

Brenda Churchill
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December 17, 2020
Testimony on H. 496 - An act relating to bias-motivated crimes and
misconduct

For the record, my name is Brenda Churchill, I represent the LGBTQIA+ community for the LGBTQIA Alliance of Vermont as a liaison here at the Vermont statehouse. Thank you for inviting me to speak today. Just a quick recap of who the Alliance is:

"The LGBTQIA Alliance of Vermont is comprised of representatives from a range of LGBTQIA organizations and individuals from the broader Vermont community. Our mission is to anticipate and collaboratively respond to proposed & enacted laws, policies, actions, and community-level crises that impact on LGBTQIA Vermonters.

The Alliance provides expert advice to elected officials, political activists, state agencies, community based & professional organizations, and other interested parties on representing and protecting the interests and rights of LGBTQIA Vermonters. The group seeks to fairly represent the collective voice of LGBTQIA Vermonters through advocacy, community building, education, and representation."

In preparing my testimony for today, I spoke with members of my community, Bor Yang, Captain Garry Scott, and former representative Kiah Morris. I did so that I might gain more insight and have a broader view of what has led to seeing this bill brought to the house floor, and, hopefully, to the governor's desk for their signature.

When introduced, The Vermont Coalition for Ethnic and Social Equity in Schools, sent a letter to ask that this bill allow input from stakeholders. The Alliance I work with signed on to that letter, to bring a larger voice to this bill. Thank you for taking the time to listen.

Personally, I have been witness to hate speech that I hope you never have to have directed at you or a family member. My friend, Christine Halquist, stood up to a relentless stream of hate mail, hate speech, and direct confrontation everyday of her campaign, and for a long time after. Threats on her life, her family, her campaign staff were a reality we had to move past. I want you to know she read everything that was addressed to her via email or in letters.

She was extremely motivated to move beyond the hate, and actually seemed energized by the vitriol that we all witnessed.

Our friend, former Representative Kiah Morris, a judiciary committee member, has also been the target of hate speech and it has affected her life and her family as well. I do not need to go over the well known and publicized details of how that story continues to unfold.

Kiah and Christine are extraordinary humans and continue to show us how to move past the ugly underbelly of our current society.

Both of these people, who I can call my friends, have been deeply, tragically, and continuously assaulted by others whose sole motivation seems to be the disruption of the lives of people who are different than they are.

According to the statistics provided to me by the Vermont State Police, we are seeing an increase in the hate and bias motivated crimes being reported. The awareness, training, and community building that law enforcement officers receive are likely bringing those statistics up. Still this is a reality that my LGBTQ+ community lives with. Daily.

With the change in language, the addition of the civil penalties, H 496 now has what it seems to have been lacking. I would ask the committee to consider an addition to the penalty part of this act to include a diversion program to add accountability to the community and a way to help restore offenders in a way that allows the courts to have greater latitude and closure.

In closing, I would like to say that this bill goes in the right direction. The time really has come to show unity and support for anyone that is the victim of this level of bias and hatred. All marginalized communities deserve protection. The LGBTQIA Alliance of Vermont supports this legislation.

Thank you.

Brenda Churchill

Testimony before the House Judiciary Committee.