

The Mayors Against LGBT Discrimination Coalition held a briefing on Jan. 18, 2017.  
(Washington Blade photo by Michael Key)

With a new administration coming to power that may not be favor to LGBT rights, a new coalition launched on Wednesday for mayors seeking to combat anti-LGBT discrimination.

The group, known as “Mayors Against LGBT Discrimination,” consists of 175 mayors from across the country and is billed as a broad-based non-partisan coalition of local official to advance.

San Francisco Mayor Ed Lee, a co-chair for Mayors Against LGBT Discrimination, said during the event the groups is needed because “people are sensing real basic injustice” against LGBT people and other groups.

“This is so basic to managing a city is the sense that everybody who comes to our city belongs and they have to belong a place where they feel safe, respected, where their creative energies can be unleashed and they can contribute to diverse society,” Lee said.

Coordinating the new initiate is Matt McTighe, executive director for Freedom for All Americans, who said during the kick-off event at the Holland & Knight law offices in downtown D.C. he expects the numbers of mayors in the initiative to grow quickly.

“Most people know there is no federal non-discrimination law that protects LGBT people from discrimination,” McTighe said. “In 32 states they still lack comprehensive protections that cover L, G, B and T people in housing, employment and public accommodations. That’s working we’re working to remedy and trying to change that, but it’s not going to happen overnight.”

Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney, another “Mayors Against LGBT Discrimination” co-chair, said during the event mayors often have to act against anti-LGBT discrimination “because someone has to do it,” noting Pennsylvania is one state without LGBT non-discrimination law.

“There seem to be this sticking point when it comes to this particular social issue that they’re either afraid to do it or they really do want to discriminate against people,” Kenney said. “But cities can move forward ahead of them, and even though they will do to circumvent our ability to raise revenue and do other things, I don’t know if they’ll go to the extent of telling us that we have to be let people discriminate against people.”

Winnie Stachelberg, executive vice president for external affairs at the Center for American Progress, presented at the event a preview of the report from her organization on executive actions mayors can take on behalf of LGBT people.

Among the report’s suggestions are executive orders to ensure city and county employees are free from discrimination, directives barring city funds from being used for conversion therapy and promoting LGBT-inclusive data collection. A full version of the report, Stachelberg said, would be released in the coming weeks.

“Looking at the challenges that face our community from workplace protections and housing challenges and on and on, we at the Center for American Progress said, ‘Mayors have executive authority and they have administrative authority that often doesn’t require legislation,’” Stachelberg said.

Seattle Mayor Ed Murray, who’s gay and a “Mayors Against LGBT Discrimination” co-chair, said the coalition will provide resources seeking to respond state measures seeking to undermine LGBT rights.

“There’s always been sort of weakness in the structure of the LGBT community in not having organizations tightly connected to cities and to states, and so I think that’s something my community needs to get better at to help people like us who are mayors,” Murray said.

Also present at the event was Charlotte Mayor Jennifer Roberts, who said she “joined for help” for assistance with her state legislature. Last year, after the city passed a non-discrimination ordinance, the state legislature retaliated by passing North Carolina’s House Bill 2.

“We are not a home rule state; our state has absolute authority over our cities,” Roberts said. “Our fellow North Carolinians know how devastating that can be because our state can actually dissolve our city council if they want to, so we are not negotiating in a position of strength.”

Another Mayors Against LGBT Discrimination co-chair is D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser, but she wasn’t present at the event. McTighe said she intended to come, but forced into a logistics meeting about the upcoming inauguration in D.C.

McTighe said after the event the launch was timed with the meeting of the U.S. Conference of Mayors in D.C., not the inauguration of Donald Trump, although he “for sure” wants the voices of mayors raised under the new presidency.

“We were going to do this at the start of the legislative session,” McTighe said. “It was more before we knew the outcome of the presidential election. We knew that going into a new year, going into the start of so many legislative sessions and the start of Congress, we wanted to make sure that these local leaders were having their voices heard. I think it’s even more important with the inauguration.”