



**For Immediate Release**

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## The Equal Rights Center Applauds Passage of Hate Crimes Prevention Act

WASHINGTON, D.C., October 28, 2009 – Today President Obama signed The Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, extending federal civil rights protections by making it a federal crime to assault someone because of their sex, disability, sexual orientation, or gender identity. The previous 1969 federal hate-crime law only covered crimes motivated by actual or perceived race, color, religion, or national origin, and only while the victim was engaging in a federally-protected activity.

Since the FBI began reporting hate crimes 11 years ago nearly 80,000 hate crime incidents have been registered, with 16 percent attributed to crimes based on what the FBI categorizes as "sexual preference."

The Hate Crimes Prevention Act also comes on the heels of the first national study on crimes against people with disabilities released this October by the Department of Justice. The report, *Crime Against People with Disabilities, 2007*, found that people with disabilities are 50 percent more likely to experience nonfatal violent crime than those without disabilities. The study also found that about one in five crime victims with disabilities believe their disability was the reason they were targeted.

The Act is named for the victims of two crimes committed more than ten years ago in 1998: Matthew Shepard, a gay 21-year old was beaten to death; and James Byrd, Jr., an African-American man was tied to a pick-up truck and dragged to death.

In response to the passage of the Act, **Equal Rights Center (ERC) Executive Director Donald L. Kahl made the following statement:**

**“The ERC applauds Congress and President Obama for enacting the Hate Crimes Prevention Act. Although this country has made great strides to protect civil rights, hate groups have continued to grow by 50% since 2000, and horrific hate crimes—like the shooting at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum this year—still occur.**

**“People with disabilities, women, and the GLBT community encounter many forms of discrimination daily and the protections of this Act bring a fundamental right—the right to be safe—to several vulnerable communities.”**

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**About the Equal Rights Center ([www.equalrightscenter.org](http://www.equalrightscenter.org))**

Since 1983, the Equal Rights Center (ERC), a national non-profit civil rights organization, has identified, challenged, and eliminated discrimination. The ERC fights discrimination in housing, employment, public accommodations, and government services through education and outreach, research, testing, counseling, enforcement, and advocacy.