

A chance to stand up against hate

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James Byrd Jr. Matthew Shepard. Joseph Ito. Ricky Birdsong. Won-Jon Yoon. Anita "Nicki" Gordon. Thao Pham. Ji-Ye Sun. Gary Lee.

These women and men, ordinary everyday sort of people, are all dead, murdered within the past five years because of their race, religion, gender or sexual orientation.

At this very moment, the House of Representatives has an historic opportunity to stand up against hate by passing the Local Law Enforcement Enhancement Act (LLEEA) (H.R.1082), legislation that will eliminate gaps in federal authority to investigate and prosecute bias-motivated crimes. A crucial vote is scheduled within the next few days. This vital legislation, passed by overwhelmingly bipartisan support in the Senate (S622) in June, strengthens existing current hate-crime laws against race and religion-based crimes by authorizing the Department of Justice to assist local prosecutors and, where appropriate, investigate and prosecute cases in which bias violence occurs because of the victim's race, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, gender or disability.

Why is such legislation necessary? Because as recently as this past April, a Jewish woman, an African-American male and three immigrants from India, China and Vietnam were murdered in Pittsburgh during a two-county orgy of racist violence. Because in 1999, white supremacist Buford Furrow issued a "wake up call to kill the Jews" when he attempted to murder Jewish children at a Jewish community center, and killed Ito, a Filipino-American.

Crimes of this magnitude transcend local communities and have a national impact. Therefore, these crimes demand a federal response.

Under current federal law, the government must prove a crime occurred because of a person's membership in a protected group (such as race or religion) and because he/she was engaging in a federally-protected activity (such as voting, going to school or working). This new legislation will eliminate these overly restrictive limitations and provide authority for federal prosecutions in cases in which the bias violence occurred because of the victim's sexual orientation, gender or disability. While approximately 40 states across the nation have enacted hate-crime legislation, only 21 have legislation with teeth.

In the Senate, this crucial legislation engendered broad bipartisan support. All Americans have a stake in effective response to violent bigotry. These crimes demand federal jurisdiction because of their impact on democracy itself. Bias crimes are designed to intimidate the victim and members of the victim's community, leaving them feeling isolated, vulnerable and unprotected by law. By making minority communities fearful, angry and suspicious of other groups _ and of the power structure that is supposed to protect them _ these incidents can damage the fabric of our society and fragment communities.

While bigotry cannot be outlawed, hate-crime statutes demonstrate an important commitment to confront criminal activity motivated by prejudice. We therefore call upon the entire New Jersey House delegation to join the Senate in giving the federal government the authority to act in a real partnership with state and local officials in combating bias crimes.

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