



**National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Action Fund testimony submitted to the United States House of Representatives Committee on Labor and Education Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education Subcommittee and Healthy Families and Communities Subcommittee on the “Strengthening School Safety through Prevention of Bullying” hearing**

**July 8, 2009**

**Statement by Rea Carey, Executive Director  
National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Action Fund**

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittees,

We thank both Subcommittees for holding a hearing on the issue of preventing bullying and harassment in schools. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Action Fund — the oldest national advocacy organization for the civil rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people — represents a community with a substantial stake in the question of how to create safe schools. Among the groups at highest risk of aggressive bullying and harassment in schools are LGBT children and young adults, children and young adults who are perceived by peers to be LGBT, and the children of LGBT parents. Sadly, the nation has recently witnessed many youth suicides that were caused by severe and unremitting school bullying targeted at a student’s actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. This year, for example, Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover, an 11-year old in Massachusetts committed suicide because he faced daily anti-gay slurs and aggressive bullying. As such examples demonstrate, unsafe schools can have profoundly destructive consequences.

Congress has an important role in addressing bullying and harassment in schools. Bullying and harassment are often motivated by homophobia, biphobia (hostility toward bisexual individuals) or transphobia (hostility toward transgender individuals and other persons who do not conform to socially-expected gender roles). Such forms of violence are not confined to any particular state or region; they are national problems deserving of federal legislative attention.

The Task Force Action Fund welcomes federal measures to increase school safety that are cognizant of the specific prejudices faced by LGBT students and families. We ask Congress to pass measures that enumerate specific categories of protection, including sexual orientation and gender identity, and that promote inclusive education about sexual orientation and gender identity.

As one concrete measure, we ask you to prioritize passage of H.R. 2262, the Safe Schools Improvement Act, introduced by Representative Linda Sanchez. The Safe Schools Improvement Act amends the Safe and Drug Free Schools Act to help schools prevent bullying and harassment. Importantly, H.R. 2262 expressly addresses bullying and harassment that target a student’s actual or perceived identity or associations with persons or groups on the

basis of race, color, national origin, sex, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity or religion. The Act also enables states and localities to define other categories of protection.

This enumeration of protection found in the Safe Schools Improvement Act serves many important purposes. It provides explicit guidance to policymakers, school officials and teachers. For many LGBT students, inaction by teachers and school officials can often exacerbate bullying and harassment by giving the false impression that targeting students on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity is permissible. Furthermore, by expressly protecting students on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity, and on the basis of association with LGBT people, the Act would send a strong and clear message that schools have a duty to actively protect all students, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. We urge you to support the Safe Schools Improvement Act and similar measures.

Schools, by their very nature, should be places of safety, not fear. No child should have to endure what Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover and many others have faced; no family should have to fear the terrible potential consequences of unceasing bullying and harassment. We thank both Subcommittees for holding this hearing.