

Boston No Longer Requires Gender on Marriage Certificates

By Chris Lisinski

State House News Service

Bostonians will no longer have to identify their sex or gender on marriage certificates, and city workers will operate under new guidance designed to better acknowledge varied gender identities, officials announced Tuesday.

The city launched “gender aware guidelines and standards” for a variety of services, aiming to promote more inclusive language and communication involving residents who identify as transgender or nonbinary, according to Chief of Equity and Inclusion Mariangely Solis Cervera.

And in a related step, City Hall on Tuesday began “removing any gender markers for marriage certificates,” Solis Cervera said.

City officials pitched the changes as a way to mitigate the discrimination and marginalization that LGBTQ residents can face, particularly transgender and nonbinary people of color.

“Almost at the 20th anniversary of same-sex marriage in the state of Massachusetts, the city of Boston is taking yet another step in ensuring that our city is more equitable and inclusive of everyone,” Solis Cervera said at a press conference.

Mayor Michelle Wu in a statement called the change “a huge step in building a City that is truly inclusive.”

About 5,000 couples apply for marriage licenses in Boston each year, according to City Registrar Paul Chong. The very first

gender-free marriage certificate went to Kimberly Rhoten, the director of policy and strategic initiatives in the mayor's office of returning citizens.

"A marriage certificate is a symbol of love and commitment. But unfortunately, for people like me, their certificate's outdated and narrow gender markers were a glaring reminder that our city still had a long way to go to acknowledging our existence," Rhoten, who identifies as nonbinary, said. "They were a subtle, yet powerful, message that our love, our relationships and our identities were somehow less valid and less recognized underneath the eyes of the law and the city of Boston."

"Your efforts have not only changed a piece of paper, you have changed lives," Rhoten added. "You've made it easier for people like me to live authentically and love openly."

Rhoten got married on June 10, and Chong ended the press conference by presenting an updated marriage certificate that does not list any sex or gender.

"This is the first [gender-free] marriage certificate, and I think it's fitting because you are such an important part of making these changes happen," Chong, who officiated Rhoten's wedding, said.

Boston residents who want to acquire an updated marriage license that does not list sex or gender identification can contact the Registry for a new copy.

It was not immediately clear Tuesday if residents who want to list a sex or gender on their marriage certificates can do so.

Julia Gutierrez, the city's chief digital officer, said the new standards for employees fall into two buckets. The first part provides workers with guidelines on when it's appropriate to ask about someone's gender identity, limiting it to "absolutely necessary" instances such as those required by

state or federal regulations. The second piece focuses on helping the city better collect gender data and more respectfully discuss topics such as pronouns and chosen names with constituents.

Residents can provide feedback to the new standards online or by emailing techgovernance@boston.gov.

“Just as the language for talking about gender dynamic changes over time, we expect to regularly review and continuously improve the standards and guidelines in response to the feedback that we receive,” Gutierrez said.

The new Boston gender guidelines and standards published Tuesday build on a 2020 ordinance, filed by City Councilor Liz Breadon and then-Councilor Wu, calling for gender inclusivity on city forms as well as a more recent amendment from Councilor Gabriela Coletta.

Coletta recounted challenges faced by her North End liaison, Jack Imbergamo, who identifies as transgender. While Imbergamo was being hired, Coletta said, the only option on city employment forms was to use his legal name from before his transition, sometimes referred to as a “deadname.”

“It’s a small thing to some folks, but it is a huge thing to folks going through their own journey in how they identify,” Coletta said. “It was traumatizing. Let’s be real, it was traumatizing to have to live through that. In the process of trying to get his emails, his deadname emerged as well.”

Coletta said the changes to city policy represent a “huge deal” that will be “so, so important to many folks coming through the doors of City Hall.”

State elected officials have been weighing policy changes to make government services more accommodating for transgender and nonbinary residents. In 2019, the Registry of Motor Vehicles began allowing drivers to select a “Gender X” option

on licenses and state ID cards.

The Senate in July approved legislation that would codify that practice in law and expand similar options to other state forms and documents. That bill (S 2425) would also allow people to retroactively change the gender listed on their marriage license if the marriage is still intact and their spouse consents.

Senators have approved some version of the legislation in multiple sessions, but it has not earned support from top House Democrats.