

**AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION**

**ADOPTED BY THE HOUSE OF DELEGATES**

**February 9, 2004**

RESOLVED, That to preserve the authority of the states and territories to regulate marriage under our federal system, the American Bar Association opposes any federal enactment that would restrict the ability of a state to:

(a) prescribe the qualifications for civil marriage between two persons within its jurisdiction; and

(b) determine when effect should be given to a civil marriage validly contracted between two persons under the laws of another jurisdiction.

## REPORT

### Introduction

As states across the country consider the question of what rights and protections should be accorded to same-sex couples,<sup>1</sup> efforts are underway to enact a federal constitutional amendment or other legislation that would prevent states from establishing, by court decision or legislation, a definition of marriage that would include marriages between two persons of the same sex.

This recommendation does not seek to place the ABA on record as either favoring or opposing laws that would allow same-sex couples to enter into civil marriage. Rather, its purpose is to preserve the authority conferred upon the states under our federal system to decide for themselves the terms under which two people may assume the rights and responsibilities of civil marriage.<sup>2</sup> As Justice Brandeis famously stated over 70 years ago, “It is one of the happy incidents of the federal system that a single courageous State may . . . serve as a laboratory; and try novel social . . . experiments without risk to the rest of the country.”<sup>3</sup>

In keeping with this philosophy, the ABA has adopted a series of policies urging state legislatures and state courts to provide legal protections for children in families headed by unmarried or same-sex partners. In August 1995, the ABA adopted a policy supporting the enactment of legislation and implementation of public policies that would ensure that child custody or visitation is not denied or restricted on the basis of a parent’s sexual orientation. In February 1999, the ABA adopted a policy supporting “the enactment of laws and implementation of public policy [providing] that sexual orientation shall not be a bar to adoption when the adoption is determined to be in the best interests of the child.” Most recently, in August 2003, the ABA adopted a policy supporting state laws and court decisions permitting second-parent adoptions by unmarried persons, including lesbian and gay partners.

The proposed resolution complements and seeks to preserve these existing policies by opposing federal legislation that would usurp traditional state powers to determine who may enter into civil marriage.

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<sup>1</sup> The 2000 Census revealed that gay and lesbian families reside in 99.3 percent of all counties across America. See, e.g., <http://www.hrc.org/familynet/printpage.asp?table=articles&ID=340>.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., *Pennoyer v. Neff*, 95 U.S. 714 (1877) (states decide eligibility to marry); *In Re Burrus*, 136 U.S. 586 (1890) (“The whole subject of the domestic relations of husband and wife, parent and child, belongs to the laws of the states and not to the laws of the United States”). Of course, the general rule of states governing eligibility to marry gives way only when states’ marriage laws fail to conform with constitutional guarantees. *Perez v. Sharp*, 198 P.2d 17 (Cal. 1948) (striking down anti-miscegenation law on state constitutional grounds); *Loving v. Virginia*, 388 U.S. 1, 12 (1967) (striking state law marriage restrictions based on race); *Zablocki v. Redhail*, 434 U.S. 374 (1978) (striking state marriage restriction based on poverty); *Turner v. Safley*, 482 U.S. 78 (1987) (striking state marriage restriction based on incarceration).

<sup>3</sup> *Santosky v. Kramer*, 455 U.S. 745, 773 (1982) (Rehnquist, J., dissenting) (quoting *New State Ice Co. v. Liebman*, 285 U.S. 262, 311 (1932) (Brandeis, J., dissenting)).

## The Proposed Constitutional Amendment

On May 21, 2003, U. S. Rep. Marilyn Musgrave (R-CO) introduced in the U. S. House of Representatives H.J.Res. 56, a joint resolution to amend the U. S. Constitution to restrict the definition of marriage to the union of a man and a woman and to prohibit the states from allowing same-sex couples to enter into civil marriage or be granted the “legal incidents thereof.” Specifically, the amendment provides:

SECTION 1. Marriage in the United States shall consist only of the union of a man and a woman. Neither this Constitution or the constitution of any State, nor state or federal law, shall be construed to require that marital status or the legal incidents thereof be conferred upon unmarried couples or groups.

