



BY PAIGE M. STEFFEN, ESQ., CLARK HILL PLC

## Know Your Rights: Ensuring Equality for LGBTQ Employees

The Corporate Equality Index (“CEI”), an annual list published by the Human Rights Campaign (“HRC”) Foundation that rates workplaces on LGBTQ equality, recently released its 15th Edition, which reported that a record number of businesses are now embracing inclusive policies for LGBTQ employees.

The CEI praises the success of the nation’s largest employers, stating that they have “demonstrated through their actions that LGBTQ people are not just tolerated, but welcomed in their workplaces and communities.”

In a time of turmoil and uncertainty, these companies are taking the lead to ensure that their most valuable assets, their employees, are protected and treated with respect and equality.

The HRC Foundation is one of the largest advocacy groups for the LGBTQ community, and it has used the CEI as a platform to gauge companies’ level of LGBTQ workplace inclusion and to encourage all employers to promote equality for all employees. Approximately 900 companies with a minimum of 500 full-time employees throughout the U.S., representing almost every industry, participated in this year’s CEI. All of the involved companies were ranked with a score from 0 to 100 depending on the inclusiveness of its workplace.

The scores are calculated based upon the following categories: (1) Equal employment opportunity policy, (2) Employment benefits (equivalent spousal and partner benefits); (3) Organizational LGBTQ competency; and (4) Public commitment to LGBTQ-specific efforts. Further, if the participating company was involved in a large-scale official or public anti-LGBTQ event, that company’s score would be significantly decreased.

The CEI contained encouraging reports of great successes in ensuring fairness and equality in the workplace. Notably, 517 of the CEI-ranked companies, which is up from last year’s 407, received perfect scores on this year’s Index. More than 40 of the CEI-ranked companies with perfect scores, including Boeing, Crate and Barrel, Sears Holdings, and several law firms are based in Illinois.

Not only is this the largest number of companies receiving top scores, it is also the largest jump in a single year. Many additional CEI-rated companies, approximately 650 in total, offer transgender-inclusive healthcare coverage, and more than 90% of the businesses have implemented both sexual orientation and gender identity employment protections.

In addition, 50% of the Fortune 500 companies participating in this year's CEI offer transgender-inclusive healthcare coverage. To put this figure into perspective, not a single Fortune 500 company provided such coverage in 2002, and less than 10% provided coverage in 2011.

Further, 387 CEI-rated companies have adopted gender transition guidelines for employees in efforts to establish best practices for transgender inclusion in the workplace. These companies have also invested in education. For instance, 86% of the CEI-rated businesses offer education and training programs that specifically include definitions of and/or scenarios on gender identity in the workplace.

As evidenced by the above statistics, the public sector has led and continues to lead the way in workplace equality. Dozens of corporations have taken strong stances and spoken publicly against federal and state bills that may retract from the progress that has been made in LGBTQ equality.

These public efforts by some of the nation's—and the world's—largest employers have reportedly helped block more than 100 laws across the U.S. that could have been detrimental to the LGBTQ community. For example, Wal-Mart, the nation's largest public employer with more than two million employees, helped defeat anti-LGBTQ laws in Arkansas. Whole Foods Market, among hundreds of other corporations, also intends to speak out against any and all Texas laws seen as hostile to LGBTQ persons.

The HRC Foundation encourages all companies to use the CEI as a guide to help develop and successfully implement inclusive LGBTQ policies and protections.

However, these companies' efforts to promote inclusive policies, practices, protections, and benefits for LGBTQ employees have been met with backlash. For instance, some retailers who have implemented supportive LGBTQ policies and made statements in support of the LGBTQ community have faced protests and boycotts from consumers. One of the most publicized boycotts came after Target pledged that customers and employees could use the bathroom of their gender identity. Additionally, there are still companies that do not recognize basic hiring protections for LGBTQ or recognize gender identity in their company policies.

While it is important to recognize the great strides that have been made in LGBTQ equality, it is equally important to understand that there is significant work to be done and that there are still barriers to full equality for the LGBTQ community.

Understanding and navigating your rights as an employee can be challenging and overwhelming. In the event that you have any questions, you may want to contact an attorney to discuss your situation.

**Paige M. Steffen** is an Associate Attorney in Clark Hill PLC's Chicago office. She concentrates her practice on insurance and health care law.

Contact her at (312) 517-7501 or [psteffen@clarkhill.com](mailto:psteffen@clarkhill.com).

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