

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

NOTE TO MEDIA: *As President Obama today signed the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, the following 31 organizations issued this joint statement:*

History in the Making

It took much too long, more than a decade. And it came at too great a price: the brutal killings of Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. are just two among the thousands of crimes motivated by hate and bigotry.

But this week, the president put pen to paper and fulfilled a campaign promise, the signing of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, extending the federal hate crimes statute to include sexual orientation and gender identity along with race, religion, gender, national origin and disability. Our deepest hope and strong belief is that this new law will save lives. Now, lawmakers and the president have made an imperative statement to the country and the world: Our nation will no longer tolerate hate-motivated violence against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people.

We have worked long and hard for this and its passage is historic.

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting Program, there are nearly 8,000 hate crime-related incidents annually, and more than 1,200 of those incidents involve violence based on sexual orientation or gender identity. And even more alarming, while the overall occurrence of hate crimes is declining nationally, hate crimes against LGBT people have been increasing. This year alone, we saw hate crimes trials in the brutal killings of two transgender women, Angie Zapata and Lateisha Green.

As a result of this legislation, if local jurisdictions are unable or unwilling to investigate or prosecute hate crimes based on sexual orientation or gender identity, the Justice Department can now step in. And that's why the LGBT community never stopped working for this historic day.

This legislation not only has practical value, but is a symbol of our progress. It is the first time in the nation's history that Congress has passed explicit protections on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. We could not have reached this moment without the powerful support of our allies who stood with us every step of the way. We are deeply grateful to civil rights, civic, faith and disability rights groups, as well as law enforcement and district attorney organizations that worked side by side with the LGBT advocates. We are equally thankful to Congress, President Obama and members of his administration for passing and signing this bill into law.

While today we celebrate this marker of progress, we must recognize it as only one of the building blocks to full equality and demand that it be just a first step toward equal treatment under federal law in all areas of our lives. And we must focus on the next step.

The passage of the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act provides us with an opportunity. We must use this moment to educate and keep the momentum going so that we can continue to make progress on the local, state and federal levels. Yes, legislation

takes a long time — often years of work. Yet, our community is on the cusp of passing much-needed protections.

This week, we call upon lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, families and allies to take this opportunity of increased media and public attention on hate crimes to educate co-workers, classmates, neighbors, family members and friends about our lives, and about why we need not only their friendship and love, but their vocal support for a more just and equal America for LGBT people. If your members of Congress voted in support of hate crimes legislation, call them and thank them. Then ask them to be there for us again when the vote turns to workplace nondiscrimination, military service and partnership rights.

With your help and our collective pressure, equality is within reach.

When talking about the need for hate crimes legislation, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said: “The time for debate is over.”

She was right.

Just as the time has finally come for stronger hate crime protections, it is also time to pass an inclusive Employment Non-Discrimination Act, repeal “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” and the so-called Defense of Marriage Act, and ensure that health care, economic policy and immigration reform incorporate the needs of LGBT people.

The time for debate is over.

Signed by:

Jo Kenny, AFL-CIO Pride at Work
Terry Stone, Centerlink: The Community of LGBT Centers
Gabe Javier & Debbie Bazarsky, Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals
Marianne Duddy-Burke, DignityUSA
Toni Broaddus, Equality Federation
Jennifer Chrisler, Family Equality Council
Evan Wolfson, Freedom to Marry
Lee Swislow, Gay & Lesbian Advocates & Defenders
Jarrett Barrios, Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation
Rebecca Allison, M.D., Gay & Lesbian Medical Association
Eliza Byard, Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network
Chuck Wolfe, Gay & Lesbian Victory Fund
Marjorie Hill, Gay Men’s Health Crisis
Joe Solmonese, Human Rights Campaign
Rachel Tiven, Immigration Equality
Earl Fowlkes, International Federation of Black Prides
Kevin M. Cathcart, Lambda Legal
Leslie Calman, Mautner Project: The National Lesbian Health Organization
Sharon Lettman, National Black Justice Coalition
Kate Kendell, National Center for Lesbian Rights
Mara Keisling, National Center for Transgender Equality
Sharon Stapel, National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs

Justin Nelson, National Gay & Lesbian Chamber of Commerce
Rea Carey, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force
Paul Kawata, National Minority AIDS Council
Kyle Bailey, National Stonewall Democrats
Greg Varnum, National Youth Advocacy Coalition
Selisse Berry, Out & Equal Workplace Advocates
Jody Michael Huckaby, PFLAG National
Michael Adams, Services and Advocacy for GLBT Elders (SAGE)
Aubrey Sarvis, Servicemembers Legal Defense Network