

Bob was a co-worker of Kelly, my girlfriend whom I would later marry. One day, Bob asked Kelly if we would like to join them for dinner. Kelly accepted readily, but my discomfort was palpable. On the way there, I asked Kelly what I should do if either of these men tried to hug me.

My uneasiness lasted throughout the evening. And even today, more than a decade later, it still creeps up on me at times. But as I got to know Bob and Scott, and other gay people since then, I reached this conclusion about homosexual relationships: They are not much different from heterosexual ones.

At their essence is the same kind of spark that exists between straight couples. They go through the same excitements and disappointments. And, like their straight counterparts, gay relationships are far more about respect, trust and commitment than they are about sex.

The most significant difference between gay and straight relationships, I discovered, was the atmosphere in which they exist. The love between straight people is celebrated and affirmed; gay love is attacked and condemned.

Legalizing homosexual marriages would diminish these attacks. It would take the wind from the sails of the true sexual bigots, encouraging an evolution in attitude similar to the one we have experienced with interracial and inter-religious unions. Gay people, at least to some extent, would be freed from their embattled status.

But the benefits of gay marriage, I believe, would extend beyond the gay community.

The rest of us would benefit because legitimizing gay marriage would bolster the institution of marriage. How? By reminding all of us that at its core, marriage is not so much about gender, or sex, or politics, but about caring, maturing, committed love.

PERSONAL EXPLANATION

HON. WILLIAM M. THOMAS

OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, June 20, 1996

Mr. THOMAS. Mr. Speaker, yesterday I missed a vote on an amendment to H.R. 3662, which passed by a 93 vote margin, 257 to 164. I oppose the amendment which would resume designating critical habitat for the marbled murrelet and would have voted against the amendment had I not been detained discussing a matter of importance to some of my Tulare County constituents with Members of the Senate in the Senate Chamber.

For too long, the Endangered Species Act has hurt our economy and wasted public resources. As a cosponsor of H.R. 2275, I believe Congress must reform the Endangered Species Act, so that it will contain strict requirements for scientific documentation and mandate objective evaluation of evidence prior to any species being listed and a habitat designation made. If society wants to protect a species, then society should pay for it, and not lay the costs onto the backs of that segment of society who own property on which so-called endangered species live.

FOOD STAMPS AND THE ELECTRONIC BENEFIT TRANSFER SYSTEM

HON. PAT ROBERTS

OF KANSAS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, June 20, 1996

Mr. ROBERTS. Mr. Speaker, today I am introducing legislation concerning the Food Stamp Program and the electronic benefit transfer [EBT] system, on behalf of myself and BILL EMERSON, the chairman of the Department Operations, Nutrition, and Foreign Agriculture Subcommittee, who is an expert in the food stamp and EBT programs. We are introducing this bill, along with other members of the Committee on Agriculture, because we believe that EBT systems, in which food stamp benefits are provided through a debit card system instead of coupons, are the preferred choice of delivering food benefits. The inspector general of USDA, in his testimony of February 1, 1995, before the committee, made it clear that EBT systems, while not eliminating trafficking in food stamps, were superior to coupons and a tool that can be used in tracking down persons abusing the Food Stamp Program.

It is vital that States be allowed to proceed with implementation of EBT systems for the Food Stamp Program. An element that is standing in the way of implementation of EBT is a Federal Reserve Board rule known as regulation E. This rule, among other provisions, would create a new entitlement to the replacement of food stamps for persons receiving their benefits under an EBT system. The bill we are introducing provides that regulation E will not apply to the Food Stamp Program.

The National Governors' Association supports exemption of State and local EBT programs from the regulation E provisions and have stated their opposition to unfunded mandates that are created by the liability provisions of regulation E. The National Governors' Association also stated that without this exemption, States will not be able to move forward with EBT.

For more than 10 years the U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA], at the direction of Congress, has been investigating the feasibility, cost-effectiveness, and general impact of using an electronic benefit transfer [EBT] system to issue food stamp benefits. Paper coupons are replaced and recipients use a debit-like card at the grocery store checkout. Counties in several States, including Pennsylvania, Minnesota, New Mexico, and New Jersey have implemented EBT and Maryland, Texas, Utah, and South Carolina have EBT systems statewide.

USDA has found that EBT administrative costs are lower than coupon issuance costs; that food stamp benefit loss and trafficking are reduced; grocery store costs are reduced; food stamp participants prefer EBT; and financial institutions also prefer EBT and their costs are reduced.

Law enforcement officials have spoken in favor of EBT because it provides an electronic trail of abuses in the program. While trafficking is not eliminated under an EBT system, incidental street trafficking is reduced considerably.

States want to move ahead with EBT. Regulation E rules stand in their way. Until re-

cently, USDA viewed regulation E as inappropriate for the Food Stamp Program. USDA, in May 1993, stated its opposition to the applicability of regulation E to its programs because those programs do not fall under the jurisdiction of that regulation; legislation and regulations for the USDA programs already have provisions for benefit recipient rights and protection; and regulation E may reduce benefit recipient's services.

However, in June 1995, the Federal Electronic Benefits Transfer Task Force, represented by officials from the Office of Management and Budget, the USDA, and the Department of Health and Human Services, stated its opposition to removing regulation E applicability for the food stamp and other assistance programs. This is very unfortunate and this position is contrary to the positions of the National Governors' Association, the National Conference of State Legislators, the National Association of Counties, and the American Public Welfare Association.

According to a 1993 Department of the Treasury study, application of regulation E for State EBT systems would cost States over \$800 million per year for Aid to Families with Dependent Children [AFDC], food stamp and general assistance programs. This represents an unfunded mandate to the States and many States have said they could cease EBT program planning and operations if regulation E is applied to them.

For these reasons we are introducing this bill today and urge our colleagues to support it.

H.R. —

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the "Encouragement of Electronic Benefit Transfer Systems Act".

SEC. 2. AMENDMENT.

Section 7(i) of the Food Stamp Act of 1977 (7 U.S.C. 2016(i)) is amended by adding at the end the following:

"(7) ENCOURAGE ELECTRONIC BENEFIT TRANSFER SYSTEMS.—

"(A) IN GENERAL.—The disclosures, protections, responsibilities, and remedies established under section 904 of the Electronic Fund Transfer Act (15 U.S.C. 1693b), and any regulation or order issued by the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System in accordance with such Act, shall not apply to benefits under this Act delivered through any electronic benefit transfer system.

"(B) REPLACEMENT OF BENEFITS.—Any regulation issued by the Secretary regarding the replacement of benefits under this Act, and liability for replacement of benefits under this Act, under an electronic benefit transfer system shall be similar to the regulations in effect for a paper food stamp issuance system.

"(C) DEFINITION OF ELECTRONIC BENEFIT TRANSFER SYSTEM.—As used in this paragraph, the term 'electronic benefit transfer system' means a system under which a governmental entity distributes benefits determined under this Act, or other benefits or payments, by establishing accounts to be accessed electronically by recipients of the benefits, including through the use of an automated teller machine, a point-of-sale terminal, or an intelligent benefit card."