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LGBT Workplace Advocates Gather in SF

By Yael Chanoff

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This week, 3,000 people will flock to the Moscone Center for the 16th annual Out and Equal Summit on Workplace Equality.

"We're celebrating the advancement of the LGBT movement," said Selisse Berry, founder and executive director of Out and Equal Workplace Advocates, which hosts the conference. "We're also reminding people that there are states where you can still be fired for being LGBT."

In 32 states, employees can be fired based solely on their gender identity. In 29 of those states sexual orientation isn't protected either.

Out and Equal advocates to change this, while working inside companies, including some of the world's most powerful corporations, to improve protections and the work environment for LGBT employees.

The summit - November 3-6 - will be four days loaded with information on workplace equality, along with entertainment from the likes of Martha Wash and Thea Austin, and keynote speeches by Lee Daniels, Olympia Dukakis, and Billie Jean King.

Corporate non-discrimination policies have improved dramatically since Out and Equal was founded. In 1996, 5 percent of companies on the Fortune 500 list had policies that prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation, according to Out and Equal communications director Joel Engardio.

Today, that number is 90 percent.

Sixty percent of Fortune 500 companies extend these protections to gender identity.

Workplace equality efforts advance as more states legalize marriage equality. Last June, the Supreme Court struck down a key provision of the Defense of Marriage Act, and 32 states now grant federal marriage benefits to same-sex couples. The new victories are coming fast - "It could be 35, depending on when you go to press," Engardio said.

Some Out and Equal summit panels will address this new reality, including "The Post-DOMA Era" and "The Cost of Inconsistency." At the latter, Out and Equal will reveal the results of a study that surveyed corporations about how much money they're losing dealing with varying marriage equality laws in different states.

"Right now we have a patchwork of states that allow same-sex marriage, and some don't allow it. If you're a company doing business in all 50 states, you have an economic burden," said Engardio.

"It's time to finish the job on LGBT equality, because it's a huge cost to business," he added.

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