

UT expands employee benefits to include same-sex couples

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News Editor

Same-sex couples who say "I do" can now have the insurance policies to prove it.

On July 7, Chancellor Jimmy Cheek announced in a mass email that UT would expand its insurance policy to provide benefits for same-sex married couples employed by the university.

The decision comes in light of the Obergefell v. Hodges case that legalized same-sex marriage in all 50 states on June 26 and will apply to all same-sex spouses among UT faculty and staff.

Cheek stated in his announcement that the Supreme Court decision "helps the university take a significant step forward in our efforts to enhance diversity and inclusion on our campus."

Mary Lucal, UT Human Resources interim assistant vice chancellor, said such inclusion within the university's expanded insurance policy paves the way for attracting future, high-caliber employees.

"We're kind of reflective of the community's excitement," Lucal said. "I think, from a human resources perspective, our ability to recruit and retain the most talented faculty and staff now knows no bounds because we're not going to have (same-sex marriage) as a limitation.

"It doesn't change the day to day — it simply enhances opportunities and things to come."

Couples married in another state before the ruling are eligible to apply for benefits at the UT Payroll Office through Aug. 25, or 60 days after the court's ruling.

These 60 days given after the June 26 decision mirror the same time period required of all legally-recognized couples to apply for benefits as stipulated by state law.

Although UT Payroll Office does not keep hard data on the number of same-sex spouses that have applied for benefits, director Rob Chance cited 10 walk-ins who have signed up in person for the newly expanded benefits.

"Every single one of (the policies) that mentions the word 'spouse' now, by definition, extends to same-sex married partners," Chance said.

Aside from the health insurance component, Chance explained the expansion will include other categories of coverage like funeral leave and tuition assistance — all equal to coverage received by their heterosexual colleagues.

While no official statistics document

impacted couples, Lucal said knowing a handful of the walk-ins places a positive visual on the expanded policy.

"It's only 10 people, but it's 10 people who feel that they are able to have a place here, and that just makes you feel good," Lucal said.

Like Lucal, Vice Chancellor for Diversity Rickey Hall also views the benefits expansion as a way to secure professional talent among faculty and emerging scholars that enroll at UT.

"I think we are becoming competitive in many ways, but this was one of the things that was holding us back," Hall said.

By mimicking the policies of Top 500 companies and major private employers, Hall also stated that UT's decision to expand benefits propels momentum to achieve status as a Top 25 public research university.

Still, Hall emphasized that "individual interaction" will become key in expanding the university-wide acceptance of same-sex couples beyond the fine print of an insurance policy.

"(The expansion) doesn't impact people's behavior, those (are) the things we have to work on — climate issues, making sure the university is more welcoming in its inclusiveness of all faculty and staff," Hall said.

For OUTreach Director Donna Braquet, the expansion of marriage benefits that encompass same-sex spouses like her wife, Corinne Branigan, was a policy she thought would never exist in her lifetime.

As a staff member since 2004, Braquet cited stirrings to secure domestic partner benefit for LBGQT+ faculty that began more than 15 years ago by fellow UT colleagues.

"At that point, we never thought marriage would be a reality, so the best we thought we could do was to get equal benefits through the university — which is kind of marriage-like, kind of separate, but unequal," Braquet said.

Braquet also waited for the university to announce an extended benefits policy in the following days after the Supreme Court's "historic ruling," eventually deciding to apply for benefits in person on July 2.

The next day, she presented a nearly year old marriage license from San Francisco's city hall, making Braquet and her wife one of the first same-sex couples to receive marriage benefits at UT.

"I think that there had been some internal prep because they wanted to be sure that when someone came to them, they were acting in accordance with how they should," Braquet

UT's Payroll Office will submit applications for insurance coverage to the state on an employee's behalf.

To read the full text of Chancellor Cheek's July 7 announcement, visit chancellor.utk.edu.

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