Equality Action Tour heads to Detroit
Series of meetings promote equality in LGBT community
By JOVAN GLASS | The South End
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In Michigan, laws against workplace discrimination based on gender identity or sexual orientation only protect workers employed by the state, not those employed in the public sector.

Although 17 U.S. states have laws against housing discrimination based on sexual orientation, Michigan does not. An anti-bullying law being considered by the Michigan Senate does not include specific provisions for bullying against the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community.

A coalition of advocacy organizations has launched the Equality Action Tour, a series of town hall events to promote equality for all in Michigan in hopes of preventing discrimination against the LGBT community.

The tour will make its sixth stop June 21 at the Park Bar in Detroit, located at 2040 Park Ave. The event is free and open to the public, and it will focus on the economic, social and legal consequences of discrimination faced by the LGBT community and their loved ones.

Unity Michigan, a coalition that advocates equality, will sponsor the event. Its mission is to promote policies that protect the civil rights of gay and transgender citizens. The Equality Tour has already made stops in Ann Arbor, Kalamazoo, Livonia, Grand Rapids and Port Huron, with plans to stop in Lansing following the Detroit meeting. A complete calendar can be found on the organization’s website.

Attendees can “expect to hear real life stories of discrimination in Michigan, how often it occurs, what needs to be done to prevent this from happening and what others can do to help,” Equality Michigan Director of Communications Michael Gregor said.

According to a 2006 Anti-Defamation League report, 31 U.S. states have laws that prosecute sexual orientation-based hate crimes. Twenty-one states and the District of Columbia have laws forbidding discrimination in all employment based on sexual orientation. Equality Michigan hopes to add Michigan to that list.

Many residents had strong opinions when informed of the lack of legal protection the LGBT community has in Michigan.

“It’s a misrepresentation of the diverse makeup of the state of Michigan,” Michigan State University political science major Anton McCambell said. “It saddens me that the state is lagging behind on the civil rights of its (residents).”

Unlike McCambell, however, many Michigan residents were unaware of the absence of discrimination laws.

“That sounds silly to me,” said Meghan Hopkins of Detroit. “I would have assumed things like that would be in place in the state. Especially with all the suicides and things happening due to bullying; that can’t be legal.”

The Williams Institute at the UCLA School of Law, a sexual orientation law and public policy think tank, estimates that 9 million (about 3.8 percent) of Americans identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. Approximately 10 percent of that 9 million live in Michigan and could reap the benefits of these laws.

“While discrimination is not something that everyone in the LGBT community has to deal with,” Hopkins added, “it is still something that can and should be prevented.”