

## PRESS RELEASE

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### MONTANANS SUPPORT EQUALITY FOR GAY AND LESBIAN PEOPLE

In late January of this year, Diane Keefauver was fired from her job shortly after she came out as a lesbian to co-workers. Unfortunately for Diane, it is perfectly legal in Montana for employees to be fired solely because they are gay or lesbian.

Today, the Montana Human Rights Network, with the support of organizations including the Montana Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, Service Employees International Union (SEIU HealthCare 775NW), and the United Church of Christ, released polling information that shows a stark contrast between the beliefs of Montanans across the state and Montana law.

The poll results show that the large majority of Montanans believe gay and lesbian people should not have to experience discrimination and harassment. Eighty-seven percent agreed that no-one should be discriminated against in the workplace solely because they are lesbian or gay, and a full 91% agreed that that gay or lesbian people should not be subjected to threats and intimidation.

“Seeing these results tells me that my neighbors think what happened to me is wrong, and that we should take action to prevent it from happening to anyone else,” Keefauver said. “That is certainly a comforting feeling, and it gives me hope that we can change the laws in Montana this year.”

This new data shows that Montanans’ anchor their beliefs in equality and acceptance on the view that discrimination is wrong, period.

At the core of this support is Montanans’ belief that laws need to be changed to protect people from discrimination and harassment. Amending the hate crimes statute tops the list with 70% of Montanans supporting changing it to include gays and lesbians. Voters also support extending the Montana Human Rights Act to cover housing and employment protections for their gay, lesbian and transgendered neighbors.

The Network and ally organizations stated that this new data reinforces something that they have long believed true. “For years we have been saying that Montanans want their neighbors to have an equal chance at building a life, by gaining employment and securing housing,” said Christine Kaufmann, Executive Director of the Network. “Montanans want everyone to be judged based on their ability and character, not on their sexual orientation.”

Earlier this year the Network announced the formation of the Equality Project and its long-term plan to educate and build support across the state with the goal of bringing Montana law into step with the beliefs of voters across the state.

Montana Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence Executive Director, Kelsen Young said, “We’ve been trying to change these laws for years now by saying that Montanans value non-discrimination and

fairness. These results prove the point, and we are excited about being a part of a state-wide effort to get the word out and move forward on this issue.”

Other co-sponsoring organizations include Forward Montana (a state-wide progressive youth organization), WEEL (a low-income advocacy organization), NARAL Pro-Choice Montana, and Montana PFLAG (Parents, Friends and Families of Lesbians and Gays).