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California NAACP endorses same-sex marriage bill

By Lisa Leff
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SAN FRANCISCO – The California chapter of the NAACP has endorsed a bill that would legalize same-sex marriage in the state, marking the first time an arm of the venerable civil rights group has lent its political clout to the issue that has divided the black community.

Members of the California State Conference of the NAACP narrowly voted at their convention last fall to support the pending "Religious Freedom and California Civil Marriage Protection Act," but the group did not make its position public until this week, in advance of the bill's first legislative hearing.

"In a place like California, you can not possibly work for rights if you don't work for gay rights," said Alice A. Huffman, California NAACP president. "You either believe in the rights of everyone or you are in the wrong business."

Spearheaded by Assemblyman Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, the measure would amend a 1977 California statute that defines marriage as "a personal relationship arising out of a civil contract between a man and woman" to read "between two persons."

It is scheduled to be heard by the Assembly Judiciary Committee on April 26.

Although other minority organizations have endorsed AB 19, including the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, the NAACP's backing is particularly valuable for gay rights activists. They have faced criticism in some quarters for calling the marriage cause a modern civil rights struggle, as well as opposition from some black clergy who regard homosexuality as a sin.

"To have the largest civil rights group in the nation take this important and historic stand is significant in the struggle to achieve full equality for the lesbian and gay community," said Geoffrey Kors, executive director of Equality California, a gay rights lobbying group. "We are humbled and gratified."

The national NAACP has not taken a position on gay marriage, although its chairman, Julian Bond, has gone on record as a supporter. NAACP spokesman John White said no other state or local chapters besides California's have come out in support of same-sex marriage.

Huffman, who serves on the NAACP's national board of directors, said that when the issue came before several hundred California members at their October convention, it prompted a lively discussion. In the end, a resolution endorsing marriage rights for same-sex couples and opposing

efforts to amend the U.S Constitution to ban gay marriage passed by a slim majority, she said.

"This issue is really an issue that is not clearly understood by many segments of my community, especially the fundamentalists," said Huffman, adding that despite lingering opposition among some NAACP members, the organization would testify for Leno's bill and lobby lawmakers, if necessary.

A similar bill Leno introduced last year passed the Judiciary Committee, but Leno withdrew it once it became clear it lacked the necessary votes to make it off the Assembly floor.

Meanwhile, two other California lawmakers have introduced constitutional amendments that would elevate the state's existing definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman from statute to the constitution. Those bills are scheduled to be heard by Assembly and Senate committees on April 19, and would need to be passed by two-thirds of lawmakers to be submitted to voters.