



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**EQUALITY ILLINOIS HONORS SEN. HEATHER STEANS
WITH FREEDOM AWARD**

CHICAGO – Equality Illinois, the state's oldest and largest organization advocating for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Illinoisans, announced today that its annual Freedom Award will be presented to state Sen. Heather Steans (D-Chicago) for her indefatigable work on behalf of equality during her five years in the Illinois Senate.

"Sen. Steans has been one of the General Assembly's most vocal and passionate supporters of full equality for LGBT people, including being the chief Senate sponsor of the marriage bill," said Bernard Cherkasov, CEO of Equality Illinois. "From defending civil unions from successive attacks in the legislature to fighting hate crimes to advocating for safe schools, Sen. Steans powerfully represents the LGBT community's needs. She embodies the reason the Equality Illinois Freedom Award was created."

In 2009, Sen. Steans introduced the first bill in the state Senate seeking the freedom to marry for all Illinois couples. As chief Senate sponsor of the current bill, the Religious Freedom and Marriage Fairness Act, Sen. Steans earlier this month secured its historic passage out of the Senate Executive Committee, leading the quickest victory that advocates had achieved for any piece of LGBT equality legislation in Illinois. "Over the course of the last year, Sen. Steans has worked closely with Equality Illinois and our coalition partners to build support for the marriage bill," Cherkasov said.

The Freedom Award is given annually to individuals who demonstrate remarkable vision, courage, and leadership in the effort to achieve full equality for LGBT individuals in Illinois. The 2013 Freedom Award will be presented at Equality Illinois' Justice for All Gala, which is scheduled to take place on Saturday, February 9, at the Hilton Chicago. Past Freedom Award winners include Illinois Senate President John Cullerton, state Rep. Greg Harris, former state Rep. Constance "Connie" A. Howard, former Comptroller Dawn Clark Netsch, and the late state Rep. Mark Beaubien Jr.

"Being able to help gay and lesbian Illinoisans win the freedom to marry the love of their life is a reward in itself, but to be recognized for that work with the Equality Illinois Freedom Award is truly humbling," Sen. Steans said. "We've come so far, so fast that I believe our efforts will result in passage of the marriage bill in a very short time."

In the Senate since 2008, Sen. Steans currently chairs the Appropriations I Committee, vice chairs the Environment Committee, co-chairs the bipartisan, bicameral Medicaid Advisory Committee, and serves on the Public Health and Human Service committees.

Sen. Steans has demonstrated unshakable commitment to addressing the most pressing challenges facing Illinoisans. She passed Medicaid reform legislation, enacted significant nursing home reform legislation, advocated for bills to improve the environment and successfully sponsored bills to repeal the death penalty and establish civil unions.

Prior to the Senate, Sen. Steans focused on government finance, economic development and education reform. She served as budget director of the Wisconsin Department of Industry, Labor and Human Relations, as a strategic planner with the Chicago Public Schools, and as a consultant with Ernst & Young.

Sen. Steans and her husband, Leo Smith, live with their three children in the Edgewater neighborhood of Chicago.

For more information about Equality Illinois' Justice for All Gala, please visit www.eqil.org.

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