



*An Oklahoma Where Everyone is Equal*

## MEDIA STATEMENT

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Laura A. Belmonte  
Vice-President  
TEN – The Equality Network  
918.906.2134  
[lbelmonte@theequalitynetwork.org](mailto:lbelmonte@theequalitynetwork.org)

### **Rep. Mike Shelton Takes Courageous Stand for Equal Protection for All**

Tulsa – April 6 - [The Equality Network](http://theequalitynetwork.org) (TEN) commends Rep. Mike Shelton (D-Oklahoma City) for his courageous stand against members of the Oklahoma legislature who are attempting to deny victims of hate crimes equal protection under federal law. In the face of personal attacks and intentional distortions of his actions, Rep. Shelton remains steadfast in his belief that racial and religious minorities, the disabled, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people should be protected from violence directed at their communities.

Senator Steve Russell's efforts to obstruct the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act have been punctuated with deceit. When his colleagues on the Senate Judiciary Committee declined to send his original bill, SB 2165, to the full Senate, Russell hijacked an entirely unrelated bill authored by Wes Hilliard (D-Sulphur). Rep. Hilliard's bill, SB 1965, created a task force to study the Oklahoma Secondary Schools Activities Association. But Russell used legislative sleight-of-hand to delete all of SB 1965's original content and replace it with the language of SB 2165. Perhaps not fully realizing the monumental changes to the original SB 1965, the Oklahoma Senate voted 39-6 to pass Russell's language blocking enforcement of federal hate crimes laws. In a heroic effort to safeguard over 40 years of U.S. civil rights protections, Rep. Shelton assumed control of Rep. Hilliard's bill and refused to allow any version of Russell's obstructionist and bigoted legislation to be heard by the House Judiciary Committee.

Sen. Russell erroneously asserts that SB 1965 protects the free speech rights of religious leaders who preach against homosexuality. However, federal hate crimes laws in no way abridge 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment protections of freedom of speech or religious expression. Indeed, the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act explicitly emphasizes that only acts of violence, not speech, are subject to federal hate crimes laws. Russell's bogus claim that these statutes will

result in the prosecution of ministers espousing anti-gay biases is belied by last week's Fourth Circuit Federal Appeals Court ruling ordering the father of a slain Marine to pay court costs to Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church. TEN cannot fathom speech more hateful than that spewed by Phelps and his followers and yet courts have repeatedly upheld their 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment rights — a position that TEN, as avid proponents of civil liberties, fully supports. Rather than accepting Sen. Russell's fictitious arguments, let us focus instead on the tragic history of church bombings, cross burnings, lynchings, graveyard desecrations, gay bashings, and other horrible acts of violence against minority communities that necessitated federal hate crimes laws.

It is clear that Sen. Russell and his supporters are willing to use any and all tactics, whether or not in compliance with usual legislative procedure, to push this bill to passage. We fully expect the language of Russell's version of SB 1965 to be recklessly inserted into an entirely unrelated bill. We wish fervently that Russell and his cohorts were expending a fraction of the energy they are devoting to trying to upend two generations of civil rights legislation to addressing our state's \$850 million budget shortfall, ensuring that Oklahoma's teachers and police officers are no longer losing their jobs, and moving our state toward a future of inclusivity and prosperity.

####

[The Equality Network](#) works to achieve equality and to secure legal protection for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Oklahomans through advocacy, coalition building, and individual empowerment in the political process.