

Testimony
Judy Shepard, President and Co-Founder
Matthew Shepard Foundation
July 12, 2016
House Foreign Affairs Committee
Hearing: Human Rights Under Siege Worldwide

Chairman Royce and Ranking Member Engel:

Please accept my thanks for providing the opportunity to discuss "Human Rights Under Siege Worldwide." I am the mother of Matthew Shepard, a 21-year-old University of Wyoming student murdered in 1998 in what became one of our country's most notorious hate crimes. On behalf of our family and the Matthew Shepard Foundation, which we founded 18 years ago in Matt's memory to advance acceptance of human diversity and dignity, we strongly support your committee's exploration of the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) people around the world.

Indeed, today's topic covers the exact work my son Matt dreamed of doing before his untimely death. He possessed a distinct passion for human and civil rights and was pursuing political science and language studies until his last day. But when he first told me his dream to do this work, I was heartbroken. I knew then that his being gay would prevent that career from being achievable. Had the events that took our son away never occurred, there still would have been endless discriminatory hurdles and boundaries for Matt to overcome in order to achieve his ambition of contributing toward real, lasting human rights advances around the world.

The most honest and straightforward reasoning for why an LGBTI-inclusive notion of human rights should be pioneered by the United States today is because we finally live in a world where it can be accomplished, by those who have dedicated their lives and sacrificed their safety to ensure a better future. My husband Dennis and I have been honored and humbled to visit more than a dozen countries on behalf of the State Department to spread a message of understanding, compassion and respect for all people regardless of what makes them different. We are very encouraged that there are now seven openly gay ambassadors among of the U.S. Diplomatic Corps, an opportunity we had never imagined could have been available to Matt were he still alive.

There are people all around the world already doing the necessary work to promote diversity and inclusion for LGBTI people. It is clear to me that the support and encouragement of our foreign service professionals is critical to their success. Dennis and I have had the fortune of meeting with these brave activists, one-on-one in their home towns and communities, and we hear first-hand about the need for more reform and more support. Very often they know Matt's story, and of our family's personal pain and struggle to inspire the change Matt would have wanted to see. We continue to do whatever we can to turn our loss into other people's opportunity.

In nearly 20 years of doing this work, specifically with our partnership with the U.S. State Department working in such places as Jamaica, Russia and Lithuania, Dennis and I know a few things to be basic truths. One of them is that sometimes all it takes to spark these movements for equality and civil rights is a designated time and space to talk about it. To lend a voice to those who normally feel silenced by fear is a critical step in

preventing what happened with our son. We need to promote human rights and civil rights for LGBTI people around the world before another family loses a child. We cannot wait for tragedy to inspire good intentions. These civic leaders, citizens and communities across the globe are demanding action, and it is our responsibility to meet their call with our own mission of equality and acceptance. We have the means and the expertise to do so successfully in a way that is in concert with our national values. To fall short of answering their call, by contrast, would be to walk away from one of the most important roles the United States plays in the global community.

After Matt's murder, it wasn't just the LGBTI community in the United States who called for us to do the work we do; it was the world. And without this worldwide support and that of U.S. embassies and consulates around the world we would have no way of knowing just how far this movement has reached, and more importantly, how far this movement has yet to go.

The appointment of the Special Envoy for LGBTI rights has been vital for the advancement of the existing position of the US State Department. The message conveyed by this appointment has been critical in emphasizing how important human rights should be in all situations - whether it is to advance protections for all of a nation's citizens under the law or merely the sincere attempt to change hearts and minds.

We know others look to the America for guidance and hope in achieving equality for their LGBTI communities. In some cases, it is not even the overriding goal of equality - it is the most basic goal of safety. The U.S. government sometimes sends mixed messages about how we ourselves regard citizens of our own LGBTI family. We think the greatest message we – our government – could send would be one of 100% equality for all our US citizens.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my views and experience as part of your commendable, and timely, hearing. Our family's best wishes are with you in any effort you undertake to bring into the fold of human rights every single person wherever they live, and whomever they love.