

# NANCY PELOSI

## JUNIOR CONGRESSWOMAN IMPRESSES GAYS

by Lester Olmstead-Rose  
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Nancy Pelosi, the nation's second-most-junior member in Congress, has been at the job for half a year now, and the initial response on her performance is overwhelmingly positive.

Elected to San Francisco's heavily gay 5th Congressional District in June, Pelosi's efforts elicit nothing but praise from leaders on lesbian, gay, and AIDS issues.

"I give her an A-plus," was constituent Peter Fowler's summary of her performance. Fowler is Board Co-Chair of the Washington-based National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and has consulted regularly with Pelosi and her office.

"She's really exceeded anyone's expectations in her willingness to be a part of our community," said Fowler. "She's been nothing short of phenomenally successful and visible."

"I think she's been doing terrific," commented Lois Galgay Reckitt, Deputy Director at the Human Rights Campaign Fund in Washington, D.C.

"Nancy Pelosi," said Paul Boneberg, Executive Director of Mobilization Against AIDS, "has been perhaps the best Congressperson on AIDS I have worked with. She's done everything possible for AIDS and lesbian and gay issues. She's there 100%."

Among the items cited in support of these rave reviews are the Congresswoman's efforts on behalf of presumptive disability benefits for AIDS sufferers, her visible role on the March on Washington, her fundraising for gay and AIDS issues, and, perhaps most importantly, the staff she has hired.

Boneberg calls Pelosi's staff as good on AIDS as any other legislative staff in the nation, citing in particular the expertise of Dr. Steven Morin, her assistant for AIDS issues. In addition to Morin, Pelosi's lesbian and gay staff includes Catherine Dodd and H.M. Sanchez in San Francisco and Phil DeAndrade in Washington.

The only problem facing Pelosi is her junior status in Congress. First term Congressmembers traditionally have difficulty pushing substantive legislation since much of the power in the House is based on tenure. Pelosi must also compete with the legacy of Phil and Sala Burton, who served as her predecessors for over two decades. Phil Burton was a master politician who built an unchallenged

Democratic party machine in San Francisco and wielded immense power in the House.

But Pelosi's political savvy and Washington connections—she was a key Democratic fundraiser and Chair of the 1986 Senatorial Campaign Finance Committee before running for office—have given her key committee assignments and helped her win a number of significant victories in her short tenure.

The victory most often cited by both staff and observers, was the expansion of presumptive disability benefits by the Social Security Administration (SSA). Presumptive disability is vital for people with AIDS and severe-ARC because it cuts the time and paperwork involved in receiving government disability benefits. Last spring, however, the SSA announced that presumptive disability would not be granted to about 4,000 people falling under the Center for Disease Control's expanded definition of AIDS and severe-ARC.

Pelosi, in her role as a member of the Government Operations Committee, promptly called for an investigation of the SSA position and for congressional hearings on the issue. Pelosi and aide Morin set to work organizing evidence, compiling background data, and convincing other members of the Committee of the importance of the issue.

On the eve of the hearings in July, the SSA buckled under the pressure and changed their position.

Through hard work and political know-how, the most-junior Congresswoman from liberal San Francisco was able to tweak the nose of a Reagan agency, and gain important benefits for people with AIDS.

The SSA example does not stand alone. Boneberg, who coordinated the Lobby Day for the March on Washington, cites a call he made to Pelosi's office asking for help on a March fundraiser. Congressmember Pelosi not only lent her name as a sponsor, but personally called friends in Washington to find a house for the event and to help organize the details. According to Boneberg, she personally went far beyond what he expected.

If there is any criticism of Pelosi, it is that she is overcompensating for her narrow victory over gay Supervisor Harry Britt and putting on a symbolic front for her lesbian and gay constituents.

Both Boneberg and Fowler strongly repudiated that assessment, though, giving her high marks for a genuine understanding of her constituents' concerns.

"I don't think it's symbolic," said Boneberg, "She's extraordinarily effective. Her work is extremely substantive."

Fowler cites her ability at "creating visibility for our concerns and making them her concerns."

In fact, the only person who didn't give glowing praise for Pelosi's efforts was Supervisor Britt, who declined through a staff member to comment because he felt it was "too soon" still to judge her performance.

Boneberg, who actively supported Britt during the campaign, believes Pelosi has no ill feelings after the divisive primary fight.

"I do not detect any resentment or hostility."

Galgay Reckitt adds that Pelosi "appears to have an understanding of why our organization supported Harry Britt, and we're very pleased with her performance."

As a mainstream Democrat in heavily Democratic San Francisco and with her already-solid record drawing positive reviews from the local media, she is almost certain to be re-elected next year. Fortunately, early indications are that Nancy Pelosi will use her position to become a leading advocate for lesbian and gay concerns on Capital Hill.

"In the long run, let's see what she does," cautions Fowler. But for now, "she's the dream of a liberal Democrat who supports gay issues." □

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### LETTER TO THE MEMBERS

Dear Friends:

Thank you for the warm reception and friendship we have had over the years. We have worked together on many issues, and now we share the same hopes for the future of our city. I believe that we can accomplish the changes that are necessary for us and our neighbors if we have enough faith in our ability to make a difference.

Alice began because it found politics-as-usual was not good enough for San Francisco. It still isn't. The issues that Alice has championed still need an advocate and still belong on the city agenda. I look forward to working with you for affordable housing, a compassionate response to the AIDS epidemic, the inclusion of lesbian and gay people in the decisions that affect their lives, and, most of all, a City Hall that knows how to advocate for the people of our city.

Warm regards,

Art Agnos