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April 12, 2007

Dear Senator,

As representatives of a diverse array of religious communities, we write to urge you to co-sponsor and vote in support of the Local Law Enforcement Hate Crimes Prevention Act (LLEHCPA). In the 109th Congress, the House approved an identical bill on September 14, 2005 as an amendment to H.R. 3132, the Children's Safety Act, with a bipartisan majority of 223-199.

Hate is neither a religious nor American value. The sacred scriptures of many different faith traditions speak with dramatic unanimity on the subject of hate. Crimes motivated by hatred or bigotry are an assault not only upon individual victims' freedoms, but also upon a belief that lies at the core of our diverse faith traditions -- that every human being is created in the image of God. While we recognize that legislation alone cannot remove hatred from the hearts and minds of individuals, the LLEHCPA will serve as a crucial step in building a society where hate-motivated crimes are deemed intolerable.

In 2005, the FBI documented 7,163 hate crimes directed against institutions and individuals because of their race, religion, sexual orientation, national origin, or disability. But these troubling statistics do not speak for themselves – because behind each and every one of these incidents are individuals, families, and communities deeply impacted by these crimes. The LLEHCPA will stream-line the process for the Department of Justice to assist local authorities to investigate and prosecute these cases – and permit federal involvement in cases that occur because of a victim's gender, disability, gender identity or sexual orientation.

Existing federal law is inadequate to address the significant national problem of hate crimes. Not only does current law contain obstacles to effective enforcement, but it also does not provide authority to investigate and prosecute bias crimes based on disability, gender, gender identity or sexual orientation. We are morally obligated to call for laws to protect all Americans from hate-motivated violence.

The LLEHCPA does not in any way violate the First Amendment protections of offenders. Hate crime laws do not restrict speech. Rather, they target only criminal conduct prompted by prejudice. Some critics of the LLEHCPA have erroneously asserted that enactment of the measure would prohibit the lawful expression of one's deeply held religious beliefs. These fears are unfounded. **The LLEHCPA does not punish, nor prohibit in any way, preaching or other expressions of religious belief, name-calling, or even expressions of hatred toward any group. It covers only violent actions that result in death or bodily injury**

Although we believe that state and local governments should continue to have the primary responsibility for investigating and prosecuting hate crimes, an expanded federal role is necessary to ensure adequate and equitable response to these divisive crimes. The federal government must have authority to address those important cases in which local authorities are either unable or unwilling to investigate and prosecute.

Now is the time for Congress to publicly reaffirm its commitment to protect all Americans from such flagrant bias-motivated violence. As people of faith and leaders in the religious community, we are committed to eradicating the egregious hatred and violence which divides our society. We believe that the LLEHCPA is vital to this struggle, and we ask you to support its passage.

Respectfully,

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