

DNC's LGBT caucus meets in Chicago

by Erica Demarest

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The DNC LGBT caucus that recently convened in Chicago. Photo by Erica Demarest

The Democratic National Committee (DNC)'s LGBT Caucus met Sept. 10 in downtown Chicago for its fall meeting. Members discussed past successes and laid out 2012 election strategies.

"I can't think of anything more important we have on our plates right now than getting [Obama] elected; we cannot afford to go backwards," said Brian Bond, director of constituency outreach at the DNC. "I firsthand know that there has been frustration out there. Trust me. But I can also tell you... This president and his administration are truly making our lives better as human beings and LGBT Americans."

The LGBT Caucus assembly was part of the DNC's larger fall festivities hosted at the JW Marriott Chicago Hotel. The two-day event featured appearances from Steve Kerrigan, CEO of the 2012 Democratic National Convention; Michael Madigan, Democratic Party of Illinois chair; U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin; Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel; and DNC Chair Debbie Wasserman

Schultz.

The LGBT meeting started with a call for celebration. Earlier that morning, New Jersey Democrat Barbra "Babs" Casbar Siperstein became the first transgender person elected to the DNC's executive committee.

When a caucus member encouraged her to be good at her first meeting, Siperstein quipped, "I don't know about good. I'll be careful."

Most of the gathering focused on maintaining and increasing LGBT representation. Metropolitan Water Reclamation District Commissioner Debra Shore, one of the first openly gay people elected countywide, told the room how she'd procured domestic partner benefits in her office: She asked for them. Benefits were swiftly voted on and passed unanimously, she said.

"I asked [the executive director] why this agency hadn't done that sooner, and he said to me, 'Well, nobody asked,'" Shore said. "So, at a minimum the one reason it's important for us to be in elected office is that we ask."

Arkansas state Rep. Kathy Webb then detailed how she helped pass that state's anti-bullying bill earlier this year. Arkansas is the 11th state in the country to offer both sexual orientation and gender identity protection, and Webb was voted the most effective lawmaker in the Arkansas legislature.

DNC Deputy Political Director Steve Walker urged the caucus to recruit more members of color. "It's important for me to identify myself as a gay man in the Black caucus," he said. "It's also just as important for me to identify myself in the LGBT caucus as an African American."

Walker will tour the country this fall with the DNC to fundraise for the 2012 election and increase LGBT visibility. Possible names for the tour, he joked, included "Priscilla, Queen of the Desert" or "The Dream Girls Tour."

Caucus Chair Rick Stafford moderated the meeting, which roughly 40 people attended. States represented included: Maine, New Jersey, Wisconsin, Minnesota, California and Arkansas. A member of Democrats Abroad even flew in from Paris, France.

Stafford presented awards to two allies of the community "who watch over for us, help us, and guide us," and encouraged caucus members to focus on reelecting Obama so that we don't revert to "prehistoric times" under GOP leadership.

Representatives from Obama's 2012 campaign team detailed a re-election plan that involves identifying and mobilizing key communities. Chief among them: LGBT voters. The representatives' PowerPoint presentation illustrated how partnering with LGBT leaders in different regions could have a powerful trickle-down effect throughout queer communities.

The campaign team will soon launch <http://lgbt.barackobama.com>.