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SPEAKING UP

Bill will mend gaps in bias-crime law

BY MARTIN PEREZ, REV. REGINALD JACKSON
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James Byrd Jr. Matthew Shepard. Joseph Iletto. Ricky Birdsong. Won-Joon Yoon. Anita Gordon. Anil Thakur. Thao Pham. Ji-Ye Sun. Gary Lee.

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

The House has a historic opportunity to stand up against hate by passing the Local Law Enforcement Enhancement Act (HR-1082), legislation that will eliminate gaps in federal authority to investigate and prosecute bias-motivated crimes. A crucial vote is planned soon.

This vital legislation, passed with overwhelming bipartisan support in the Senate in June, would strengthen the law against race- and religion-based crimes by authorizing the Justice Department to help local prosecutors and, where appropriate, investigate and prosecute cases in which 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, Vietnam and China were murdered in Pittsburgh during a two-county orgy of racist violence. Because in 1999 white supremacist Buford Furrow issued a "wakeup call to kill the Jews" when he attempted to murder Jewish children at a Jewish community center and killed Iletto, 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 and because he was engaging in a federally protected activity (such as voting, going to school or working).

The new legislation would eliminate these overly restrictive limitations. While approximately 40 states have enacted

hate-crimes legislation, only 21 have legislation with teeth.

All Americans have a stake in effective response to violent bigotry. Bias crimes are designed to intimidate the victim and 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.

We call upon the entire New Jersey House delegation to join the Senate in giving the federal government the authority to act in a partnership with state and local officials to combat bias crimes.

Martin Perez is president of the Latino Leadership Alliance of New Jersey. The Rev. Reginald Jackson is executive director of the Black Ministers Conference of New Jersey. Charles "Shai" Goldstein is New Jersey regional director of the Anti-Defamation League.