Removing barriers for gays could boost state economy

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 LANSING – Discrimination against gays and lesbians hurts Michigan’s economy, according to a new report by the Department of Civil Rights.

 Emily Dievendorf, director of policy for Equality Michigan, said that reducing widespread discrimination will improve the economy because more people are likely to live and work in a state that promotes tolerance.

 “Bright, skilled workers no longer flock to a location just because a business puts down roots,” Dievendorf said. “The best and the brightest are most attracted to communities that are also safe and open to all families.

 “The solution isn’t to kick out our eager young workers who want Michigan to thrive. The solution is to welcome them,” she said.

 The Detroit-based advocacy organization works to end violence and discrimination against the LGBT communities through legal action and policy change.

 About 54.8 percent of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) residents said they experienced discrimination or harassment on the basis of sexual orientation, according to the 2012 State of the State survey.

 The Michigan State University survey said 19.3 percent experienced discrimination based on
gender expression.

Participants who reported never experiencing discrimination or harassment totaled 27.1 percent.

Last year, the Civil Rights Department conducted hearings in Detroit, Grand Rapids, Ann Arbor, Holland and Jackson to gather information about such discrimination.

Its report recaps testimony from the hearings and makes recommendations, such as the expansion of federal, state and local laws to better protect people from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender expression.

Daniel Krichbaum, director of the department, said that expanded protection needs to be part of the dialogue about the state’s economy.

"The report conclusively establishes that the economic implications of LGBT inclusion and exclusion are real," Krichbaum said. "They are substantial, they are predictable and they must be a part of any informed policy discussion."

In addition to detailing adverse economic impact, the report includes stories of LGBT individuals who have faced discrimination in housing, schools and in the workplace. It then explains how such discrimination could have adverse consequences for the victims, universities and employers in the state.

One participant from Ann Arbor testified that "in the face of protections granted based on inherent human characteristics such as race and sex, the absence of the same based on sexual orientation sends a signal that these people are not entitled to be treated equally under the law."

The report did not reveal the names of witnesses.

Not all witnesses favored changing the state’s anti-discrimination laws.

For example, a Holland resident said that amending the civil rights act would be unnecessary, because "it has been shown that the homosexual population is in the 1-to-2 percent range."

The same witness went on to say that widespread homosexual discrimination in Michigan is an "assumption."

Others gave personal examples.

A single father from Detroit told about being fired from his position as a community services coordinator after publicly coming out.
Even before his termination, the man faced extensive on-the-job harassment. “When the story broke, I came in on Monday and my desk was in the hallway,” he said. “Part of my job was to speak to the press, but they wouldn’t let me leave the building. And if you don’t make your meetings in the community, you get written up. But they won’t let me out of the building. That’s how it works.”

A woman testified in Jackson that she had been fired from a university for identifying herself as transgender.

Another Holland resident said that some companies fired openly gay employees, and that one company fired another woman “because she vocally supported me.”

Equality Michigan’s Dievendorf said that it’s important to realize the effects of discrimination extend beyond the victims.

“It’s gratifying that the report so eloquently pointed out the broader economic impact on not just the LGBT communities, but the entire state,” Dievendorf said. “The report finds that Michigan voters not only support an end to this inequality and hindrance of our economic recovery, but believed that the measures to address this problem were already in place.”

The department’s report cites widespread support for prohibiting discrimination across the state.

For example, a House bill last year would have eliminated protection on the basis of sexual orientation and gender expression that were already provided in local ordinances.

The bill, sponsored by Rep. Tom McMillin, R-Rochester Hills, didn’t pass, but it opened a LGBT discrimination discussion at the local level.

City councils statewide, including those in Ann Arbor, Lansing and Traverse City, passed resolutions opposing the bill.