If ratified, the amendment would have sweeping consequences. It would bar courts and legislatures from taking steps to permit same-sex couples to enter into civil marriage or to extend to such unmarried couples legal protections comparable to those accorded to legal spouses, such as the right to sue for wrongful death or to inherit under intestate succession laws; hospital visitation; family medical leave; dependency presumptions for workers’ compensation; or even the right to control the disposition of remains.<sup>4</sup> It is likely that the amendment would nullify Vermont’s civil union system, California’s new domestic partnership law, and scores of laws and ordinances granting various benefits to unmarried couples throughout the country.

As of Oct. 15, 2003, the proposed amendment had 97 co-sponsors in the House. In November 2003, a companion bill, S.J.Res. 26, was introduced in the Senate by Senator Wayne Allard (R-CO). As of December 11, 2003, the bill had four co-sponsors. Even before the bill was introduced in the Senate, Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-TN) and Republican Conference Chairman Rick Santorum (R-PA) had stated their support for the concept of a constitutional amendment.<sup>5</sup>

When asked about his position on the proposed constitutional amendment, President Bush stated that “a marriage is between a man and a woman, and I think we ought to codify that one way or another.”<sup>6</sup> More recently, the President issued a Proclamation in support of “Marriage Protection

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<sup>4</sup> See Alliance for Marriage, *Legal Impact of the Federal Marriage Amendment*, available at <http://www.allianceformarriage.org/reports/fma/colorchart.cfm>.

<sup>5</sup> Amy Fagan and Bill Sammon, *Bush Weighs Marriage Amendment; Awaits Court Rulings on Gay Unions*, WASH. TIMES, Aug. 1, 2003, at A1. (“Sen. Rick Santorum, Pennsylvania Republican, and Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, Tennessee Republican, have voiced support for a constitutional amendment. An aide to Mr. Frist said members of the House and Senate also are exploring ways to defend traditional marriage.”).

<sup>6</sup> Jesse J. Holland, *Senate subcommittee to take gay marriages after August recess*, ASSOC. PRESS, Aug. 1, 2003.

Week, 2003,”<sup>7</sup> an effort by certain religious and conservative groups to consolidate their attacks on same-sex families.<sup>8</sup>

In contrast, a number of prominent conservative leaders have spoken out against the proposed constitutional amendment on federalism grounds. Former Representative Bob Barr (R-GA), one of the authors of the federal Defense of Marriage Act (“DOMA”) (discussed below), has expressed his opposition to the proposed constitutional amendment, stating,

Marriage is a quintessential state issue. The Defense of Marriage Act goes as far as is necessary in codifying the federal legal status and parameters of marriage. A constitutional amendment is both unnecessary and needlessly intrusive and punitive. . . . As any good federalist should recognize, [DOMA] leaves states the appropriate amount of wiggle room to decide their own definitions of marriage or other similar social compacts, free of federal meddling.<sup>9</sup>

In a similar vein, with respect to the issue of protection for same-sex couples, Vice President Dick Cheney has stated, “I think different states are likely to come to different conclusions, and that’s appropriate. I don’t think there should necessarily be a federal policy in this area.”<sup>10</sup>

### The Defense of Marriage Act

In 1996, Congress enacted the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), which contains two substantive provisions. The first seeks to relieve states of their obligation to accord full faith and credit to same-sex marriages that are lawfully entered into in other jurisdictions.<sup>11</sup> The second provides that the federal government will not recognize such marriages.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Marriage Protection Week, 2003, By the President of the United States of America: A Proclamation, Oct. 3, 2003. See <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/10/20031003-12.html>

<sup>8</sup> See National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, *Marriage Protection Week’ Sponsors: Are They Really Interested in ‘Building Strong and Healthy Marriages?’* available at <http://www.nglftf.org/downloads/MarriageProtectionWeek.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Bob Barr, *Leave Marriage to the States*, WASH. POST, Aug. 21, 2003. Similarly, conservative constitutional scholar Bruce Fein has argued that “conservatives should squelch a rash constitutional amendment pending in the House of Representatives to prohibit states from recognizing homosexual marriages and thus place the issue off-limits for democratic discourse. The amendment would enervate self-government, . . . and clutter the Constitution with a nonessential.” Bruce Fein, *Constitutional Rashness*, WASH. TIMES, Sept. 2, 2003.

<sup>10</sup> Alan Simpson, *Missing the Point on Gays*, WASH. POST, Sept. 5, 2003, (quoting Dick Cheney).

