

# Equality Forum Brings Together Candidates Vying to Represent the Massachusetts Sixth Congressional District

Story By **Keith Spencer** with Photos by **John Andrews** of **Social Palates**

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Five candidates vying to represent the Massachusetts Sixth Congressional District attended the Equality Forum sponsored by Go Out Loud on June 20. Photo Courtesy of Social Palates

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**SALEM** – **Go Out Loud** hosted a first of its kind Equality Forum on Friday that featured the major candidates of the Massachusetts Sixth Congressional District, including a gay Republican, three Democratic newbies, and an incumbent Congressman.

The Q&A style forum was moderated by **Boston Spirit Magazine** Publisher David Zimmerman at the **Hawthorne Hotel** in Salem where candidates were asked to delve into issues surrounding diversity and equality at home in the district, across the Bay State, and affecting the entire nation.

Analysts have said the race is one of the top to watch in the country during the upcoming election. **Congressman John Tierney (D)** faces perhaps the toughest challenge of his political career with several candidates vying for a seat he has held for nine terms.



Incumbent Congressman John Tierney faces three Democratic opponents in a primary set for September. Photo Courtesy of Social Palates

First, the incumbent must mount a challenge from three members of his own party in September: Harvard graduate and Iraq War veteran **Seth Moulton**, longtime immigration attorney **Marisa DeFranco**, and **John P. Devine**, a one-time paralegal and contractor who has also held various roles at his father's company, North Suburban Transportation in Woburn.

All of the candidates worked the room before the forum commenced while Congressman John Tierney arrived slightly late from Washington, D.C.

Moulton seemed the most comfortable amongst the crowd, shaking hands and talking with as many of the forum's guests as possible. The charismatic Salem resident was flanked by a group of young campaign supporters. Moulton has certainly gained momentum in the race, raising a substantial amount of campaign funds for a newcomer, but is still looking to connect with a local, Democratic base that has strongly supported Tierney in the past.



Harvard graduate and Iraq War veteran Seth Moulton hope to unseat the nine-term Congressman John Tierney in a September primary. Photo Courtesy of Social Palates.

“I’m very happy to be here tonight,” Moulton told me before the event. “It’s exciting to be able to talk about this very important issue to me and the communities of the Massachusetts Sixth Congressional District.”

The Democratic nominee in the Sixth District will face a big challenge from the popular **Richard Tisei**, an openly gay Republican and former State Senator and Lt. Governor candidate. Tierney edged out Tisei in the final vote tally by just a couple of points in 2012.

Tisei was joined by his husband Bernie who sat front and center as his partner rose to speak first as part of an order determined by a random draw ahead of the event.

“I promise that I will not use my opponents’ straightness against them,” Tisei joked as he kicked off his opening remarks.

Each candidate was allotted ten minutes during which they could offer opening remarks, and must provide a response to three pre-determined questions relating to issues of equality.



Wakefield Republican Richard Tisei attended with his husband Bernie, and spoke out against his party's leadership & their stance on issues of equality. Photo Courtesy of Social Palates.

Tisei continued with his opening statement, addressing concerns about his party's flat-out opposition to LGBTQ equality expressed by members of the community while out on the campaign trail.

"My party in particular hasn't been very attentive to LGBT issues," Tisei remarked candidly, "and one of the things that excites me about this campaign is not only the opportunity to go to Washington to fight to change the direction of this country, but also to go and help bring the Republican Party into the 21st century on these issues."

Tisei also called for the complete repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), not just section three as was recently ruled as unconstitutional by the United States Supreme Court. He broke from the Democrats' view on LGBTQ youth homelessness, calling on Massachusetts and other states to ramp up efforts and funding as that would be "most beneficial" rather than taking legislative action at a Congressional level that may not meet the varying demands of different states.



John P. Devine has positioned his candidacy around being an outsider who understands the will of the people including issues surrounding equality. Photo Courtesy of Social Palates

A more timid and soft-spoken John P. Devine followed Tisei, heralding his roots in both Essex and Middlesex County and his outsider status in his opening remarks. Devine projected himself as the candidate who knows and understands the frustrations of the people of the Sixth Congressional District.

