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Transgender Rights move to the forefront, with the leadership of Mark Leno and Dennis Herrera



By Theresa Sparks

YOU NEVER KNOW who will emerge as a champion of human rights, or when they will emerge. In the case of transgender rights, two heroes surfaced over the last two years. **Mark Leno** and **Dennis Herrera** forever changed the course of history in the transgender movement and, by extension, made the lives of thousands of transgender

individuals in San Francisco a little less difficult.

Supervisor Mark Leno was dismayed, in the fall of 1999, by the results of research into transgender discrimination. It was occurring in the areas of employment, public accommodations, education, medical care, law enforcement and housing. No area of daily life was untouched by ignorance, hatred and bias for transgender San Franciscans. Acting courageously, Mark Leno led the Board of Supervisors in creating the first transgender civil rights committee in the United States fully sanctioned by a governmental body. The Transgender Civil Rights Implementation Task Force was born, chartered with the task of implementing recommendations by the Human Rights Commission to eliminate transgender discrimination. The Task Force continues today, working on a wide range of issues affecting transgender citizens of San Francisco.

But Mark Leno wasn't finished. One more element of discrimination against transgender citizens especially bothered him, the exclusion of transgender City employees from the full range of medical benefits provided to all other City employees. To Supervisor Leno it was simple — equal pay and equal benefits for equal work. Why should transgender employees be treated any differently from all other City employees of and be denied the same level of medical care?

Mark Leno introduced the inclusion of full transgender medical benefits into the City's employee medical benefits plan and, on April 30th, the issue came to the full Board for a final vote. Before a packed gallery, and dozens of representatives of local, national and international press, Mark Leno led an emotionally charged debate on transgender

medical care, resulting in an historic victory for transgender rights heard literally around the world.

Last year the Political Action Committee of the Harvey Milk LGBT Democratic Club invited **Police Commission President Dennis Herrera** to discuss discriminatory treatment of transgender individuals by San Francisco police officers. Commissioner Herrera was deeply moved by emotional accounts of profiling and deliberate harassment, abuse and violence committed by SFPD officers against transgender suspects. He was presented with a report suggesting that members of law enforcement had committed nearly one-half of all reported violence against transgender individuals in San Francisco. He was shocked and left the meeting committed to finding out more about these allegations.

He met with leaders from the transgender community and members of the San Francisco Human Rights Commission regarding transgender abuse and the SFPD. He studied published reports and heard personal accounts of acts of harassment, discrimination and violence by police officers against individuals who self-identified as transgender. Commissioner Herrera met with the Director of the Office of Citizens Complaints, the Chief of Police and other senior command officers to determine the true scope of the problem. He quickly concluded that the SFPD severely lacked understanding, education and sensitivity regarding transgender citizens. The Office of Citizens Complaints had documented the need to address this problem and had formulated a series of recommendations for consideration by the Department. But, the recommendations never had been acted upon by either the Department or the Police Commission.

Dennis Herrera acted immediately. He introduced the OCC recommendations on transgender non-discrimination at the next meeting of the Commission. After an impassioned plea by Commissioner Herrera, the policy recommendations passed unanimously.

Senior staff of both the SFPD and the Human Rights Commission are currently designing a program of enhanced recruit training, senior officer education and culturally sensitive language to address and resolve the issue of transgender discrimination within the Police Department. Once in place, this new program promises to dramatically alter the historically confrontational relationship between the SFPD and transgender citizens of San Francisco.

Mark Leno and Dennis Herrera have made history by bringing respect to the thousands of men and women who self-identify as transgender in San Francisco. ▼

Theresa Sparks is a member of the Alice B. Toklas and Harvey Milk LGBT Democratic Clubs and Co-Chairs the LGBT Advisory Committee. She also serves as the first transgender Commissioner ever on the San Francisco Human Rights Commission.