<sup>11</sup> Section 2 of DOMA provides in the following terms that States need not respect the marriages of same-sex couples from other states:

No State, territory or possession of the United States, or Indian tribe, shall be required to give effect to any public act, record or judicial proceeding of any other State, territory, possession, or tribe, respecting a relationship between persons of the same sex that is treated as a marriage under the laws of such other State, territory, possession, or tribe, or a right or claim arising from such relationship.

Defense of Marriage Act, Pub. L. No. 104-199, sec. 2(a), 1996 U.S.C.C.A.N. (110 Stat.) 2419, (codified at 28 U.S.C. Sec. 1738C).

<sup>12</sup> Section 3 of DOMA states:

The DOMA does not bar any state from recognizing marriages between same-sex couples entered into in accordance with its laws. The proposed constitutional amendment would do precisely that, stripping state courts and legislatures of their ability to prescribe the qualifications for civil marriage and to determine what rights and responsibilities should attach to that status.

### **The Robust Dialogue on This Issue in the States**

States have been grappling with the issue of protections for same-sex couples since at least the 1970's. The first challenge to the exclusion of lesbian and gay couples from civil marriage was decided in 1971.<sup>13</sup> Since then, there have been a number of challenges across the country. All of these challenges were unsuccessful until 1993, when the Hawaii Supreme Court held that denying same-sex couples the right to marry may constitute unlawful sex discrimination.<sup>14</sup> While the case was working its way back up to the Hawaii Supreme Court, the voters of Hawaii passed a state constitutional amendment allowing the state legislature to limit marriage to different-sex couples. The Court subsequently dismissed the litigation as moot.<sup>15</sup>

In 1998, an Alaska trial court held that denying same-sex couples the right to marry violated the state constitutional right to privacy and the right to be free from discrimination on the basis of sex.<sup>16</sup> Following that decision, the voters amended the Alaska Constitution to define marriage as the union of one man and one woman, effectively ending the lawsuit.

In 1999, the Vermont Supreme Court held that refusing to provide committed same-sex partners with the benefits and privileges granted to married couples violated the Vermont Constitution's Common Benefits Clause.<sup>17</sup> In response to the Court's instruction to remedy this constitutional infringement, the Vermont legislature enacted a law permitting same-sex couples to enter into civil unions. Couples in a civil union are granted all of the state-conferred rights, benefits, and responsibilities of marriage, and private entities are required to treat marriages and civil unions equally. Persons in a civil union, however, are not granted any of the 1,049 federally-conferred

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In determining the meaning of any Act of Congress, or of any ruling, regulation, or interpretation of the various administrative bureaus and agencies of the United States, the word 'marriage' means only a legal union between one man and one woman as husband and wife, and the word 'spouse' refers only to a person of the opposite sex who is a husband or a wife."

Defense of Marriage Act, Pub. L. No. 104-199, sec. 3(a), 1996 U.S.C.C.A.N. (110 Stat.) 2419, 2419 (codified at 1 U.S.C. Sec. 7).

<sup>13</sup> *Baker v. Nelson*, 291 Minn. 310 (1971).

<sup>14</sup> *Baehr v. Lewin*, 852 P.2d 44 (Hawaii 1993).

<sup>15</sup> *Baehr v. Miike*, 994 P.2d 566 (Hawaii 1999).

<sup>16</sup> *Brause v. Bureau of Vital Statistics*, 1998 WL 88743 (Alaska Super. Ct. 1998). The decision is also available at: <http://www.qrd.org/qrd/usa/legal/alaska/brause-v-alaska>.

<sup>17</sup> *Baker v. State*, 744 A.2d 864 (Vt. 1999).

rights, benefits, and responsibilities of marriage. Moreover, serious questions remain concerning the extent to which civil unions are entitled to legal effect outside of Vermont.<sup>18</sup>

On Nov. 18, 2003, the highest court in Massachusetts held that barring lesbian and gay couples from entering into civil marriage violates the Massachusetts Constitution.<sup>19</sup> In its decision, the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court stayed the judgment for 180 days to permit the legislature to take whatever action it may deem appropriate in light of the decision. The timing of Massachusetts decision may make it more likely that Congress will act on the proposed constitutional amendment within the next year.

