

Earlier this week, President Obama signed into law the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, as part of the National Defense Authorization Act. This important legislation deters hate crimes by expanding federal protections and giving state and local law enforcement the tools to prosecute hate crimes based on disability, gender, gender identity, and sexual orientation. The bill will supplement the current federal hate crimes law, in place since 1968, which authorizes federal aid in cases of hate crimes committed because of a person's race, color, religion, or national origin. I have long been a friend and an ally of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community and I am committed to the cause of equality. In the U.S. House of Representatives I serve as Vice Chair of the House LGBT Equality Caucus, and on the Whip Team working with my colleagues to end discrimination of LGBT people.

Americans understand that hate crimes have no place in our nation. All Americans have a right to feel safe in their community. We all remember the brutal murders of Matthew Shepard in Wyoming and James Byrd in Texas because we know that these bias-motivated murders impacted us all. Yet, hate crimes continue to be a persistent problem: More than 118,000 hate crimes have been documented by the FBI since 1991. In 2007 alone, there were 7,624 reported hate crimes.

Currently, State and local authorities can prosecute the overwhelming majority of hate crimes and will continue to do so under this legislation. The special attention that these crimes require, however, can stretch local law enforcement resources beyond their capacity. Thus, the major focus of this bill is allowing the Federal Government to provide crucial federal resources to State and local agencies to equip local officers with the tools they need to prosecute hate crimes. The legislation also authorizes the US Attorney General to make grants to state and local law enforcement agencies that have incurred extraordinary expenses associated with the investigation and prosecution of hate crimes.

It is important to note, that this bill does not limit First Amendment rights of free speech and religious expression. The bill only applies to bias-motivated crimes of violence and does not impinge upon freedom of speech or religious expression in any way. This bill is about violent physical crime. It is not about and does not prohibit thought, speech or expression protected by the First Amendment.

The passage and signing of this legislation into law represents a comprehensive effort across political and organizational boundaries. This bill is supported by more than 300 groups, including law enforcement groups, religious groups, civil rights groups, disability groups, and

numerous other organizations: International Association of Chiefs of Police, National Sheriffs' Association, Police Executive Research Forum, Police Foundation, National District Attorneys Association, NAACP, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, Anti-Defamation League, Human Rights Campaign, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities, American Association of People with Disabilities, People for the American Way, Presbyterian Church (USA), United Methodist Church, United Church of Christ – Justice and Witness Ministries, American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Conference, U.S. Conference of Mayors, and American Association of University Women.