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HRC APPLAUDS WAL-MART'S ADDITION OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION TO NON-DISCRIMINATION POLICY

Nine of Top 10 Companies on Fortune List Now Offer Protection to Gay Workers; ExxonMobil Is Last Holdout

WASHINGTON — Wal-Mart Stores — the nation's largest private employer — took an important step toward equality for its more than 1 million workers by adding sexual orientation to its non-discrimination policy, the Human Rights Campaign asserted today.

"We applaud Wal-Mart for adding this important protection to its non-discrimination policy," said HRC Education Director Kim I. Mills, who oversees HRC WorkNet, the organization's workplace advocacy project. "As the largest private employer in America, Wal-Mart has sent a powerful signal to all American companies that this policy is necessary, important and good for business. We hope this further opens the way to making such policies a standard business practice." A Wal-Mart source privately informed the Human Rights Campaign last week that it had changed its policy. The New York Times revealed the change in a front-page story today, in which a Wal-Mart spokeswoman said, "It's the right thing to do for our employees." She attributed the new policy in part to gay employees inside Wal-Mart who had written a letter to senior management saying that unless the company changed its policy, they would "continue to feel excluded."

Wal-Mart's new policy was also a result of efforts by the Seattle-based Pride Foundation, which had purchased stock in the company and had been considering putting forward a shareholder resolution asking the company to change its policy. Such a shareholder effort has been mounted at ExxonMobil for the last five years in row, yet that company refuses to change its written policy. Pride Foundation representatives met with Wal-Mart officials at company headquarters in Bentonville, Ark., and spent two years working behind the scenes for this policy change.

"We congratulate Wal-Mart for listening to its employees and understanding the importance of addressing their needs," Mills said. "Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender employees are acutely aware that there is no federal law protecting them from job discrimination and that such policies are often the only assurance they have that they won't be fired, passed over for promotion or never hired merely because of their sexual orientation."

With Wal-Mart's move, ExxonMobil becomes the last of the top 10 on Fortune's list of the largest, most successful U.S. companies without a policy protecting workers from sexual orientation discrimination. A total of 318 of the Fortune 500 now have non-discrimination policies covering sexual orientation, according to data collected by HRC WorkNet.

"Because Wal-Mart has a reputation as a conservative company that caters to Middle America, this policy change is especially meaningful," Mills said. "Wal-Mart is also reacting to the fact that more than 80 percent of the American public believes job discrimination based on sexual orientation is wrong and should

be illegal."

Currently, there is no federal law protecting individuals from job discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. The Employment Non-Discrimination Act would prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, providing basic protection to ensure fairness in the workplace for Americans who are currently denied equal protection under the law.

The Human Rights Campaign is the largest national lesbian and gay political organization with members throughout the country. It effectively lobbies Congress, provides campaign support and educates the public to ensure that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans can be open, honest and safe at home, at work and in the community.

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