

# Gay Marriage Bill Wins in Rhode Island House

Rhode Island's House of Representatives voted overwhelmingly on Thursday in favor of a bill to make **same-sex marriage** legal, but officials in the strongly Democratic state expect the measure to face an uphill battle in the state Senate.

Lawmakers voted 51 to 19 in favor of the bill, which aims to make Rhode Island the 10th state and the last in New England to legalize gay and lesbian weddings.

Democratic Representative Arthur Handy, lead sponsor of the bill, said the issue was "about fairness and allowing all Rhode Islanders to have equal access to the rights and responsibilities that come with marriage."

"It feels good to see how far we've come in Rhode Island toward valuing all families, and I know we are close to the day when marriage equality becomes law here," he said in a statement.

House Speaker Gordon Fox, a co-sponsor of the measure who is openly gay, said he was "thrilled."

"We are marching toward equality," he said in a statement.

The legislation, supported by independent Governor Lincoln Chafee, has been introduced in the House every year since 1997. Handy has put it forward annually since 2003.

Sponsors of the bill tried to move through similar legislation in 2011, but met with opposition and were forced to change the bill to allow civil unions only.

Rhode Island remains the last of New England's six states without a law allowing gay and lesbian couples to wed, after Maine legalized same-sex marriage late last year.

Nine of the 50 U.S. states plus the District of Columbia have legalized gay marriage. Maryland was the most recent, with gay marriage becoming legal there on January 1.

Another 31 states have passed constitutional amendments restricting marriage to heterosexual couples.

In Rhode Island, it remained unclear how the proposal would fare in the state Senate, though Handy said that in the last election cycle, both legislative chambers had elected more “pro-equality” candidates than ever before.

The state Senate president, Teresa Paiva Weed, opposes gay marriage but has said she would allow a Senate Judiciary Committee vote on the bill if it passed in the House.

Senate spokesman Greg Pare said earlier on Thursday that predictions of a close Senate vote had not changed.

*Reporting by Daniel Lovering; Editing by Jane Sutton and David Brunnstrom*

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