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SCHAKOWSKY COSPONSORS BIPARTISAN BILL TO STRENGTHEN HATE CRIME LAWS

WASHINGTON, D.C. - U.S Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) today said that Congress could not afford to wait any longer to strengthen our nation's hate crimes laws. Schakowsky pointed to national statistics that show that 50,000 hate crimes have been reported over the last five years, with nearly 8,000 reported last year.

That is why Schakowsky joined a bipartisan group of House and Senate members in cosponsoring the Local Law Enforcement Enhancement Act. This bill would provide assistance to state and local law enforcement agencies and amend federal law to streamline the investigation and prosecution of hate crimes.

"Hate crimes have no place in our society and this legislation will help make this goal a reality. It is our duty to strengthen our current laws to protect victims, who are chosen because of their gender, sexual orientation, race, religion or disability," said Schakowsky, whose district was the site of a shooting rampage by white supremacist Benjamin Smith on July 4, 1999.

"I am proud to represent one of the most diverse Congressional districts in the nation and I will work to protect and honor the civil rights of all our people, without any exceptions," Schakowsky added.

The legislation would expand current law to permit federal prosecution of violence motivated by bias against a victim's sexual orientation, gender, or disability. It would also make it easier for federal law enforcement officials to investigate and prosecute cases of racial and religious violence. Current law limits federal jurisdiction over hate crimes to federally protected activities, such as voting. Ten states have no hate crime laws on the books, and another 21 states have extremely weak hate crime laws.

State and local authorities currently prosecute the majority of hate crimes and will continue to do so under this legislation. This bill will increase federal jurisdiction to allow federal officials to assist state and local officials investigate and prosecute hate crimes. The bill will also provide states and local programs with grants designed to combat hate crimes committed by juveniles.

Last year, the legislation passed the Senate by a 57 to 42 vote as part of the Department of Defense Authorization bill, and was approved by the House in a motion to instruct conferees by a bipartisan vote of 232 to 192. Unfortunately, the hate crimes language was then stripped out of the conference report.