

Obama Opens First Gender-Neutral Bathrooms at White House

The White House has opened its first gender-neutral restroom in what is seen as a symbolic step by President Barack Obama to protect the rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community in the workplace.

White House spokesman Jeff Tiller said the “all-gender restroom” is in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building where many employees have meetings and offices and is next door to the West Wing which houses the president’s offices.

The initiative is the latest in a series of actions by Obama to support the LGBT community. On Wednesday, the president issued an executive order barring companies that do business with the federal government from discriminating against LGBT staff.

“The White House allows staff and guests to use restrooms consistent with their gender identity, which is in keeping with the Administration’s existing legal guidance on this issue,” Tiller said in a statement.

Obama has taken a firm stand over the past year or so on gay and also transgender rights, an area of debate that is becoming hotly contested.

Last year, in a presidential first, Obama used the word “transgender” in the annual State of the Union address and he has also endorsed same-sex marriage, marking what may be one of the most significant advances of his presidency.

Also on Wednesday, he called for an end to psychiatric therapies that seek to change the sexual orientation of gay,

lesbian and transgender youth, also known as conversion therapy.

The number of gender-neutral bathrooms has grown in the United States in recent years, in workplaces and in colleges, but the White House's initiative comes as some U.S. states mull legislation that would curtail transgender people's ability to chose what restroom to use.

In Florida, the "Bathroom Surveillance Bill" would ban transgender people from using bathrooms, locker rooms and other sex-segregated facilities except those designated for their gender at birth.

Similar bills have also been introduced in Kentucky, Missouri and Texas, according to LGBT activist group Human Rights Campaign.

Transgender advocates have attacked the laws as discriminatory, and accused legislators in some states of "attacking the dignity and humanity of transgender and gender non-conforming people".

"It is heartening that ... at least the White House is still moving in the direction of dignity and common sense," said Mara Keisling, executive director of the National Center for Transgender Equality, in a statement.

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