

Obama challenges McCain on stalled hate crimes bill

Anti-violence group reports surge in anti-gay attacks

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Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) is challenging his Republican rival, Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), to end his opposition to a federal hate crimes bill following reports of a recent surge in anti-gay and anti-transgender hate crimes.

In a conference call Monday, an official with the Obama campaign's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Steering Committee noted that Obama is a strong supporter of the Matthew Shepard National Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act while McCain opposes the legislation.

"We feel it's important to point out the stark contrast between Sen. Obama and Sen. McCain on this issue," said Matt Nosanchuk, an official with the Obama LGBT Steering and Policy Committee. "In Sen. Obama's vision for America, there is no place for hate crimes," Nosanchuk said.

A McCain campaign spokesperson did not respond to a request for comment by press time. The Matthew Shepard hate crimes measure, named after the gay University of Wyoming student who was murdered in an anti-gay attack in 1998, would authorize the federal government to prosecute hate crimes based on a victim's sexual orientation, gender identity, gender or disability.

McCain voted against an earlier version of the Shepard bill, but did not show up for the vote when the Senate approved it in September, 60-39, as an amendment to the Defense Authorization Act.

The House voted 237 to 180 to approve the Shepard measure as a freestanding bill in May 2007. But the bill died in December when the House refused to accept the Senate's version of the bill as an amendment to the defense authorization measure.

Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.), a lead sponsor of the bill in the House, has called on the Senate to pass the measure this year as a freestanding bill since the House-approved version carries

over into the second half of the 110th Congress in 2008. Senate Democratic leaders, however, have yet to schedule a vote on the bill.

A spokesperson for Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) could not be reached by press time to determine whether the Senate plans to vote on the Shepard bill during the Senate's remaining weeks in session this year.

Rep. John Conyers (D-Mich.), who participated in Monday's conference call, said the inability of Congress to pass the bill last year was due largely to President Bush's opposition to the measure. The White House last year said Bush would veto the bill if it reached his desk, even if it was attached to the defense authorization act.

Gay activists, meanwhile, have said there's a growing need for Congress to pass the Shepard bill.

Sharon Stapel, executive director of the New York City Anti-Violence Project, which monitors anti-gay and anti-transgender violence throughout the country, said a sharp increase in hate crimes against gays and trans people seen in June and July appears to be continuing in August.

Stapel and Avy Skolnik, who heads the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, which is affiliated with the New York group, said recent incidents of anti-gay and anti-trans violence have occurred in at least seven states, including New York, Colorado, Texas, Tennessee and Ohio.

Damien Skipper, brother of Ryan Skipper, a gay man who was attacked and murdered at age 25 during a 2007 hate crime in Polk County, Fla., said during the conference call that Obama's support for hate crimes legislation is among the reasons his family is supporting Obama for president.

"I look at Barack Obama and see that he has the same opportunity to do what past presidents did on civil rights for other minorities," he said.

Some gay activists have expressed concern that Democrats, including Obama, haven't kept their commitment to enact important gay rights legislation, including the hate crimes bill, since they gained control of Congress in January 2007.

But Becky Dansky, federal legislative director of the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force, said the passage of the Shepard hate crimes bill last year in separate votes in the House and Senate indicates Democratic leaders in both chambers sought to carry out their commitment to the legislation.