



Obama names 7 gays to transition team

Gay groups considering Inaugural events

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Officials with President-elect Barack Obama's transition team this week named at least seven openly gay people to transition panels assigned to review federal departments and agencies.

Three of the seven gays named to the transition panels — businessman Fred P. Hochberg, former San Francisco Supervisor Roberta Achtenberg, and labor attorney Elaine Kaplan — held high-level positions in the Clinton administration.

The Obama officials also named President Bush's former ambassador to Romania, Michael Guest, to a transition panel assigned to review issues pertaining to the State Department. Guest became the nation's second openly gay ambassador when Bush appointed him to the Romania post for a term lasting from 2001 to 2003.

Several national gay rights advocacy groups, meanwhile, were said to be considering whether to hold one or more gay-related events during the week of Obama's Inauguration on Jan. 20.

During President Clinton's inaugural festivities in 1993 and 1997, gay groups, including the Human Rights Campaign, the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force and the Gay & Lesbian Victory Fund — held as many as a dozen events, including a gay inaugural ball.

Gay choruses and gay marching bands also participated in some of Clinton's official inaugural ceremonies. In 1993 and 1997, AIDS activists, at Clinton's invitation, marched in the official Inaugural Parade while carrying cloth panels from the National AIDS Quilt.

Officials with HRC, the Task Force and the Victory Fund said they were deliberating over whether to sponsor gay-related events for the Obama inauguration, and HRC was expected to announce plans soon for another gay inaugural ball. But no plans had been announced by mid-week.

The seven known gays appointed to the Obama transition review teams are among more than 300 people appointed to transition review panels this week.

“The Agency Review Teams for the Obama-Biden Transition will complete a thorough review of key departments, agencies and commissions of the United States government as well as the White House,” a statement posted Monday on the transition team web site states.

The teams will “provide the president-elect, the vice president-elect, and key advisors with information needed to make strategic policy, budgetary, and personnel decisions prior to the inauguration,” the statement says.

Presidents traditionally appoint members of their transition teams to middle and high-level posts in their administrations. Officials working in presidential election campaigns also have been named to government agency jobs and White House positions under past presidents.

A number of gay rights advocates worked in paid positions on the Obama campaign, including gay Democratic activists Brian Bond and Dave Noble. They could not be immediately reached for comment.

Last week, reports surfaced that Obama was considering appointing his highest-ranking gay campaign official, deputy campaign manager Steve Hildebrand, as successor to Democratic National Committee Chair Howard Dean. Dean announced last week that he would not seek another term as chair.

Obama transition spokesperson Stephanie Cutter has said neither Obama nor the transition team would comment on any potential appointees to government or party positions until such appointments are officially announced over the next several weeks.

However, several news media outlets said reliable sources from the Obama camp disclosed that former presidential contender and Obama rival Sen. Hillary Clinton was on Obama’s short list to become secretary of state. According to media reports, Eric Holder, a former D.C. prosecutor who served as deputy U.S. attorney general under the Clinton administration was also on Obama’s short list to become attorney general.

Both Clinton and Holder have strong records of support on gay rights. While serving as United States Attorney for the District of Columbia in the 1990s, Holder met with gay activists over the issue of anti-gay hate crimes and created a unit in the U.S. attorney’s office that specialized in prosecuting hate crimes.

Hochberg, a longtime gay Democratic Party activist from New York, served from 1998 through 2001 as President Clinton’s deputy and later acting administrator of the U.S. Small Business Administration.

Achtenberg served as Clinton’s Assistant Secretary of Housing and Equal Opportunity at the Department of Housing and Urban Development. She later served as senior adviser to then HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros during Clinton’s second term in office.

Kaplan served in the Clinton administration as head of the U.S. Office of Special Counsel, which is charged, among other things, with enforcing federal personnel policies and laws that prohibit discrimination against federal workers. Kaplan put in place policies that protected federal employees from discrimination based on sexual orientation. Those policies were later reversed by Kaplan’s replacement at the Office of Special Counsel, Scott Bloch, a Bush appointee.

Bloch recently resigned at the request of the White House following allegations that he politicized the office's hiring and enforcement policies.

Guest had served for nearly 20 years as a career U.S. Foreign Service officer at the time Bush named him ambassador to Romania in 2001. After completing his term as ambassador in 2003, he became dean of the State Department's Foreign Service Institute, which trains Foreign Service officers.

Guest created a stir in 2007 when he announced he was retiring from government service, in part, to protest a State Department policy that denies spousal benefits, including security protections, to same-sex partners of Foreign Service officers stationed at overseas posts. He said Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice had authority to provide some of the partner benefits but she declined to do so.

Earlier this year, Guest said he was supporting Obama's presidential bid.

The other openly gay members named to the transition review teams, in addition to Hochberg, Achtenberg, and Guest, include Rick Stamberger, president and CEO of SmartBrief, Inc., an online news publisher; Brad Kiley, an official with the Washington-based Center for American Progress think tank; and Thomas Soto, co-founder of Craton Equity Partners, a large "clean technology" investment fund based in Southern California.

Stamberger is serving on a transition panel reviewing the White House Fellows program. Kiley and Soto are serving on panels reviewing the Executive Office of the President, with Soto focusing on the workings of the White House Council on Environmental Quality.