In addition, three other pending cases challenge the denial to same-sex couples of the right to marry. The cases are pending in New Jersey,<sup>20</sup> Indiana,<sup>21</sup> and Arizona.<sup>22</sup>

The state legislatures also are heavily involved in considering these issues. In the 2002-2003 session, bills were introduced in five states – Connecticut, Massachusetts, Montana, New York, and Rhode Island – to permit same-sex couples to enter into civil marriage. In seven states – California, Colorado, Connecticut, Hawaii, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Washington – bills were introduced to create civil unions or similarly comprehensive status. In California, legislation was signed into law conferring a broad range of rights, benefits, and responsibilities on registered domestic partners,<sup>23</sup> and domestic partnership legislation was introduced in 13 other states. On the other end of the spectrum, bills were introduced in 10 states to prohibit marriages between same-sex couples or to prohibit recognition of civil unions or domestic partnerships.<sup>24</sup>

Closely related to the question of each state's setting its own requirements for who may marry is the issue of a state's respect for a non-forum marriage, including a state's legal respect for "migratory marriages," i.e. those of persons married elsewhere who relocate to the forum state, and "extraterritorial marriages," those of non-residents who have minimal contact with the forum state (e.g. while on vacation or a business trip).

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<sup>18</sup> See *Rosengarten v. Downes*, 71 Conn. App. 372 (2002) (denying respect in Connecticut to a Vermont civil union); *Burns v. Burns*, 253 Ga. App. 600 (2002) (same, in Georgia).

<sup>19</sup> *Goodridge v. Dept. of Public Health*, No. 08860, (Supreme Judicial Court, argued March 4, 2003).

<sup>20</sup> *Lewis v. Harris*, No. MER-L-15-03, Opinion on Motion to Dismiss (N.J. Super. Ct. Nov. 7, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> *Morrison v. Sadler*.

<sup>22</sup> *Standhardt v. Superior Court*, 77 P.3d 451 (Ariz. App. 2003).

<sup>23</sup> AB 205 (Goldberg, 2003). The text of AB 205 can be accessed at

[http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/bill/asm/ab\\_0201-0250/ab\\_205\\_bill\\_20030922\\_chaptered.pdf](http://www.leginfo.ca.gov/pub/bill/asm/ab_0201-0250/ab_205_bill_20030922_chaptered.pdf). When AB 205 becomes operational on Jan. 1, 2005, registered domestic partners in California will be granted almost all of the state-conferred rights, benefits, and responsibilities that currently are conferred upon married couples. Like civil unions, however, domestic partner registration does not confer the over 1000 federally-conferred rights, benefits, and responsibilities based on marital status.

<sup>24</sup> In another measure of the vibrant dialogue on the issue of marriage for same-sex couples, a search of 52 major newspapers between Jan. 1, 2003, and Nov. 13, 2003, shows that the headline or lead paragraph contained the term, "same-sex marriage" 862 times and the term "gay marriage" 925 times. A Google search reveals 120,000 entries for "same-sex marriage" and 162,000 for "gay marriage."

Each state already has a rich body of law on this topic, primarily rooted in comity and common law and sometimes in statutory directives.<sup>25</sup> Absent federal intervention, the states will remain free to apply their own laws and precedents to foreign marriages between same-sex couples as they do in other cases.

### Conclusion

Should the House of Delegates adopt this Recommendation, the Association will have taken no position on the merits of whether same-sex couples should be granted the right to enter into civil marriage. However, it will have affirmed the principle that the states should be permitted to debate and develop their own answers to this and other critical questions touching upon traditional state responsibilities in the area of family law.

Respectfully Submitted,

Joan F. Kessler, Chair  
Section of Individual Rights and Responsibilities

Phyllis G. Bossin, Chair  
Section of Family Law

February 2004

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<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., Editors of the Harvard Law Review, *Developments in the Law – The Law of Marriage and Family*, 116 Harv. L. Rev. 1996, 2028 (2003); Barbara J. Cox, “Same-Sex Marriage, Choice of Law: If We Marry in Hawaii, Are We Still Married When We Return Home?” 1994 Wis. L. Rev. 1033 (1994).

