

# ARCHIVES:

## Camille Hopkins & The Transition Policy

by Adrienne C. Hill

Fifteen years ago, Camille Hopkins became the first openly transgender employee for the City of Buffalo. Today, she is asking City Hall to adopt a gender transition policy in order to protect future trans employees from the discrimination and harassment she once suffered.

Hopkins began her own workplace transition in 2001. She says she gave City Hall twelve months to prepare for her transition because, “Since nobody else had done that, there was no road map.” First, she asked her supervisor and the Human Resources department to inform her coworkers and clients of her upcoming transition, and to schedule mandatory sensitivity trainings—requests she says the City refused. “I just didn’t want to show up one day with a different set of clothing, and then [have people] scratching their heads, saying, ‘What’s going on here?’,” she explains. By refusing to prepare those with whom she worked, Hopkins believes her supervisors left her vulnerable to harassment.

The conflict with City Hall only worsened after September 2002, when she began attending work as a woman. Although the city had declared superficial support for her transition, she says, “People’s automatic response when I would suggest something was ‘No.’”

As in present-day transgender rights debates, the most contentious issue in Hopkins’ transition was bathroom use.

“In order not to be pushy, I suggested a gender-neutral bathroom,” she says. On her floor, “...there was a janitor’s closet, with a sink, a toilet, and some kind of janitor’s work bowl. And it smelled, and it was pretty messy.”

In 2004, she requested access to the women’s bathroom on her floor. Initially, City Hall complied, but after a coworker complained, her superiors ordered her back to the janitor’s closet. Hopkins refused, and took bathroom breaks at the City Court building in protest. As a compromise, City Hall permitted Hopkins to use the women’s restroom—but installed a latch on the front door, enabling her cisgender coworkers to lock her out. Ultimately, she had to threaten to sue City Hall in order to have the latch removed.

Before her 2005 sex reassignment surgery, Hopkins sought reimbursement from her employee health insurance. Insurance coverage for gender-confirming surgeries is now common and accessible to City of Buffalo employees. But in 2005, it was only offered by a small number of workplaces. In October 2004, the Buffalo News, catching wind of Hopkins’ request, released a sensationalistic article titled “Insurance coverage sought for sex change.” In it, reporter Brian Meyer deadnamed Hopkins, called gender-confirming surgery a “fringe benefit,” and implied that Hopkins didn’t really need the insurance coverage because she’d already, “...spent thousands of dollars on electrolysis and hormone therapy.”

Once the Brown administration took over City Hall, Hopkins’ conflicts over access to resources subsided, but incidences of harassment grew. After receiving a series of threatening notes, she began bringing a baseball bat and pepper spray to work for protection. “I would file complaints, and the city would take the longest time to address them,” Hopkins says. “And then, they often found that there was no basis for my claims—because I didn’t have filmed video, apparently.”

Meanwhile, Hopkins says that her supervisor repeatedly retaliated against her for overt displays of LGBTQ activism. These conflicts came to a head in 2007 when the City of Buffalo charged her with insubordination and conduct unbecoming following an incident in which she wore a gay-themed t-shirt for casual Friday.

“The city actually brought me before the legal department and made an offer: they could make the charges go away if I signed this agreement that said I would never sue them,” she says. She refused, and for over a year, the City neither charged her nor withdrew the charges.

Exhausted, she quit her job and moved to Portland, Oregon.

Hopkins wants the City of Buffalo to adopt a gender transition policy so that future city employees do not have to fight for resources or against harassment. She believes that standardizing the transition process will indicate to future trans employees that they are welcome in City Hall.

“It’s a welcome mat,” Hopkins explains. “It says, ‘We’ve prepared the way for you. All the work’s been done; let’s just fill in the blanks.’”

A gender transition policy is a short document which provides guidelines for transgender and transitioning employees. Transition policies typically contain a statement of support for transgender employees, a glossary of relevant terms, and a list of rights and responsibilities for the transitioning individual, their supervisor, and their coworkers. Policy guidelines cover crucial workplace issues, including: changing an employee’s name and related pronouns on workplace records, disclosing transgender status to coworkers and clients, establishing a gender-neutral dress code, access to bathrooms and locker rooms, medical leave for transition-related therapies, and policies regarding harassment, bullying, and discrimination.

Although it is unknown just how many workplaces have adopted official gender transition policies, Hopkins notes that when she wrote her own model transition policy, “I didn’t have to reinvent the wheel. I looked over probably about eight or nine of them.”

Transition policies have been adopted by cities like Seattle and Cleveland, by state governments, such as the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and by publicly funded organizations such as UC Berkeley and NASA. In the private sector, Hopkins reports, national companies tend to pave the way: “Nike and Intel. Starbucks. Kodak. Disney has provided surgical options for their transgender employees. So, glory be—a Mickey can become a Minnie, if necessary.”

