

Statement of
Chad Griffin
President
Human Rights Campaign

Congressional Forum on Transgender Violence
LGBT Equality Caucus
November 17, 2015

Thank you Congressman Polis and distinguished Members of Congress.

My name is Chad Griffin, and I'm the President of the Human Rights Campaign. On behalf of HRC's more than 1.5 million members and supporters nationwide, I thank you for the opportunity to testify.

We're here today because there's a crisis in America—an epidemic—that's raging across the country and ravaging our communities. It's stealing our neighbors, our friends, and our family. It's killing our sisters and our brothers, our partners—and even our children.

At least twenty one—twenty one—transgender Americans have been murdered this year alone. The youngest was just 17. Nearly all of them were women of color.

In 1998, the unspeakable torture and murder of Matthew Shepard made headlines around the world. That one defining act of violence crystallized for millions in this country and across the globe the threat of hate-based violence that many in our community face.

As Judy Shepard and I pointed out in a recent op-ed, the murder of 21 transgender people this year has been largely ignored.

This is inexcusable. This epidemic of violence is like a cancer—and as it grows, it's consuming our young people.

Lamia Beard, was a talented singer and musician, and a beloved daughter and sister. Lamia was gunned down in January after spending the day with her family. She was an excellent student, and a hard worker. Despite that, she struggled to find employment. After rejection upon rejection, her sister Kiara began accompanying her to drop off applications at restaurants and retail stores. Kiara explained she knew hiring managers weren't going to call her sister back

because she could see the look on their faces. After Lamia died, Kiara said “It came to a point and time when Lamia just wanted people to accept her for who she was. ...”

Zella Ziona wanted the same thing. Her courageous godmother, Yvette Kinchelow Smith is with us today. Last month—just about an hour drive from where we sit today—Zella was brutally murdered.

22-year-old Keisha Jenkins also wanted to be accepted for who she was. Last month—only 2 hours from our nation’s capital—Keisha was beaten, and shot twice in the back.

Each of these women died simply for being themselves.

Although the circumstances of each tragic loss have been unique, there are clear trend lines throughout this epidemic. It’s interwoven with other tragic realities that our country has struggled mightily with—including racism, sexism and poverty.

We fully recognize that there are many deep roots to this complex crisis. And although we don’t know all of the solutions, many of them are at our fingertips. Congress must act with a greater sense of urgency than ever before to make them a reality.

Congress must pass the Equality Act to clearly and consistently prohibit discrimination against transgender people in every area of their lives: at work and at school, in seeking health care, and when accessing credit or housing,

We must also make anti-bullying laws and policies trans-inclusive and meaningfully implemented, and we must help teachers and school administrators more consistently provide real support to the victims. Congress has the power to make this change and protect all students by passing the Safe Schools Improvement Act and the Student Nondiscrimination Act.

We must demand that state and federal agencies ensure that young people in foster care and those living on the streets have access to appropriate and safe emergency housing and supportive services. And they must provide better opportunities for education and job training to give them the opportunities they need to succeed. Passage of the Runaway and Homeless Youth and Trafficking Prevention Act is essential to ensure that transgender youth aren’t turned away from these vital shelters.

Congress should hold law enforcement agencies accountable by requiring mandatory reporting

of bias motivated crime data. Finally, Congress must commit to adequately funding the programs that empower transgender people, including those that provide job training and affordable housing.

This Friday, many of us in this room will gather in a church down the street to commemorate the annual Transgender Day of Remembrance. As a community, we'll reflect on this horrific loss of life, reading 21 names from the United States alone -- the most ever reported. This is fundamentally unacceptable, and our shared mission must be to change this tragic reality.

We must end this violence and work together to provide meaningful answers that ensure a better today and a brighter tomorrow – a day when transgender kids grow up living full lives, free to be who they are without fear of discrimination or violence. A day when they don't simply have an opportunity to survive, but the opportunity to thrive. They deserve the promise of the American Dream. And it's on us—all of us, together—to help achieve it.

Thank you.