

**Statement Of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),
Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee,
Executive Business Meeting
November 10, 2011**

The Respect For Marriage Act

Today we will vote to right an injustice that goes to the core of what we stand for in this great Nation: freedom and equality. The fundamental freedom to make a public and lifetime commitment to the one you love and the equality of all state-sanctioned marriages are at the heart of the Respect for Marriage Act.

I am proud that my home state of Vermont has long taken an active role in America's journey to build a more just society. Vermont was the first state in the Union to outlaw slavery. Vermonters offered shelter to runaway slaves seeking refuge while in transit to Canada, as one of the last stops on the Underground Railroad. Vermont was the first to adopt universal manhood suffrage, regardless of property ownership. And more recently, Vermont has led the Nation in upholding the freedom and equality of all of its citizens in committed relationships.

In the 15 years since the passage of DOMA, I have listened to Vermonters and understand why these highly personal freedoms and protections are so important and so desperately needed. Vermont was the first in the Nation to provide for civil unions. This initial move prompted heated debate among Vermonters. Several courageous leaders showed us the way, including Susan Murray and Beth Robinson, whose advocacy for equality was so powerfully moving. We were also moved by the late Republican Senator from Vermont, Bob Stafford, who reminded us that love and commitment are values to encourage, not to fear. And when Vermont took the next step to marriage equality two years ago, our state also led the Nation by doing so for the first time through our democratically elected officials, and on a bipartisan basis.

Five other states and the District of Columbia now also recognize that all of their citizens have the freedom to publicly commit themselves to each other in marriage. But because of DOMA, thousands of American families are now being treated unfairly by their Federal Government. They are shunted aside -- singled out from all other marriages recognized by their states. As we heard at this Committee's hearing in July, DOMA is harming thousands of Americans families by making them less secure and less protected. At our hearing, we heard challenging and inspiring accounts from witnesses who, though burdened by this discrimination, have been able to spin courage from their hope -- courage, from their belief in the willingness of their fellow Americans and their government to right this wrong. This unfairness must end. The Respect for Marriage Act would provide for the equal treatment of all lawful marriages in this country by repealing DOMA.

Freedom and equality are not partisan issues. The Respect for Marriage Act has the support of Democrats and Republicans, Independents and Libertarians, civil rights organizations and major American businesses.

Love and commitment are not usual topics for us to discuss in this Committee. But let us all remember that is what is at stake in this effort to provide equal protection of the laws. I have

been married for 49 years. Not a day goes by when I am not reminded of how important this bond is to me, to our three children, and to our five grandchildren. I see many students in the audience today, and I hope that by the time they decide to get married, their Federal Government will no longer discriminate by treating some lawful marriages unfairly.

If we take this step today, it will be another historic milestone along our Nation's imperfect yet ever-onward path toward perfecting a society grounded in our timeless ideals. A society that values the security and dignity of the committed relationships to which so many of us aspire in our pursuit of happiness.

The Federal Government should not deny recognition and protection to the thousands of Americans who are lawfully married under their state law. We must repeal DOMA to ensure the freedom and equality of all of our citizens. I hope our Committee today will take the next step on the path toward equality by voting in favor of the Respect for Marriage Act.

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