

NATIONAL COALITION OF BLACK LESBIANS AND GAYS

Understanding the Organization

The purpose of this document is to provide guidelines for individuals working with existing NCBLG chapters or organizing new groups. This information is presented only as a tool and should not be considered as binding upon any group or chapter. The National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays is an organization reflective of diverse and creative individuals. It is through the expression of our diversity and creativity that the organization will grow and meet the needs of our community.

In an effort to present information in a clear manner the method chosen is to answer those questions most frequently posed about the National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays.

When and why was NCBLG started?

NCBLG began in 1978 by Black Lesbians, Gays and Transpersons in Washington, DC, and Baltimore, MD, who felt a need for an organization devoted to issues facing Lesbians and Gays of color. The first local chapters were the DC Coalition of Black Gay Men and Women, and the Baltimore Coalition of Black Gays, chaired by A. Billy S. Jones and Reverend Delores Berry, respectively. Later that same year another chapter was started, the Detroit Coalition of Black Gays, by Renee McCoy. These three chapters ultimately formed the foundation of the national organization.

At the time that NCBLG began, the Gay rights movement was less than a decade old. In that short span of time peoples around the world had been made aware of the oppression of thousands of persons based upon their sexual preference. Organizations sprang up across the country to address the concerns of this new minority. At the same time, however, these new institutions failed to recognize racial and cultural differences, and thus became, basically, white organizations addressing the needs of white Lesbians and Gays. Tragically, these groups also reflected the racist attitudes and behaviors typical of American society at that time. Persons of color were not allowed to hold positions of power to any significant degree, and were embraced only if they were willing to "be Gay first".

Lesbians and Gays of color who were not willing to separate racial oppression from sexual oppression found themselves needing an organizational structure which would allow for the addressing of both. The Gay rights movement was also a celebration of difference expressed through Gay and Lesbian lifestyles, and the creation of support systems for Gays and Lesbians. Lesbians and Gays of color needed a way of incorporating both celebration and support into their lives, especially when struggling against their dual oppressions. NCBLG was that vehicle.

Is NCBLG for Blacks only?

No. Initially, NCBLG was established to address the concerns of all Lesbians and Gays of color. Its first conference in 1979 brought together individuals of all races to define needs and develop strategies. At that conference, however, it was discovered that the needs of various groups of peoples of color were different, and it would have been impossible at the time to create an organization which would effectively meet such a variety of needs. The established chapters were primarily Black with the exception of the New York Coalition of Third World Lesbians and Gays which had a large Hispanic membership. It was decided, therefore, that NCBLG would focus its programs and outreach to the Black community, but, maintain strong ties with other racial groups through coalition work and other supportive and solidarity building measures.

Since outreach in local areas targets the Black community, involvement from white Lesbians and Gays is minimal. Whites, however, do join as individual national members. NCBLG welcomes and encourages this support, for the organization is well aware that oppression must be confronted on all levels, on all fronts, and that liberation will only be realized through the unified efforts of all peoples. Whites belonging to NCBLG are committed to the purpose of the organization and to the elimination of racial, sexual, gender, and class oppression throughout all communities.

How does NCBLG work?

The organization is governed by a Board of Directors composed of at-large members and representatives from each local chapter. There is a national office which takes care of the day-to-day affairs of the organization and coordinates national activities. An executive director is hired to run this office. Each local chapter determines their own particular activities as long as they are in keeping with NCBLG's bylaws. The national office and the Board of Directors provides technical assistance to local groups.

Every eighteen months (unless circumstances prohibit) a general convention is held for the membership. It is at this meeting that major decisions are made and structure is enlarged. Those allowed to vote at the general convention are: the at-large board members, chapter representatives to the board, and representatives elected from various caucuses established at the convention, i.e., men, women, transpersons.

Is NCBLG only political?

No. The needs of Black Lesbians and Gays are far from just political. Very much of the work of NCBLG is geared toward influencing legislative change. However, NCBLG is involved in all aspects of life and activities are, therefore, reflective of the educational, social, and survival needs of its members.

