

Town clerk in N.Y. resigns over new gay marriage law

by [Paul Riede](#)

July 21, 2011

Granby, N.Y. (RNS) Ruth Sheldon was knee-deep in work. As town clerk in Granby in upstate Oswego County, she was busy with the census of the town's dogs.

Workers were going door to door, counting canines and letting people know that every dog over 4 months old needs a license. As the project progresses, piles of paperwork land on Sheldon's desk for processing. And then there were those phone calls. "I'm getting so many distractions from these reporters and so forth that are calling, and I have an enormous amount of work to do," she said.

The reporters weren't interested in the dog census. They were calling about her decision to resign her post rather than honor the state's same-sex marriage law. Her last day is Saturday (July 23) -- the day before the law goes into effect.

Every time the phone rang, Sheldon, 65, had to shift gears from counting dogs to discussing matters of law and faith. Like the other 931 town clerks across the state, she is suddenly on the front lines of an issue that is drawing international attention.

Sheldon, a 16-year-veteran of the office, is the second clerk to submit her resignation since same-sex marriage was legalized in New York last month. Laura Fotusky, clerk of Barker in Broome County, was the first.

Some clerks, like John Copanas of Syracuse, have embraced the opportunity to issue licenses to couples eager to wed. Copanas will be working Sunday to help those who want to get a jump on the process.

Others have wrestled over whether their religious beliefs should trump their civic duty.

Rosemary Centi, the clerk in Guilderland, outside of Albany, will continue in her job despite her religious concerns. She says she will issue marriage licenses but that she will no longer perform marriage ceremonies.

Barbara MacEwen, the town clerk of Volney, Oswego County, had considered resigning but decided to stay on. She is a friend of Sheldon's and spoke with her before Sheldon submitted her resignation. "She told me what she was planning on doing, and I said, `If that's the way the Lord is leading you, then that's what you should be doing,'" MacEwen said.

Sheldon said her decision was a difficult but obvious one. She believes the Bible expressly forbids homosexuality, and that is all she needs to know. "I believe the Bible is the word of God," she said. "I could not violate my conscience and my faith by signing a document that I feel I cannot sign."

It is quite possible that Sheldon would never have been faced with the reality of signing a same-sex marriage certificate. She has signed only 12 marriage licenses this year -- and all last year she signed 13.

But she says she couldn't take that chance.

"If I had to come to work every day with trepidation that somebody might come in asking for that kind of license, it would be very difficult to do my job," she said. "And if I recommended that they go to another town or city clerk I would be opening myself up to discrimination, and it's not my desire to discriminate against other people."

Sheldon, a member of the Fulton (N.Y.) Alliance Church, says she didn't want to comment on whether same-sex marriage is a civil rights issue. "If you ask black people they will tell you that they don't think it is a civil rights issue," she said. "I don't think it's for me to say. I'm standing on the word of God."

She said she is giving up a job she loves and a salary and health insurance package of \$32,760 a year. She lives with her husband, Robert, a retired dairy farmer, and they will celebrate their 38th wedding anniversary next month. "I know how to live on a little and I know how to live in abundance, and if I have to live on a little then that will be it," she said.

Granby Town Supervisor Ed Williamson said he respects Sheldon's stance and accepted her resignation with regret. But he said if he were in her position he would act differently.

"My own personal belief is I would sign (the licenses)," he said. "I feel that because these people pay taxes like anybody else, who are we to tell them how to live?"

Bruce Carter, president of the CNY (Central New York) Pride Task Force, said Sheldon is doing the appropriate thing. "She has the right to her religious beliefs. She just doesn't have the right to impose them on other people," he said.