

Gays will continue the fight for hate crimes protection

December 7, 2007

LGBT rights groups in the United States have expressed their disappointment that new hate crimes legislation will not be passed by the US Senate.

The Matthew Shepard Act would have extended federal grants to local law enforcement agencies in order to more thoroughly investigate and prosecute domestic terror crimes that target individuals based on disability, sexual orientation, gender or gender identity.

Under existing hate crimes laws, such grants are routinely provided to local agencies for similar crimes which target victims based on race, colour, national origin or religion.

However, the hate crimes provisions had been attached to a defence spending bill, and it has now been dropped by the Senate because it could not attract enough support.

Human Rights Campaign, an LGBT rights organisation, had led efforts to get the legislation passed.

In May the US House of Representatives passed the Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act with a strong bipartisan vote of 237-180.

The Senate approved the nearly-identical Matthew Shepard Act as an amendment to the Department of Defence Authorisation bill on a voice vote.

"Today's decision is deeply disappointing, especially given the historic passage of hate crimes legislation through both Houses of Congress this year," said HRC President Joe Solmonese.

"After more than ten years and several successful bipartisan votes, it is heartbreaking to fall short this close to the finish line.

"However, we are not giving up on efforts to find another legislative vehicle, in the second half of this Congress, to move the Matthew Shepard Act."

Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, said:

"We are deeply angered and disappointed by the decision to strip hate crimes provisions from the defence authorisation bill since we'd been assured by congressional leaders that attaching the provisions to the larger bill was the only way to avoid a Presidential veto."

President Bush had indicated he would use his veto to block any attempt to extend federal hate crimes laws to LGBT people.

"We call on the Senate to immediately advance a stand-alone version of hate crimes that matches the version passed by the House earlier this year and send it to the President's desk," said Mr. Foreman.

"When the President vetoes the bill, as he has repeatedly promised to do, everyone will see just how subservient this administration is to America's anti-gay industry. Force his

hand, for goodness sake, rather than hiding us away."

National Stonewall Democrats issued the following statement:

"Democrats in both the US House and Senate support passage of the Matthew Shepard Act.

"The Democratic leadership, which guided this legislation to successful passage in their respective chambers, are now burdened with a moral obligation to see their work completed.

"If the National Defence Authorisation Act is not the appropriate vehicle for passage, then we encourage the Democratic leadership to work with our community to find the most expedient way to place this legislation on the President's desk within this Congress."

Research has proven that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in the US are disproportionately affected by hate violence.

LGB people are more likely to be victims of hate-motivated physical assaults than other minorities, including African Americans, Jews and Muslims.

According to the FBI, 14 percent of hate crime victims in 2005 were victims of crimes motivated by hatred of lesbian, gay or bisexual people.

Moreover, reports produced by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (1984 –1993) and the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programmes (1994 –present) have documented more than 35,000 anti-LGBT crimes over the last 22 years.

A 2007 poll conducted by Peter Hart Research associates found that three out of four Americans supported the expansion of federal hate crimes law to include crimes based on disability, sexual orientation, gender or gender identity.

Support cut across partisan, ethnic and religious lines.

74% of African Americans support the legislation along with 74% of Whites and 72% of Latinas/os.

63% of Evangelical Christians support the legislation according to the poll, as do 56% of Republican men.