## **GENERAL INFORMATION FORM**

Submitting Entities: Section of Individual Rights and Responsibilities  
Section of Family Law

Submitted by: Joan F. Kessler, Chair  
Section of Individual Rights and Responsibilities

Phyllis G. Bossin, Chair  
Section of Family Law

1. Summary of Recommendation

The Recommendation opposes any federal enactment that would restrict the ability of a state to prescribe the qualifications for civil marriage between two persons within its jurisdiction. It also opposes any federal enactment that would restrict the ability of a state to give effect to a civil marriage validly contracted between two persons under the laws of another jurisdiction.

2. Approval by Submitting Entity

The Council of the Section of Individual Rights and Responsibilities approved the filing of this Report with Recommendation in principle on Oct. 26, 2003, during its fall meeting in Washington, D. C. The Executive Committee approved the filing of this Report with Recommendation on Nov. 17, 2003.

The Council of the Section of Family Law approved co-sponsorship of this Report with Recommendation by conference call on Nov. 19, 2003.

3. Has This or a Similar Recommendation Been Submitted to the House of Delegates Board of Governors Previously?

No.

4. What Existing Association Policies Are Relevant to This Recommendation and Would They Be Affected by Its Adoption?

The ABA has adopted a series of policies urging state legislatures and state courts to provide legal protections for children in families headed by unmarried or same-sex partners. In August 1995, the ABA adopted a policy supporting the enactment of legislation and implementation of public policies that would ensure that child custody or visitation is not denied or restricted on the basis of a parent's sexual orientation. In February 1999, the ABA adopted a policy supporting "the enactment of laws and implementation of public policy [providing] that sexual orientation shall not be a bar to

adoption when the adoption is determined to be in the best interests of the child.” Most recently, in August 2003, the ABA adopted a policy supporting state laws and court decisions permitting second parent adoptions by unmarried persons, including lesbian and gay partners.

5. What Urgency Exists That Requires Action at This Meeting of the House?

On May 21, 2003, Rep. Marilyn Musgrave (R-CO) introduced in the U. S. House of Representatives H.J.Res. 56, a joint resolution to amend the U. S. Constitution to restrict the definition of marriage to the union of a man and a woman and to prohibit the states from allowing same-sex couples to enter into civil marriage or be granted the “legal incidents thereof.” As of Oct. 15, 2003, the proposed constitutional amendment had 97 co-sponsors in the House. In November 2003, a companion bill, SJR 26, was introduced in the Senate by Senator Wayne Allard, R-CO. As of December 11, 2003, it had four co-sponsors. On Nov. 18, 2003, the highest court in Massachusetts held that barring lesbian and gay couples from entering into civil marriage violates the Massachusetts Constitution. This decision may prompt further congressional action on this issue in the coming year.

6. Status of Legislation

A proposed constitutional amendment is pending. The bill introduced in the U. S. House of Representatives on May 21, 2003, had 97 co-sponsors as of mid-October. In November, five Senators introduced a companion bill in the Senate. Even before that time, several Senators, including Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-TN) and Republican Conference Chairman Rick Santorum (R-PA), had stated their support for the concept of a constitutional amendment.

7. Cost to the Association (both direct and indirect costs)

Adoption of this Recommendation would result only in minor indirect costs associated with Governmental Affairs and Section staff time devoted to the policy subject matter as part of the staff members’ overall substantive responsibilities.

8. Disclosure of Interest

There are no known conflicts of interest.

9. Referrals

Prior to submission, this Report with Recommendation was referred to the Section of Family Law, which subsequently agreed to co-sponsor the resolution.

By copy of this form, the Report with Recommendation will be referred to the following additional entities, including all Sections and Divisions:

Section of Administrative Law and Regulatory Practice  
Section of Antitrust Law  
Section of Business Law  
Criminal Justice Section  
Section of Dispute Resolution  
Section of Environment, Energy, and Resources  
Section of Family Law  
General Practice, Solo and Small Firm Section  
Government and Public Sector Lawyers Division  
Health Law Section  
Section of Intellectual Property Law  
Section of International Law and Practice  
Section of Labor and Employment Law  
Law Practice Management Section  
Section of Legal Education and Admissions to the Bar  
Section of Litigation  
Section of Public Contract Law  
Section of Public Utility , Communications and Transportation Law  
Section of Real Property, Probate and Trust Law  
Section of Science and Technology Law  
Section of State and Local Government Law  
Section of Taxation  
Tort and Insurance Practice Section  
Judicial Division  
Law Student Division  
Senior Lawyers Division  
Young Lawyers Division