What are the purposes of NCBLG?

The National Coalition of Black Lesbians and Gays calls upon our Sisters and Brothers of African descent to join in:

Black Pride and Solidarity: The New Movement of Black Lesbians and Gays.

As a national organization, we are committed to building solidarity between Black Lesbians and Gays, Transpersons, and with our heterosexual Sisters and Brothers, with the understanding that an end to the oppression of Black people requires the full participation, dedication, and commitment of all.

We are committed to fighting for an end to Lesbian and Gay oppression, racism, sexism, class oppression, militarism, and all the barriers which interfere with our right to live in peace and harmony. We stand in solidarity with movements for liberation and social justice.

We condemn the increasing racist attacks against the Black community, and other People of Color. We condemn the increasing right wing attacks against the Lesbian and Gay community. We condemn the refusal of the Reagan administration to provide adequate funding for AIDS and other health crises, while squandering funds to wage war.

We are the **NATIONAL COALITION OF BLACK LESBIANS AND GAYS (NCBLG)**, a national political and educational organization, providing support and advocacy for individuals and organizations on issues affecting the Black Lesbian and Gay community.

PURPOSES

1. to actively work against racism, sexism, ageism, classism, homophobia, and any other forms of discrimination within the Black community and the Gay community
2. to create positive attitudes between and among Black non-Gays and Black Gays
3. to improve the working and social relationship between and among Black Lesbians and Black Gay men
4. to raise the consciousness of Black Lesbians and Black Gay men on major local, national, and international issues
5. to stimulate wholesome and soulful sociopolitical atmospheres for Black Lesbians and Black Gay men
6. to work cooperatively with other national and local Lesbian/Gay organizations in the pursuit of Lesbian/Gay civil rights
7. to work cooperatively with other national and local Black organizations in the pursuit of human/civil rights
8. to support the struggles for human and civil rights for all including --but not limited to--women, youth, physically challenged, senior citizens, prisoners, Native Americans, Asians, Latin Americans, et al
9. to promote coalition building and unity among and between Black Lesbians and Black Gay men
10. to pursue political power and recognition in non-partisan, non-vio-

lent, but aggressive ways for the survival growth/acceptance of ourselves as Black Lesbians and Black Gay men

11. to maintain and stress the beauty of Black culture and Lesbian/Gay culture, thereby projecting our motto: "As Proud of Our Gayness as We Are of Our Blackness"

What does it take to start a chapter?

In addition to adhering to the bylaws, a chapter needs to do the following:

- endorse the above listing of the organizations purpose;
- a group must have at least ten members in order to qualify as a chapter;
- thirty per cent (three of the ten) should be of the minority gender. If there are more men, then three of the group must be women. If there are more women three of the group must be men. NCBLG is committed to addressing issues of sexism, so it must be noted that all chapters should aggressively work toward inclusivity;
- annual chapter dues are \$250.00. In addition, each chapter is responsible for contributing at least \$1500 annually to the support of the national office.

What does the local chapter get for the annual fee?

Each chapter receives technical assistance in organizing from the national office, regular communication, ten copies of Black/Out, copies of the NCBLG brochure which allows for the insertion of local information and contacts, copies of the bi-monthly newsletter, technical assistance in fundraising, leadership training, and other material developed by the national office. Each chapter is also visited by the executive director at least once per year, who provides more direct assistance specific to that particular chapter. Due to financial considerations, however, this occurs only for chapters in good standing unless the chapter or group agrees to pay travel costs.

What does the national office do?

As stated above the national office is responsible for providing technical assistance to existing chapters. Further, it is the task of the executive director to represent NCBLG at conferences and to assist groups in beginning chapters. The national office also establishes and implements programs addressing the concerns of Black Lesbians and Gays, establishes educational programs and materials designed for Blacks, provides speakers to other groups and organizations, networks with other Gay and Lesbian groups, lobbies for legislative change, maintains a mailing list of over 2500 individuals, answers mail from individuals around the world seeking information about Black Lesbians and Gays, provides phone support to Black Lesbians and Gays around the country, and more. NCBLG's national office is essentially the center of organizing on a national level for Black Lesbians and Gays. The organization's ultimate goal is for the headquarters to be structured in such a way that it meets the needs of Black Lesbians and Gays regardless of where they live and its programs encompass many of the needs of that community.

