



We must end discrimination against transgender people

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OPINION - 7/29/08

Earlier this month, Angie Zapata, an 18-year-old transgender Latina woman was found brutally beaten to death in her apartment in Colorado. Angie was often the target of harassment, said her family and friends; her death might very well be a manifestation of prejudice in its most extreme form.

Unfortunately, discrimination against the Angies of the world is a painful reality, one that highlights a need and presents us with an opportunity. The need is to ensure people live free of discrimination; the opportunity is educating our families, our friends, our neighbors on the importance of respecting other human beings, their identities and their lives. We also must educate our lawmakers to make it unlawful to discriminate based on an individual's gender identity.

A good step in the right direction was taken a few weeks ago, when the U.S. House Subcommittee on Health, Employment, Labor, and Pensions held the first-ever congressional hearing on transgender discrimination in the workplace. Members of Congress heard firsthand the devastating stories of discrimination experienced by transgender people. They also heard the abominable statistics that show that nationally more than 37 percent of transgender individuals have experienced employment discrimination.

Discrimination against transgender people is pervasive, and current laws and employer policies are insufficient to protect their rights. For far too long, transgender people have lived with the fear of losing their job simply because of who they are. This congressional hearing marked a critical step in addressing this travesty once and for all. We urge lawmakers to pass federal employment protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Employment discrimination — as well as discrimination in many other facets of life — is the basic and problematic sign of a society that still permits for human beings to be treated unfairly because of who they are. In her life, Angie experienced harassment because of her gender identity; transphobia might have been a key factor in her death. Clearly transphobia on many levels still pervades our society, and it must come to an end.

Angie was fortunate to have the love and acceptance of her family. In press reports, Angie's parents and her sisters accepted her fully as a woman. Her sister Stephanie said, "I loved my sister, she was my angel." Her other sister Mónica, serving as the family's spokeswoman, added, "We want the whole community involved to find this person who hurt my sister and to let everyone be aware that all she wanted was to be beautiful. We want this violence to end. Transgender people deserve to be treated with respect."

Respect, indeed. Respect that comes from the protection from discrimination. Respect that comes from the government showing its citizens that prejudice and intolerance won't be accepted. Respect that comes from the love of a family that understands that the pursuit of happiness is not a theory; it should be put into practice. Respect that comes from valuing our common humanity.

In honor of Angie and the countless transgender people who have suffered from hate, intolerance and discrimination, let's start by ensuring they receive the basic rights of being able to work and live in a society that prides itself of being the beacon of freedom.

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