Steering Committee on the Unmet Legal Needs of Children

Commission on Domestic Violence  
Commission on Homelessness and Poverty  
Commission on Law and Aging  
Commission on Mental and Physical Disability Law  
Commission on Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Profession  
Council on Racial and Ethnic Justice  
Commission on Women in the Profession

American Immigration Lawyers Association  
Hispanic National Bar Association  
National Asian Pacific American Bar Association

National Association of Women Judges  
National Association of Women Lawyers  
National Bar Association Inc.  
National Conference of Women's Bar Associations  
National Lesbian and Gay Law Association  
National Legal Aid and Defender Association  
National Native American Bar Association

10. Contact Persons (prior to meeting)

Mark D. Agrast, Immediate Past Chair  
ABA Section of Individual Rights and Responsibilities  
Center for American Progress  
805 15<sup>th</sup> Street, NW, Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20005  
Tel.: 202/682-1611, Ext. 337  
Fax: 202/682-1867  
E-mail: magrast@amprog.org

Courtney Joslin, Co-chair  
Committee on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity  
ABA Section of Individual Rights and Responsibilities  
National Center for Lesbian Rights  
870 Market Street, Suite 570  
San Francisco, CA 94102-3016  
Tel.: 415/392-6257  
Fax: 415/392-8442  
E-mail: joslin@mail.nclrights.org

Phyllis G. Bossin, Chair  
ABA Section of Family Law  
Phyllis G. Bossin Co., L.P.A.  
36 E. 4th Street, Ste. 1210  
Cincinnati, OH 45202-3810  
Tel.: 513/421-4420  
Fax: 513/421-0691  
E-mail: pbossin@bossinlaw.com

Penny Wakefield, Director  
ABA Section of Individual Rights and Responsibilities  
740 15th St., NW  
Washington, DC 20005  
Tel: 202/662-1030  
Fax: 202/662-1032

E-mail: wakefieldp@staff.abanet.org

Kate Hagan, Director  
ABA Section of Family Law  
750 N. Lake Shore Drive  
Chicago, IL 60611  
Tel.: 312/988-5619  
Fax: 312/988-6800  
E-mail: hagank@staff.abanet.org

11. Contact Person (who will present the report to the House)

C. Elisia Frazier, Delegate  
ABA Section of Individual Rights and Responsibilities  
1310 W. Lexington Avenue  
Fort Wayne, IN 46807  
Tel.: 260/745-3044  
Fax: 260/455-5403  
E-mail: cef1938@comcast.com

Mark D. Agrast, Immediate Past Chair  
ABA Section of Individual Rights and Responsibilities  
Center for American Progress  
805 15<sup>th</sup> Street, NW, Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20005  
Tel.: 202/682-1611, Ext. 337  
Fax: 202/682-1867  
E-mail: magrast@amprog.org

Lynne Gold-Bikin, Delegate  
ABA Section of Family Law  
Wolf Block, et al  
325 Swede St.  
PO Box 869  
Norristown, PA  
Tel. : 610/272-1511  
Fax : 610/272-6976

Timothy B. Walker, Delegate  
ABA Section of Family Law  
Cox Mustain Wood Walker et al  
6601 S. University Blvd. Ste. 200

Littleton, CO 80121-2973  
Tel.: 303/730-0067  
Fax: 303/730-0344  
E-mail : tbwalker10@aol.com

12. Contact Person Regarding Amendments to this Recommendation

C. Elisia Frazier, Delegate  
ABA Section of Individual Rights and Responsibilities  
1310 W. Lexington Avenue  
Fort Wayne, IN 46807  
Tel.: 260/745-3044  
Fax: 260/455-5403  
E-mail: cef1938@comcast.com

Lynne Gold-Bikin, Delegate  
ABA Section of Family Law  
Wolf Block, et al  
325 Swede St.  
PO Box 869  
Norristown, PA  
Tel. : 610/272-1511  
Fax : 610/272-6976

Timothy B. Walker, Delegate  
ABA Section of Family Law  
Cox Mustain Wood Walker et al  
6601 S. University Blvd. Ste. 200  
Littleton, CO 80121-2973  
Tel.: 303/730-0067  
Fax: 303/730-0344  
E-mail : tbwalker10@aol.com