How are the bills paid?

NCBLG is supported, primarily, by its members and chapters. Individuals can join the national for an annual fee of \$25.00. Chapter fees have been discussed previously. In addition, board members who are not chapter representatives are responsible for raising \$2500.00 annually per board member. Grants are also solicited for specific programs and the national office does ongoing fund raising. It must be noted, however, that NCBLG does not have access to many of the funding sources available to most organizations and must rely upon generous contributions from individuals for its survival. The office has been understaffed since its beginning and the need for NCBLG continues to grow beyond available resources.

What do Chapters do?

The most basic task of the local chapter is to be a support system for Black Lesbians and Gays. How this happens and what this means varies depending upon the area and the individuals involved. Below are, however, some suggestions which can be applied to all chapters.

Political Activities: invite elected officials to address a meeting of the group to discuss Gay and Lesbian rights; sponsor a voter registration campaign addressing an issue of concern to either the Gay and Lesbian community or the Black community or both; sponsor educational forums about political issues involving sexuality or racial oppression.

Social Activities: host community potlucks; rollerskating parties; bowling; dances; camping trips; house parties; vacation packages to interesting places, i.e., the Bahamas; poetry readings.

Social Service Activities: volunteer at local shelter for the homeless; help out at an AIDS project; begin a food bank; collect and distribute clothing to needy individuals.

As the chapter develops activities will be better determined by its members. However, in the initial stages the following suggestions may be helpful in deciding what to do at meetings. (This is based upon a group meeting once per week):

Week #1 - Open rap: Suggestions for topics: coming out, relationships, parenting, safe sex, AIDS and Blacks, surviving racism in the Gay and Lesbian community, violence, abusive partners, drug and alcohol abuse, religion, and sexuality, roles, self-hatred among Black Lesbians and Gays, men's issues/women's issues.

Week #2 - Video Night. Members come together to view a film or video which can be consciousness raising or just plain fun.

Week #3 - Informational presentation followed by rap session. Individuals representing special concerns are invited to share with the group. Suggestions: elected officials, artists, poets, writers, persons involved in special interest projects, i.e., housing, religion, civil rights, etc.

Week #4 - Business meeting and Pot Luck Feast. During the first portion of this meeting, matters concerning the business of the group are dealt with followed by a social where members bring a dish or beverage to share.

Note: if there are five meetings in a particular month, an additional rap

may be scheduled.

What else should we know when starting a chapter?

- Groups need to meet regularly, once a week, if possible.
- Activities should be advertised throughout both the Gay and Lesbian community and the Black community.
- Meetings should begin on time.
- Setting up and cleaning up must be planned ahead of time.
- Groups should meet at the same place every time when possible.
- Avoid depending upon a member's home for meetings. Solicit meeting space from local YM/WCA's, American Friends Meeting Houses, Unitarian Churches, Gay community centers, MCC Churches, libraries, bars and clubs, etc.
- Leadership must be clear, respected, and nurtured. Someone must be responsible for the group's activities.
- Communication is vital to the continued life of the group. Always have a sign-in sheet and maintain a mailing list. Individuals should be contacted at least bi-monthly and informed of the groups upcoming activities. Individuals who suddenly leave the group should be contacted by phone just to see how they are doing and to invite their continued participation.
- Finances can become a problem if not handled correctly from the very beginning. From the very first meeting it must be stressed that organizing costs money. Initially a collection may be taken to cover mailing and space rental. Fundraisers can be organized for future costs. A bank account requiring at least two signatures should be set up as soon as possible. A post office box in the group's name should be rented also as soon as possible.