Devine agreed with Tisei, calling for a complete repeal of DOMA, but took it a step further as he called for the passage of a Marriage Fairness Act that would create reciprocity between all states that would legally recognize all marriages regardless of sexual orientation.

“It’s all about civil rights,” Devine said clearly and simply.

He was followed by Seth Moulton who rose to the podium to speak about his experiences in the United States Marine Corps where he fought to end discrimination of LGBTQ members as well as his family’s personal journey with issues of equality.

Moulton insisted we’ve come a long way since even 2008 when two Democratic Presidential candidates both opposed gay marriage, however, he also voiced his disappointment that his own brother, an openly gay reporter here in the North of Boston region, is still not afforded the

same rights and opportunities that he fought to ensure for all citizens as a member of the United States Armed Forces.

“I understand what it’s like to fight for equal rights in an organization opposed to it,” Moulton recalled

Moulton recalled the story of his friend and fellow Marine who also inspired him to speak out while serving with him in Iraq. Despite having the opportunity to be released from active duty by admitting he was gay under the *Don’t Ask Don’t Tell* policy, Joe returned for an additional tour.

“I think it took a lot of courage for people to stand up to Don’t Ask Don’t Tell,” Moulton said, “but I also think it took a lot of courage for someone like Joe to stand up against a policy and still serve.”

Moulton would go close by calling for a change of leadership in Washington, brought about by a new generation who are ready to roll up their sleeves and lead on issues the current Congress has failed to solve.

“Co-sponsoring a bill is easy. It’s like liking a post on Facebook,” Moulton directed towards Tierney. “It’s a nice gesture. You’re on the right side of the issue, but it doesn’t do anything to get a bill passed.”

“At least if you sponsor a bill, you’re taking some leadership and pushing towards creating some new ideas.”



Immigration attorney Marisa DeFranco spoke passionately about her work on the ground, in the real world when it comes the equality issue. Photo Courtesy of Social Palates.

A fired up Marisa DeFranco followed, speaking passionately about her 17 years as an immigration attorney in Middleton as well as her pro bono civil rights advocacy work on behalf of LGBT clients since 1988 “when the acronym didn’t even exist”.

“I want to be put out of business,” DeFranco admitted frankly. “I have been an advocate on the ground, in the real world, and I know I can make a real difference in these issues.”

DeFranco voiced her concern about a lack of funding and programs aimed at ending LGBTQ youth homeless, and believes advocacy at both the state and national level are needed. She also lashed out at the Department of Justice who she believes should pursue more stringent sentences for those convicted of hate crimes. DeFranco also voiced her advocacy to extend benefits and marriage equality across all states.

“I take this personally because I am part of an interracial marriage, and not so long ago that marriage was viewed as unlawful, illegal, and unwanted, so there is no one more passionate or with better experience on the ground,” DeFranco ended.

Tierney was the final candidate to address the forum, and voiced his continued support for the Employment Non-Discrimination Act and other legislation that would further ensure equality in the workplace for all citizens regardless of sexual orientation. He also pushed for additional

budgeting and legislative measures that would help to bring an end to homelessness among LGBTQ youth.

“We need to make sure we have the right majority in charge to move forward on these issues,” Tierney charged, seemingly ignoring his Democratic counterparts who voiced similar positions on the issues.

Instead, the longtime Congressman directed nearly all his commentary towards the Republican challenger whose party’s long-held beliefs often appear counter-intuitive to the equal rights movement.



Go Out Loud Vice-President and event organizer Christopher Sicuranza



All in all, the forum showed that all five candidates have the ability to offer substantive opinions and ideas on how the communities of the Sixth Congressional District can continue leading the Commonwealth and the entire nation on issues of equality

“As Go Out Loud continues to bring communities together, I’m pleased that we could host an important conversation on where equality still needs leadership,” noted Go Out Loud Vice President Christopher Sicuranza who also announced that his company has filed to establish a 501c3 sister nonprofit, Give Out Loud.

“LGBT youth homelessness, the elderly population, and family protections are topics that our members requested responses on at tonight’s forum, and will also be central to our pursuits with our new nonprofit, Give Out Loud.”

*For more information on their efforts, visit [www.GoOutLoud.com](http://www.GoOutLoud.com). Stay tuned to **NoBo Magazine** for more coverage of the Massachusetts Sixth Congressional Race and its candidates.*

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