

# Montana fair Housing

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EXHIBIT 6  
DATE 3/16/05  
SB 199

Representatives Clark and Stoker, and Members of the House Judiciary Committee:

My name is Robert D. Liston and I am the Executive Director for Montana Fair Housing, a civil rights, private, non-profit organization whose mission is to bring about an end to discrimination against Montanans in the area of housing. Unfortunately, I have to be in Billings for a settlement conference on a housing discrimination case today and am unable to be present at the hearing. I do want you to know that Montana Fair Housing supports SB 199—to include sexual orientation as a protected class in the Montana Human Rights Act.

It is hard for me to come up with testimony and/or arguments to convince you to pass SB 199. I have been fighting for persons civil rights, whether based on their race, religion, disability, gender, familial status, age, marital status, creed, national origin or color, for so long, that it seems that all persons SHOULD be provided equal protections. Also, more and more states are passing protections for persons based on sexual orientation, as well as local counties, cities and other jurisdictions.

My experience in fighting discrimination has taught me that most discrimination is based on fear, ignorance and an unwillingness to be around, or deal with, people who are not like us. There is no rational reason to allow discrimination against persons to continue because of their sexual orientation. Many people who are gay or lesbian are able to live together with no problems, as long as we live in a “don’t ask, don’t tell” society. While most people I know do not “flaunt” their sexuality in public places, they should not be asked or required to hide their sexuality in order to protect themselves from discrimination. I have many friends, family members and acquaintances who would be covered by the change to the Human Rights Act.

One of the arguments against protections based on sexual orientation is a religious one. Unmarried heterosexual persons can live together and are protected under the “marital status” provisions of the Montana’s Human Rights Act. The same people are probably opposed to both provisions, but you, as the Judiciary Committee of the Montana’s Legislature, and the whole legislature, need to step up and “do the right thing,” which is the bottom line why to pass this legislation. ALL persons in Montana should be able to work, live, play, and participate wherever they want without fear of discrimination and retribution. In addition to ensuring people's rights are provided to people based on their sexual orientation, I believe this is also beneficial to persons who are in the housing industry. Housing providers should not be the “bedroom police.” Too many housing providers get themselves in trouble for knowing, or trying to know, more than they should and it has resulted in housing discrimination cases.

Montana Fair Housing strongly supports and urges you to pass SB 199 to ensure that all people in Montana have protections against discrimination. If you have any questions or if I may be of further assistance, don't hesitate to contact me.

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