



**STATEMENT BY LISA CISNEROS, ESQ.**  
***Proyecto Poderoso* Attorney**  
**California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc.**

My name is Lisa Cisneros. I am an attorney with California Rural Legal Assistance (CRLA). We are a legal aid organization dedicated to serving the rural poor. CRLA operates 21 legal aid offices throughout rural California, with several offices located in the Central Valley.

CRLA is one of hundreds of bar associations, religious organizations, civil rights groups, municipal governments, and leading legal scholars that submitted *amicus* briefs urging our state Supreme Court to strike down Proposition 8. If Prop. 8 is allowed to stand, it would be the first ballot measure in our state's history to succeed in singling out a minority group for the elimination of a fundamental right. Though litigating gay rights has not historically been the core of CRLA's mission, we have joined as *amicus* in the legal challenge to Prop. 8 for the following reasons.

First, our Constitution is an enduring blueprint for democratic self-governance that respects liberty and equality for all. Our founders had the wisdom to foresee that our power to self-govern must contain limits to ensure equal treatment under the law. The inclusion of the equal protection clause at the moment of our state Constitution's creation reflected that wisdom. The longstanding purpose of the Constitution has been to provide for governance by the people, for the people, while elevating above the ballot box our values of equality and freedom.

Prop. 8 upsets that delicate balance. The measure opens the door for majorities to tyrannize minorities. For example, it would be wrong to put up for vote the freedom to worship for a single religious sect, or to take a vote on whether one racial group should be permitted to own property.

Prop. 8 is a radical and dangerous shift away from this traditional view. It is a shift that threatens not only same-sex couples, but all Californians, including many of the people CRLA represents. Fortunately, the Constitution itself, which is the highest and most basic expression of the people's will, establishes that this type of radical change cannot be made by a simple majority vote on a ballot initiative.

CRLA also supports the case against Prop. 8 because same-sex couples and their families are part of the rural, low-income communities we serve. In recent years, CRLA has served an increasing number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) clients, many with especially severe cases of workplace harassment and pay discrimination. Government discrimination against same-sex couples in the area of civil marriage sends an official message of second-class citizenship for LGBT people. It creates a mixed message that undermines existing anti-discrimination laws, as well as the prospects for equal dignity and opportunity for LGBT people.

If not stopped, the unnecessary rush to single out same-sex couples for discriminatory legal treatment in our Constitution will strike a serious blow to the principle of equality that provides the very foundation for our fair-minded democracy.

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**California Rural Legal Assistance, Inc.** (CRLA), a 501(c)(3) non-profit legal services organization, seeks to ensure that California's poorest communities have access to justice.

CRLA provides California farm workers and low-income families no-cost legal representation, community outreach, and educational workshops in the areas of health, housing, civil rights, education, family security, and employment. Since 1966, we have led collaborative efforts with private, public, and non-profit agencies to expand the accessibility of the justice system to low-income individuals and families, and to educate and empower our clients to maintain equal protection under the law.

CRLA's multi-lingual, culturally diverse staff serves over 40,000 clients and community members annually in 23 offices statewide, from the US-Mexico border to Northern California.