Local trans activist Ari Moore believes that such a policy will be empowering for all City of Buffalo employees—not just those who, like Hopkins, worked in City Hall. Moore worked as a police officer during the years of Hopkins’ transition. Watching Hopkins, a white woman with a white-collar office job, encounter obstacles and harassment, Moore concluded that it wasn’t safe for a black woman with a blue-collar job, such as herself, to transition at work.

Moore speculates that, had a gender transition policy been in place during her years with the Buffalo Police Department, she may have chosen to come out. “I’m not naïve to the point where I think that would change people’s mind [about transgender coworkers],” she says. “But if there was a policy in place, administrators would be able to go back and say, ‘This is how we’re going to deal with this.’”

Camille Hopkins’ campaign for a gender transition policy in City Hall culminated in a protest on Tuesday, May 30, at this year’s Pride Week rainbow flag raising. But it began in 2015, when she moved back to Buffalo.

“I had heard that the city had become progressive,” she recalls. “I’d inquired if they had guidelines, and word came back that there weren’t any. And then, I ran into [Doug Fabian,] the Director of Personnel. And he tells me that they’re updating an employee handbook.

“So, I offered to help him. And he said, ‘I’d love that kind of help.’ But as I would get back to him every month or so, he said, ‘Well, we’re kind of stalling on this here.’”

Eventually, Hopkins was directed to Crystal Rodriguez, the City of Buffalo’s Chief Diversity Officer. Hopkins reports that over several weeks, she repeatedly called and e-mailed Rodriguez, asking after the progress of the gender transition policy, but never received a reply. “After a month or so of no responses, you know, they’re sending you a message,” she says.

As months of silence passed, Hopkins decided to try a new tactic. “When I knew that a month out from the rainbow flag raising, the mayor wasn’t going to make any announcement, I figured it would be a good chance to go public,” she reports. Accompanied by local activists, Hopkins staged a protest at the rainbow flag raising. In her speech to the press, she declared: “I am saddened that the City of Buffalo’s administration observes this day with words, but not with responsible action.”

Crystal Rodriguez says that although City Hall does not yet have an active gender transition policy, one will be included in the next employee handbook. “There is an employee transition policy written,” she says. “It’s in its draft form, only because the entire handbook is in draft form.”

According to Rodriguez, once it goes live, the new policy will guide transgender employees through obtaining insurance coverage for medical transition, set a gender-neutral dress code, explain how to change one’s name and pronouns on official records, and affirm transgender employees’ right to use the bathroom that corresponds to their gender identity. Rodriguez reports that she began working on a gender transition policy shortly after Hopkins consulted Fabian: “At that point, I immediately told Human Resources that as Chief Diversity Officer, I would take on [a transition policy]. I began looking at some best practices across the nation, but a lot of what went into my thought process was also Camille’s experience.”

Rodriguez estimates that the new employee handbook, transition policy and all, will take effect in late July or early August of this year, and says she hopes to reach out to Hopkins and Moore before finalizing the draft. Although Hopkins is cautiously hopeful, she says the fact that no transgender activist has seen the draft raises questions—both about the veracity of Rodriguez’s claims and the quality of the policy. “If it’s true that she’s already written these things, I’d like to see a copy of it, and see if it meets [trans people’s] standards,” Hopkins says. “She’s just so quiet about it, you know? That raises suspicions.”

Other activists wonder why City Hall didn’t consult the transgender community in the process of creating a gender transition policy. Moore points out that this decision has political implications. “I have told Ms. Rodriguez that unless a trans person is sitting at the table when the policy is being crafted, this makes the trans community—and rightfully so—feel very much out of the loop. Like, others are making this decision for you without any input from you. So, this thing of reaching out—I look forward to it.”

For the time being, Hopkins has elected to sit back and give City Hall a chance to fulfill its promises. But she warns that she will continue speaking out against injustice—something she learned about while working for the city.

“For the first two years that I transitioned in City Hall, I took the slings and the arrows, figuring that if I was just nice, people would see the value in embracing something new,” she says. “And then, when they banned me from the women’s bathroom, I essentially said, ‘Okay, being nice is not getting me anywhere.’ So, I found a backbone. Now, I complain, and work harder at getting things done.”

*Photos courtesy of Camille Hopkins. Top and middle, rallying for transgender rights in February and May of 2017; Bottom, at a County Legislature meeting this past April to testify in favor of an anti conversion therapy law proposed by Patrick Burke. (L to R) Matthew Crehan-Higgins, Burke, Paul Morgan, Carol Speser, Hopkins, and Bryan Ball.*

