

Hate crimes worthy of own law

By Senator Betty Davis - February 9th, 2004

The recent celebration of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday brings to mind the ideal of love, peace and harmony. With these themes upon us, it is a good time to remember that loving and respecting our family, friends and neighbors are things we should do everyday, not just during the holidays or other special times of the year. Sadly, in contrast to this positive spirit, for many victims of cultural intolerance, the world has become a place of much fear and distrust. Many times this is because of our not knowing or celebrating the diversity of all the world's cultural differences. While we may never understand the hate that leads to senseless violence in many parts of the world, we can and should strive to help make our community a place where misunderstanding or ignorance is challenged by all of us through education and example. When this fails and senseless acts of violence occur, we must have swift and appropriate consequences in place.

The Voice of the Times published an editorial designed to dissuade any idea to introduce legislation for hate crimes, calling it, "useless, comical and dangerous." Its editors feel, as do other people, that a criminal sentence should be based strictly on the severity of the perpetrator's crime. Many sensible people feel that a hate crime is more than a crime against an individual. It normally is intended to terrorize a whole group of people. A crime against an acquaintance or friend might terrorize that one victim. But a hate crime against a stranger terrorizes all members of his or her group.

Hate crimes legislation serves as a means for enforcing stricter punishment on people who choose to impose on the civil rights of others simply because of their race, religion, gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation. What sets hate crimes apart from other acts of violence is the psychological damage that they leave behind.

The American Psychological Association determined that victims of hate crimes suffer the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and can take as long as five years to recover from these symptoms after their victimization. Beyond the psychological impact that these crimes have on their victims, the APA has determined that there are social and economic ramifications to this type of crime as well. In their testimony to the House Judiciary Committee on the Hate Crimes Prevention Act of 1998, the APA warned that entire communities, as well as businesses, potentially suffer from these crimes in the way of fear and safety issues. Here in Anchorage, the Alaska Federation of Natives has openly discussed moving its annual conference to another city not only because of the notorious paint ball incidences but because of the unsolved homicides of several Native women.

Sen. Geogianna Lincoln and I have introduced hate crimes legislation. Contrary to some opinions, this legislation is needed and fair. These are particularly heinous crimes, and legislation should be expanded to cover them.

As stated on the Web site www.religioustolerance.org: "A hate crime is more serious than a conventional crime because it abuses more than the immediate victim. When a criminal act is based on factors such as a victim's race, gender, sexual orientation or religion, it takes on some of the characteristics of a terrorist act. The victim and the perpetrator are typically strangers. The crime is not directed simply against one person; it is intended to target the victim's whole group. These acts have been referred to as 'message crimes:' violence intended to send a message to a minority within a community."

I will personally continue to do all I can to celebrate the diversity of our community and state. I will continue to help educate people who are unaware of the vast richness of our residents. But I will also continue to advocate for swift legal accountability against those who would victimize others merely because of who they are.