



National Council of Jewish Women

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May 1, 2009

The Honorable Cynthia Stone Creem
Joint Committee on the Judiciary
Senate Staff: Room 416B
State House
Boston, MA 02133

The Honorable Eugene L. O'Flaherty
Joint Committee on the Judiciary Staff:
House Staff: Room 136
State House
Boston, MA 02133

Re: In Support of House Bill Number 1728

Dear Senator Stone Creem, Representative O'Flaherty, and members of the Joint Committee on the Judiciary:

On behalf of the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) and our passionate and active members and supporters throughout the Commonwealth, I am honored to have the opportunity to declare our strong support for HB 1728: An Act Relative to Gender-Based Discrimination and Hate Crimes. By including "gender identity and expression" in the state's non-discrimination statute and amending existing hate crime laws, this bill would make explicit the Commonwealth's protection of people targeted for violence and harassment because of their gender, gender identity, or gender expression. We ask that you act quickly to pass this vital and long-overdue legislation that would affirm the Commonwealth's commitment to equality for all.

As an organization that has been on the forefront of social change for over a century, NCJW recognizes the quest for transgender equality as a fundamental civil rights issue. NCJW's principles state, "Discrimination on the basis of race, gender, national origin, ethnicity, religion, age, disability, marital status, sexual orientation or gender identity must be eliminated." We work towards a more tolerant and equitable society while keeping in mind that no community is safe or free when any community is subject to discrimination and lacks legal protection.

It is well documented that transgender and gender non-conforming people in Massachusetts and across the country face unconscionable acts of bias motivated harassment and violence. They are the recipients of disproportionate levels of discrimination in all areas of life – including housing, employment, schooling, and healthcare – as a result of immutable characteristics.

Unfortunately, this already vulnerable population receives no civil rights protections under Massachusetts General Laws. HB 1728: An Act Relative to Gender-Based

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Discrimination and Hate Crimes would remedy this by adding “gender identity or expression” to the list of protected characteristics under the Commonwealth’s hate crimes laws, ensuring that hate crimes motivated by gender identity are prosecuted as such. This long-overdue legislation rectifies the legal injustices transgender individuals face. It is essential that we make Massachusetts’ laws just and equal for every individual, and that we make clear that crimes of prejudice and hate will not be tolerated in the Commonwealth. Passing this legislation does not grant a new right or entitlement to the transgender and gender non-conforming population but rather rightly upholds the state’s responsibility to ensure the protection of all its citizens from discrimination.

As an organization inspired by Jewish values, our faith guides us to embrace and accept all people, and affirm the equal rights of all. Judaism teaches us that one’s uniqueness should be celebrated, and that there is holiness in our differences. In our morning prayers we recite the Hebrew phrase *She’asani B’tzalmo* (Genesis 1:26), noting each person’s innate value and holiness by thanking Gd for creating every human being in Gd’s image. With this notion in our hearts and minds, we know that our transgender neighbors created in Gd’s image cannot be treated as second class citizens. Civil rights laws and protections must be expanded to ensure equality for all.

For your information, the National Council of Jewish Women is a grassroots organization of volunteers and advocates who turn progressive ideals into action. Inspired by Jewish values, NCJW strives for social justice by improving the quality of life for women, children, and families and by safeguarding individual rights and freedoms.

We urge you to ensure justice for all, by moving quickly to enact An Act to Relative to Gender-Based Discrimination and Hate Crimes. We urge Massachusetts to affirm this long-overdue commitment to tolerance and join the 13 other states and Washington, DC, that offer protections to transgender people.

Sincerely,

Dena Snyder
Massachusetts Representative and Field Organizer
National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW)