friend because they "weren't a real relative"
- ✓ This person also spent lots of time helping single-mother friends with their children
- ✓ her boyfriend spent a lot of time caring for a sick friend in a nearby city
- ✓ I help my ex-boyfriend (now a friend, and a single father) with his child and want to be MORE involved
- ✓ Since I am a child of abusive parents, one of my friends offered to sign a "power of attorney" in case I am sick, so she can have legal rights to care for me
- ✓ I spend Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Easter with one close friend's immediate family; they and their extended relatives treat me as one of their own
- ✓ One of my friends' girlfriends broke up with him for daring to be nonsexually affectionate with me (holding hands, sitting close together while watching TV); he stood up to this attempt to control his friendships
- ✓ Another friend of mine broke up with another girlfriend, who said he shouldn't visit his friends out of town
- ✓ And, not to leave the fun stuff out of it, me and a close friend just finished a drive down the Pacific Coast Highway that resembled a honeymoon right down to the pictures of us riding horses by the sea, and me buying her tampons in the hotel lobby! Of course, if it was a REAL honeymoon, it would prove Our Commitment And Love; as it is, I guess it only proves our "frivolous single lifestyle," because we had to pay \$25 more for our car rental than married people ("extra driver fee") and we had to pretend to be "partners" in order to both get the 50% off room rates that my friend gets for working at a hotel.

who I am committed to?" And I'm not the only one; the items in the box on the previous page is just one boy's list of people being committed to their friends, even to the point of dumping their partners.

My point? Even if most people aren't that devoted to their friends, it seems realistic to imagine that at least 5-10% of the population DO feel that way. Which is the same percentage as gay people are. As someone in both categories, then, I wonder why I can finally get "domestic partner" benefits if I shack up with a boyfriend (certainly "weird" behavior that most men wouldn't engage in), but I can't get benefits for my close friends, who are actually dearer to my heart.

I know it sounds excessively idealistic to imagine COMPLETE freedom in who we put on the benefits forms. Perhaps we can only get benefits for domestic partners NOW, or benefits for extended blood relatives. But we should be putting proposals like mine on the table.

Conservatives have proposed some pretty radical ideas lately, and those ideas have shaped the political discourse. (Who, a few years ago, would have taken seriously the notion of privatizing Social Security? Or eliminating the estate tax on those poor downtrodden billionaires?)

We could shape the political discourse over the long haul too, in favor of greater commitments among friends, an extended network of people to help raise children in today's demanding world, and complete freedom to provide "family" benefits to ANYONE we choose.

I think the "Singles Friendly Workplace Campaign" is a great idea. I hope that AASP will help to expand the conversation beyond domestic partnerships to other types of relationships too. ◇◇◇

(Ed. Note: Our Singles Friendly Workplace Campaign does not focus solely on workers with domestic partners or dependent blood relatives. We encourage employers to give equal benefits to all workers regardless of marital status or family configuration. This includes equal benefits for solo singles. Dave White makes some very good points. Our Singles Friendly Workplace Campaign will make it a point to specifically include and mention unmarried workers who have a "chosen family."

Equal Pay for Equal Work?

Not if you work for the State of California

Someone at the California Department of Insurance anonymously sent AASP a "Human Resources Bulletin" issued by the Chief of Human Resources Management of the State of California on July 18, 2001.

The bulletin included information on how much the state contributes each month to the health benefits plan of employees represented by the California State Employees Association.

The state pays:

\$182 per month for a single-party enrollment

\$362 per month for a two-party enrollment

\$473 per month for a family enrollment

This means that a single worker is being paid thousands of dollars less per year than a worker doing the same job but who has a spouse, domestic partner, or minor children who qualify for health benefits.

Who is being shortchanged in terms of benefits compensation?

✓ Unmarried workers who live alone and who do not have minor children as dependents.

✓ Unmarried workers under the age of 62 who have an opposite-sex domestic partner. Same-sex partners of any adult age are eligible for benefits. But heterosexual partners are ineligible unless both parties are over the age of 62.

✓ Single parents who have an adult child at home who does not have health insurance. Some workers can put one adult on their health plan (a spouse or same-sex partner) but a single parent may not put an adult child who lives with them on the plan.

✓ Unmarried workers who have a dependent parent or dependent relative living with them. Spousal coverage and domestic partner coverage excludes blood relatives.

Employees should be compensated on the basis of productivity and merit. It is unfair for an employer, especially a government employer whose benefits plan is financed August 6, 2001 by our tax dollars, to award benefits compensation on the basis of marital status or family structure.

Employers should give each employee the same contribution toward benefits. Then let workers choose the benefits which best suit their needs.