

Statement of
Senator Susan M. Collins

**“Domestic Partner Benefits for Federal Employees: Fair
Policy and Good Business”**

Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs
September 24, 2008

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman. That was a very moving statement indeed.

Today the Committee considers legislation that would extend Federal employee benefits to same-sex domestic partners. The Federal Government needs to have good benefits that help attract the most qualified and capable employees, and this legislation would help to advance that goal. I am, therefore, pleased to commend the Chairman for taking the lead on a national issue of fairness, equality, and tolerance.

As the Chairman has explained, the Domestic Partnership Benefits and Obligations Act provides that a Federal employee and his or her domestic partner would have the same benefits that apply to a married Federal employee and his or her spouse. There are many practical reasons for doing this. The Federal Government faces a huge challenge in attracting and retaining talented and dedicated employees, both because of competition from private employers and because of the wave of potential retirements in the years ahead. Adapting Federal benefits policy to reflect the common practice

among Fortune 500 companies will help us meet these challenges.

Equally important, the principles supporting this change are a matter of simple fairness. As long as the partners in the household have established a personal relationship based on an affirmed commitment, I see no public purpose to be served by denying their eligibility for Federal benefits.

There is, however, one issue that the Committee may wish to consider. My colleagues should look at how my home State of Maine has addressed this issue. It has addressed the issue more broadly than this bill. Since 2004, Maine has operated a domestic partner registry that allows Maine-domiciled, committed adults to register for legal recognition as domestic partners to secure rights such as next-of-kin status and medical decisionmaking power. This registry, however, does not restrict these benefits to same-sex partners. Partners in committed relationships of different genders can also register. Similarly, Maine health insurance law requires that any insurer offering contracts subject to State regulation offer the same coverages and rates for registered domestic partners that it offers to spouses. And, again, the law does not distinguish between same-sex and opposite-sex relationships. So I want to hear our witnesses discuss that issue this morning.

Let me emphasize that, regardless of this broader issue – and there are legitimate issues for expanding the bill and for not doing so – many experts predict that the Federal Government is about to experience a huge retirement wave. Indeed, some estimate that

approximately 60 percent of the Federal workforce will be eligible for retirement over the next decade.

According to the Human Rights Campaign, 56 percent of the Fortune 500 companies, including some of our top Federal contractors, extend spousal benefits to domestic partners. It seems to me that if the Federal Government is going to compete with the private sector for some of the most talented workforce, we need to use some of the same incentives to attract and, as the Chairman's statement indicated, to keep qualified individuals in the public sector.

So I thank you, Mr. Chairman, for having this hearing today. It is an important issue in terms of our ability to ensure that the Federal Government has the best qualified workforce possible.