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Hundreds Rally in Los Angeles to Demand Equal Social Security Benefits for Same-Sex Couples

Days Before Tax Deadline, Rep. Linda Sanchez Announces She'll Author Bill to End Discrimination in Social Security Benefits

LOS ANGELES, April 11, 2010—An energized crowd of more than 700 people rallied at the L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center and marched more than a mile to the Social Security Administration office in Hollywood today to demand an end to the unconscionable discrimination that deprives older lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) taxpayers of more than \$120 million in Social Security benefits every year.

Representative Linda Sanchez—a member of the House Subcommittee on Social Security—announced that she will author legislation to provide equal Social Security benefits for same-sex couples and **Rep. Judy Chu** offered to co-author the bill. Other political and community leaders who spoke out at the event included Sen. **Barbara Boxer**, Rep. **Laura Richardson**, L.A. City Councilmember **Paul Koretz**, West Hollywood Mayor **Abbe Land**, L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center CEO **Lorri L. Jean**, National Gay & Lesbian Task Force Executive Director **Rea Carey** and AIDS Community Action Foundation President **Craig R. Miller**.

“We now have quality, affordable health care coming to all. What good is the quality of our health care in America if Americans are not treated equally under all of our laws?” said Rep. Sanchez. “I look at this country—which is great but could be made better—and I see that there is still discrimination ... I don’t think it’s right that Americans should be treated differently by the country they love because of who they love.”

Sanchez made the announcement at the Center's McDonald/Wright building before the crowd marched down Hollywood Boulevard to the Social Security office on Vine Street. There, L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center CEO Lorri L. Jean led the crowd in chanting and picketing to demand an end to the discrimination that hurts seniors like Alice Herman, a client of the Center's Seniors Services department. Herman spoke about being denied benefits after the loss of her beloved wife, Sylvia, even though the two were legally married.

"At the time I was burying Sylvia and grieving her loss, I had to look for a place to live as fast I as could," says Herman, who was left "a heartbeat away" from living in her car because she could no longer afford to live in the home they shared. Had Sylvia been a man, Herman would have been entitled to receive her spouse's larger Social Security payments. "This has got to change," she said.

Herman's story inspired Jean to speak out on the issue of discrimination in Social Security benefits.

"We must stop the discrimination heaped upon our elders just when they are suffering profound grief after losing a partner," Jean says. "They shared their lives for 20, 30 even 40 years—and paid into Social Security with every paycheck just like everyone else. But they are cheated out of survivor benefits because their relationships are not recognized by the Social Security system."

At Rock for Equality, it was announced that "What Kind of Planet Are We On?"—an online video that tells the story of a lesbian alien who is denied Social Security benefits—triumphed in YouTube's 4th Annual DoGooder Awards. The video, which won the Best Innovation in Video category, was featured at the top of the YouTube homepage, where it reached hundreds of thousands with its message about the need to stop discrimination in Social Security benefits. By Sunday afternoon the video, which is featured at www.youtube.com/nonprofitvideoawards, had been viewed more than 350,000 times.

The Center partnered with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, in coalition with the AIDS Community Action Foundation, to launch Rock for Equality.

"Same-sex couples are being systematically short-changed by unfair Social Security policies, costing our families \$2 billion in the past decade alone," said Rea Carey, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. "The shock of this inequity comes at one of the most vulnerable times in our lives: when we lose our partner. Social Security was created to protect all Americans in their later years, but this hasn't been the case for our families. We thank Rep. Linda Sanchez for committing to author legislation to end this unfairness once and for all."

President Barack Obama has stated his opposition to Social Security discrimination against same-sex couples, and last week Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa signed a resolution (introduced by Koretz and fellow Councilmember Bill Rosendahl and unanimously approved by the city council) calling on the federal government to end discrimination in Social Security benefits. Last week the city of West Hollywood passed a similar resolution.

At the rally, Craig R. Miller, Rock for Equality producer and president of the AIDS Community Action Foundation, noted the connection between the health of LGBT people and the government's discrimination.

“There is an inextricable link between the ongoing HIV epidemic and matters of self-esteem, equal recognition of committed relationships, and a positive view of one’s future,” said Miller. “We are unwilling to see yet another generation of kids grow up bombarded with messages from their own government that they are less than, that their relationships are less than, and that in the future, their Social Security, their fair share of our country’s social safety net, shall be less than that of other Americans.”

The Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law has determined that, on average, the lack of eligibility for Social Security Survivors benefits alone has cost the surviving partners of same-sex couples \$5,700 per year. LGBT Americans are denied other benefits as well. With more than 1 million Americans living in same-sex couples and an aging generation of Baby Boomers, hundreds of thousands of taxpayers are cheated by this unfair system every day. This discrimination is estimated to have cost the LGBT community more than \$2 billion in the last decade alone.

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About the L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center: Since 1971 the L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center has been building the health, advocating for the rights and enriching the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. Our wide array of services and programs includes: free HIV/AIDS care and medications for those most in need; housing, food, clothing and support for homeless LGBT youth; low-cost counseling and addiction-recovery services; essential services for LGBT-parented families and seniors; legal services; health education and HIV prevention programs; transgender services; cultural arts and much more. Visit us at: www.lagaycenter.org.

About the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force: The mission of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force is to build the grassroots power of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community. We do this by training activists, equipping state and local organizations with the skills needed to organize broad-based campaigns to defeat anti-LGBT referenda and advance pro-LGBT legislation, and building the organizational capacity of our movement. Our Policy Institute, the movement’s premier think tank, provides research and policy analysis to support the struggle for complete equality and to counter right-wing lies. As part of a broader social justice movement, we work to create a nation that respects the diversity of human expression and identity and creates opportunity for all. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., we also have offices in New York City, Los Angeles, Miami, Minneapolis and Cambridge. Visit us at: www.thetaskforce.org.

About AIDS Community Action Foundation: Founded in 2004, AIDS Community Action Foundation (ACAF) is dedicated to reinvigorating the response of government, media, the private sector, non-profit organizations, and the public at large to the Human Immune-deficiency Virus (HIV) epidemic in the United States. ACAF is committed to engaging in and/or supporting at the community level organizing, advocacy, fundraising, and education efforts designed to create greater public pressure toward alleviating the human suffering caused by HIV/AIDS. Visit us at www.aidscaf.com.

About MZA Events: Rock for Equality was created and is being produced by MZA Events. MZA was founded in 1984 by Craig R. Miller and his organization of activists. Miller is the originator of the AIDS Walk movement and has produced hundreds of events throughout the United States, generating more than \$400 million for major AIDS organizations and other charities confronting public health and social justice issues. Visit us at: www.mzaevents.com.