



human rights *first*

30th
ANNIVERSARY
CELEBRATE
ADVOCATE
PARTICIPATE

June 4, 2009

Dear Senator:

I write to express Human Rights First's strong support of the Matthew Shepard Hate Crimes Prevention Act (S. 909). This important legislation will help to ensure that law enforcement authorities have the tools they need to combat violent hate crime in the United States.

Forty-five states and the District of Columbia have hate crime laws, but many of those laws do not cover crimes based on disability, gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation. S. 909 would close this gap by providing federal law enforcement officials with the authority to investigate and prosecute a wider range of bias violence, including that based on disability, gender, gender identity or sexual orientation. And while state and local authorities will continue to investigate and prosecute the large majority of hate crime cases, S. 909 would provide an important backstop by ensuring that federal authorities can provide assistance in state and local hate crime investigations and by authorizing federal prosecutions when state and local authorities are unable or unwilling to act.

Hate crime is a serious problem in the United States. As we documented in our 2008 report on *Hate Crime in the United States*, hate crimes in this country include assaults on individuals, damage to homes and personal property, and attacks on places of worship, cemeteries, community centers, and schools. In 2007, the FBI documented 7,624 hate crimes directed against institutions and individuals because of their race, religion, sexual orientation, national origin, or disability. Behind these statistics are individuals, families, and communities deeply impacted by these violent crimes. By undermining the shared value of equality and nondiscrimination, violent hate crimes also threaten the very fabric of the increasingly diverse society in which we live.

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Violent hate crime is a worldwide problem. In our *2008 Hate Crime Survey* we documented a rising tide of racist, antisemitic, anti-Muslim and homophobic violence across Europe and the former Soviet Union and found that the majority of governments in these countries are failing to adequately address the problem.¹ The U.S. has led efforts to confront this scourge through its foreign policy and through engagement in multilateral institutions such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. In addition to strengthening the U.S. government's response to hate crime at home, enactment of the Matthew Shepard Hate Crimes Prevention Act would enhance global leadership by the U.S. on this issue, enabling the U.S. to more effectively encourage other governments to strengthen their responses to hate crimes.

The Matthew Shepard Hate Crimes Prevention Act has been endorsed by more than 275 national civil rights, professional, civic, education, and religious groups, twenty-six state Attorneys General, and a number of the most important national law enforcement organizations in America. In the 110th Congress, sixty Senators voted in support of a very similar measure. Last month, we welcomed passage in the House of Representatives (by a bipartisan vote of 249-175) of the Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act (H.R. 1913).

We urge swift passage of S.909. Please do not hesitate to contact our office if you have questions about this legislation or if we can be helpful in any way.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Elisa Massimino". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line above the name.

Elisa Massimino

Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director

¹ For more information about our program to combat violent hate crime in North America, Europe and Eurasia, see <http://www.humanrightsfirst.org/discrimination/index.aspx>.