



Protect the Transgender People, Too

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A commentary by Matt Foreman, executive director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, Inc.

At this critical moment in our efforts to pass an Employment Non-Discrimination Act that includes transgender people under its protections, it is important to recall just why so many of us believe that no one can be left behind.

The last five days have been a grueling and defining moment in our movement's history. When we learned that protections for transgender people would be stripped from ENDA, an unprecedented groundswell of anger, energy and determination rose up to reverse that decision.

Monday morning, a letter signed by more than 90 national and state advocacy organizations that work on behalf of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people was delivered to Congress, asking for more time to garner support for ENDA as it was originally introduced. Some 2,500 congregations were asked to activate their memberships to call Congress. Students are also calling and e-mailing Congress and launching Facebook accounts to build support, working from 120 LGBT campus resource centers. Action alerts, blog postings and opinion pieces supporting a trans-inclusive ENDA have been flying over the Internet.

We at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force are immensely proud to be part of this moment. Our staff mounts a full-court press in the halls of Congress, on the telephones and over e-mail, to convince our congressional leaders that separating transgender people from the rest of us is unacceptable and unsupportable.

Why have we all worked so hard together and in such a dramatic way over this issue? For over a decade, the Task Force, and increasingly our organizational colleagues, has re-embraced transgender friends, family and colleagues as part of our community and part of our movement for freedom and equality. We believe the social disapproval and punishment of LGBT people varies only by degree. Yes, we can be fired if we identify ourselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual. But it isn't always about whom we love; sometimes it's about a refusal or inability to disguise ourselves — "pass" — as heterosexual.

The freedom to express ourselves and be ourselves is at stake when any one of us is punished and persecuted for stepping outside the rigid rules of gender conformity. Lesbians, gay men and bisexual people historically engage a whole range of dress and behaviors that challenge the traditional gender code. Women who are too masculine and men who are too feminine often suffer job discrimination and harassment at work, just as our transgender sisters and brothers do.

Two women loving each other, two men loving each other, men and women who may love either men or women, and people who self-define their gender identity or expression all challenge and change gender-based assumptions and expectations. Centuries of formal state-sponsored and

informal cultural oppression show that none of us are intended to exist, to thrive and to enjoy good and long lives.

There is no more fundamental human right for all of us than to be free to love and live as our minds and hearts guide us. But what is the value of freedom if we can't get and keep a job, something we all need to make for ourselves a decent life?

Discrimination at work hits transgender people particularly hard. A survey conducted in Washington, D.C., shows that 60 percent of transgender respondents report either no source of income or incomes of less than \$10,000 per year, a clear indication of the desperate need for employment protections for transgender people. Employment discrimination undeniably erodes the freedoms of transgender people, and all the rest of us, to live as we know we must.

Uncounted numbers of LGBT people courageously refuse to live a lie. This basic need to live fully as the people we know we are — loving someone of the same sex or transforming one's self to express the other long-sought gender — forms the foundation of our very movement for freedom and equality. Just as we would oppose any legislation that cut out lesbians or gay men from needed protections, we oppose the re-drafted ENDA that excludes gender identity. We dream that all of us, every one of us, will some day be able to be and tell others who we are, each minute of every day, and not face punishment, prosecution or persecution.

A groundswell of support for a trans-inclusive ENDA, resounding across this entire country, cannot be ignored. We call on congressional leaders and all people of compassion and good will to work harder to win passage of a federal law that protects LGBT people in the workplace so that every one of us can simply live.