

September 29, 2010

Testimony Congresswoman Eddie Bernice Johnson
Hearing before the Senate Committee on the Judiciary
Subcommittee on Crime and Drugs
“Crimes Against America’s Homeless: Is the Violence Growing?”

Thank you Senator Cardin and Members of the Subcommittee on Crime and Drugs for inviting me to testify on this important issue.

Each year there are hundreds of individuals who are targets of violent crime based solely on their appearance, means, or lifestyle. Each and every violent crime is traumatic. However, hate crimes are not only meant to physically harm the victim, but degrade all individuals of similar identity. They instill a pervasive sense of fear within that community.

Over the past few years, there has been a great deal of attention given to enhanced enforcement of hate crimes. Unfortunately, there has been a significant omission during this debate. One of the most frequent, but least discussed categories of hate crimes are those which target the homeless.

Between 1999 and 2010 there were more than 1,000 bias-motivated attacks committed against the homeless; 291 of these attacks were homicides. This is more than twice the number of homicides committed in all other hate group categories combined.

The thread that holds all these crimes together is the sheer violence and disregard for human life. In April of last year, a homeless woman confined to a wheelchair was repeatedly raped in Seattle, Washington. The man who raped her told her, “I can rape you and get away with it...You’re homeless? No one cares about you.”

Last year in my home state of Texas, a forty-one year old homeless man was sitting on a bench near the University of Texas at El Paso. Four unknown males assaulted him and lit him on fire. He survived, but lives with serious burns. This was one of six non-fatal attacks that involved setting a homeless individual on fire. These six attacks occurred in 2009 alone.

In 2009, there were 43 homeless men and women who were murdered because they were homeless. 90% of those deaths were caused by stabbing, blunt force or strangulation.

A misconception is that these attacks happen to belligerent bums. However, many of these individuals were sought out by their attackers. Some victims never even spoke to their attacker before they were killed.

In the 110th Congress, I first introduced the Hate Crimes Against the Homeless Statistics Act. This bill was reintroduced this Congress along with a Senate companion bill sponsored by Senators Cardin and Collins. The sole purpose of this bill is to direct the FBI to add the category of homelessness to their hate crimes statistics.

The National Coalition for the Homeless has done an outstanding job collecting data on homeless hate crimes over the past 10 years. However, federal recognition is essential in order to understand and curb this type of violence.

The federal government has fallen behind the states on this issue. Currently, there are four states who already recognize homelessness as a category of hate crime. Several more have legislation pending. These are not simply Democratically run states. Florida had a Republican-elected Governor and Legislature at time their homeless hate crimes bill was signed into law.

If Congress continues to not take a stance on this issue, we send the message that we are willing to look the other way. Treating homeless individuals rudely or inhumanely is seen as acceptable by far too many Americans. It is the one group where it is still acceptable in most circles to disparage. How do we end that if even Congress is unwilling to treat these individuals equally?

I thank Senator Cardin for being a true leader on this issue, and for allowing me to testify in front of the Committee today.