

Thank you Congressman Conyers, Members. I am honored to be here today to address this critically important topic.

Our nation's eyes are on Sanford, Florida following the death of Trayvon Martin. Our hearts go out to the family and friends that were left behind by his untimely death. On behalf of HRC President Joe Solmonese, the staff of the Human Rights Campaign and our one million members and supporters, I want to express our sincerest sympathies to Trayvon's parents.

This case is a tragedy. We don't know the degree to which racial bias played a role. That is an important question for the investigation, not only in finding justice for Trayvon and his family, but also so that we can determine how best to prevent another tragedy.

At the Human Rights Campaign, we have had a great deal of experience grappling with questions surrounding the role bias plays in violence acts. Bias-motivated violence takes many forms—it can be based on race, religion, gender, gender identity, disability or sexual orientation. We have lost Matthew Shepard, Angie Zapata, Sean Kennedy and countless others to hate crimes due to the victims' sexual orientation or gender identity. Not a week goes by in which we do not face violent crime targeted at lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons because of who they are. Recently, in DC, for example, we have seen a rash of violent crimes against transgender women that remain unsolved.

When these crimes occur, they have a broad impact beyond the physical victim. Bias motivated crimes terrorize an entire community. Individuals feel less safe, less secure and less free. As we see with the incredible national response to Trayvon's death, or as we saw with the deaths of James Byrd Jr and Matthew Shepard, these specific incidents have a much broader impact.

Congress and President Obama have recognized the distinct nature of hate crimes—that bias motivated violence is particularly reprehensible and requires a broader response.

After more than a decade of debate, in 2009, the President signed the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crime Prevention Act, authored by Congressman Conyers. The Shepard-Byrd Act provides badly needed authority to expand the federal government's ability to investigate and prosecute hate crimes.

Since enactment of the bill, the Civil Right Division of the Department of Justice, along with the FBI, have conducted trainings on the new law across our nation – starting in the 5 states that do not have hate crime laws.

Individuals like Matthew Shepard's mom, Judy Shepard, and the head of the Laramie, Wyoming police department at the time of Matthew's death, Dave O'Malley, have spoken to law enforcement and prosecutors at these trainings about their experience with the impact of hate crimes.

Under the Shepard-Byrd Act, the Department of Justice has brought 8 cases, charged 27 defendants and convicted 10 individuals for committing hate crimes. Most recently, 3 men in Mississippi were convicted after they beat and used a truck to run over an African American man.

One of the defendants in that case called friends immediately after the assault "to brag" about the incident.

According to the most recent hate crime statistics from the FBI, which significantly undercount the number of hate crimes occurring in the US, there were 6,624 single bias motivated incidents in the U.S in 2010. Nearly half were motivated by a racial bias, one fifth were motivated by a religious bias, another fifth were motivated by a sexual orientation bias, and over 12 percent were motivated by an ethnicity/national origin bias.

These numbers were voluntarily reported to the FBI by state and local law enforcement. Disturbingly, thousands of law enforcement agencies nationwide did not report to the FBI, including at least three jurisdictions with populations of 250,000 or more and at least twelve jurisdictions with populations of 100,000 to 250,000.

The Shepard-Byrd Act also requires the FBI to collect statistics on hate crimes based on gender or gender identity. Implementation of that requirement is still pending and will hopefully begin in 2013.

Our nation cannot afford the burden of hate crimes -- whether they be in Shenandoah, Pennsylvania, Queens, New York or Alpena, Arkansas.

Because of the Shepard-Byrd Act, the FBI and Department of Justice have jurisdiction to investigate Trayvon's murder. Because of the courage of Trayvon's parents and the voices of millions of Americans, federal, state and local authorities have no choice but to seek justice for Trayvon. The nation is watching.