

Congressional Forum Testimony from Harper Jean Tobin

Good afternoon. I am thankful to the Equality Caucus for holding this forum and for having me here today.

My name is Harper Jean Tobin and I am the Policy Director of the National Center for Transgender Equality. We are a leading social justice advocacy organization, winning life-saving change for transgender people.

This year when strangers learn what I do for a living, they often say something like, “you must be very pleased with how this year is going.” They are of course referring to the tremendous increase in public awareness we have seen in the last few years. People certainly are seeing and hearing more about trans people than ever before. We are making real progress both in public policy and in shifting the cultural conversation from one of fear and derision to one of understanding and support.

But the truth is, that for most transgender people, this year has also been deeply traumatic. Our humanity is being attacked by state legislators, school boards and even Presidential candidates. We are being impugned as deceptive, unstable, or worse, as predators and child molesters, all for political purposes. While we have known for years that trans people face higher rates of suicidality, when a transgender person dies by suicide now it is more widely reported than ever before, with so many publicly reported suicides and others lost to suicide who we may never know about. Most emblematic of the trauma of this year, though, has been the horrifying spike in public reports of murder of transgender people, and in particular of trans women of color. That is why we are here today, just three days before the Transgender Day of Remembrance, which is commemorated each November 20 to remember and honor transgender murder victims. What other community needs to have a day like that? But every trans person knows about it.

This year we have seen more reports of murders than any year since the community started counting and remembering victims almost twenty years ago. While it is not clear if the actual rates of violence are increasing or it is just being reported more often, or both, the impact on the community is

undeniable. We all feel it. And there is significant trauma and fear, especially among the trans communities of color who are most likely to see the crisis face to face. But in these communities and among trans people as a whole, there are also substantial reserves of resolve and resilience. We are all committed to working together to address this crisis.

And I think we also understand that violence is a complex problem with many complex causes and corollaries. To prevent and respond to it we must understand those complexities. But today we lack even basic information. We do not actually what know the murder rate is among trans women of color or all trans people. No one has studied it. The federal government has not studied it. In fact, we do not really know how many transgender people there are. We have some rough estimates that suggest that there are probably about one million transgender-identified people in the United States, but we don't really know because the federal government has been almost entirely negligent in studying us.

Because of this lack of federal research, not only do we not know *the extent* of the violence problem against us, we don't even know *the nature* of the problem. The murder victims who have been discussed today, and many others who have survived violent attacks have been victims of bias crimes, domestic and intimate partner violence. Some have been targeted as sex workers, and others in other situations. But we do not know the extent of each because the federal government has not studied it. Shockingly, almost no one has studied it.

Just today, the Williams Institute at UCLA released a literature review on Intimate Partner Violence and Intimate Partner Sexual Abuse of LGBT people. Among the findings was that there are virtually no studies of either among transgender people. Even the CDC's National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS), which includes sexual orientation, completely excludes gender identity, even though what few studies there are, point to equal or elevated levels of IPV and IPSA among transgender people. The same can be said for other research being executed by the Department of Justice, HHS, and the Veterans Administration.

Today, the Department of Justice will release its annual Hate Crimes Statistics. This will be the second year that gender identity statistics will be included. And yet the shortcomings of these statistics are well known. The data are collected and reported so inconsistently as to render them almost meaningless.

We are in the midst of a serious transgender public health crisis and the government is not studying it. We are in the midst of a serious transgender public safety crisis and the government is not studying it. To us, this is a moral crisis and no one is studying it.

At the same time, there are clearly actions we can take right now. One of the most important is to continue and redouble efforts to strengthen community policing and police accountability. We need thoroughly reformed police departments to help address this crisis. When trans people are attacked, our own community members are afraid to talk to police. It is the same parts of our communities that are hardest hit by anti-trans violence and by police use of force. In research conducted by NCTE and the National LGBTQ Task Force, trans people reported high levels of mistreatment by police, and correspondingly high levels of mistrust. While the Administration has taken important steps, we need stronger local and federal action for police reform—including using the power of the federal purse—trans communities need to be part of that conversation and the policies that come out of it.

We also cannot separate the violence trans people experience from the economic hardship and discrimination our communities face. We know that when you are more likely to be unemployed, homeless, or involved in sex work that's currently a crime—and because of the discrimination they face, this is all true of trans people—you are more exposed to violence. We need stronger legal protections, supportive schools, more job assistance, and non-judgmental help for our communities so people have more opportunities that will keep them out of harm's way. There is so much we can do, if we commit ourselves to it.

This Friday, when we as transgender people attend thousands of Day of Remembrance observances across the country and the world, it will not

feel like a great year for us. We are still losing amazing, beautiful people far, far too often and we need our government to work harder.