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Gay-rights group questions YMCA member rules

Same-sex couples are not allowed to join as 'family'

By CHRIS KENNING
ckenning@courier-journal.com
The Courier-Journal

The Greater Louisville YMCA is drawing fire from a gay-rights group for enforcing a policy that denies family memberships to same-sex couples.

The Fairness Campaign plans a week of protests beginning Monday at the downtown YMCA in an attempt to pressure officials to drop the policy that grants family memberships only to legally married couples, a designation that homosexuals cannot attain under Kentucky law.

After a gay couple was denied a family membership and complained, the YMCA formed a six-member committee to re-examine its policy. But activists complain that the YMCA is procrastinating, instead of



"I think . . . we need to be more open to people," said YMCA patron Rebecca Norton, who opposes the rule.

changing a rule that charges gay couples \$26 more a month by requiring two individual memberships.

"If a straight couple can access the same services I can for



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less, then that's discrimination," said Jeff Rodgers, a Fairness Campaign coordinator and YMCA member.

Rodgers said the policy violates the spirit of the Louisville

and Jefferson County fairness ordinances, which prohibit discrimination because of sexual orientation and gender identity in employment, housing and public accommodations. The group is studying whether it also violates the letter of the law, he said.

But Steve Tarver, YMCA president and chief executive officer, said the long-standing local policy is rooted in a traditional view of families and is based on the definition of marriage in state law.

Tarver said he is confident

the policy conforms to the city and county gay-rights ordinances and doesn't believe it is discriminatory, since gays aren't barred from joining.

"I'm not eligible for a senior adult membership. But that doesn't mean I'm being discriminated against," he said.

Kellie Watson, director of the Louisville-Jefferson County Human Relations Commission, which enforces the fairness ordinances, said it isn't clear

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whether the YMCA policy conforms to the ordinances.

No complaint has been filed, but Watson said if one were, she would need to research whether the YMCA is as a public accommodation or an exempt religious organization.

The YMCA of Greater Louisville has 40,000 members at 11 branches in Jefferson, Oldham and Bullitt counties.

The policy came to the attention of gay-rights activists earlier this year after the YMCA told a lesbian couple that they weren't eligible for a family membership that a relative had bought them a week earlier.

The couple complained, arguing that YMCA staff previously granted family memberships to some homosexual couples.

But Tarver said same-sex couples who have received family memberships got them by mistake, either because staff members didn't know the policy or didn't properly question applications. He said he doesn't know how many unmarried applicants, gay or heterosexual, have received family memberships.

"We've created some inconsistent appearances, and I'm sorry for that," Tarver said. "But if you have a policy, you should stick to it."

Gay couples who had already received family memberships can keep them, officials said.

While YMCA staff don't require couples who apply for family memberships to produce documentation showing they are legally married, questions can be triggered if applicants have different addresses or last names or are of the same sex, Tarver said.

The nonprofit Young Men's Christian Association has 2,505 branches across the country, all of which set their own policies for family memberships, said Julie Mulzoff, a Chicago-based spokeswoman for YMCA of the USA.

Those policies vary, she said. The YMCA in Seattle, for example, offers gay couples discounted memberships, while others, including the YMCA of Central Kentucky in Lexington, do not.

Such rules have fomented contro-

versy in YMCAs in places such as Des Moines, Iowa, and Fargo, N.D. Central Kentucky YMCA President Jan Brucato said her branch's policy, which has prompted several complaints, stems from the organization's Christian roots, which "are very meaningful to many people."

The national organization takes no stand on the debate but encourages "inclusivity," Mulzoff said.

The couple whose complaint has spurred the Louisville protest told The Courier-Journal that they felt slighted by the YMCA's refusal to acknowledge them as a family. The couple, who requested anonymity, said they have been together 16 years and have a 6-year-old daughter.

The YMCA's decision denying them a family membership means they pay \$98 a month for two adult memberships, instead of \$72 a month for a family membership. Adult memberships allow children younger than 15 to attend without charge.

Tarver said the YMCA can provide financial aid to those who can't afford the the membership expense.

One man who has a family membership with his partner said that they received the membership more than five years ago and that no one questioned their application or mentioned the policy.

"People knew we were a (same-sex) couple. We've been very open," said Nick Wilkerson, 46, who called the rule "unfair."

Other YMCA patrons who were asked about a possible policy change had mixed reactions. Dan Hall, a minister at Graceland Baptist Church in New Albany, Ind., said he had never heard of the YMCA's family policy but would support the board of directors' decision.

"The policies ought to reflect the organization," Hall said.

Rebecca Norton, 21, learned of the policy several weeks ago and said it should be changed.

"I think, especially in our society, we need to be more open to people," Norton said. "I think they should definitely let same-sex couples have family memberships. It's really a form of prejudice."

Staff writer Brandy Warren contributed to this story.