

# OPINION

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the <sup>Charleston</sup> **Gazette**  
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## Humane Brave action

**W**EST Virginia's House of Delegates now has the opportunity to add sexual orientation to the state's Human Rights and Fair Housing acts. The measure passed the House Judiciary Committee on Wednesday.

The protection for West Virginia's homosexual minority had already passed the Senate unanimously. Because the House version is slightly different, it would require another vote in the Senate to pass.

This action (SB600) has been a long time coming and is a natural extension of protections to a group too often targeted for discrimination or even violence. West Virginia law already makes it a felony to attack or threaten anyone "because of such person's race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, political affiliation or sex."

The House Judiciary Committee wisely rejected an amendment offered by Delegate Kelli Sobonya, R-Cabell. She wanted to make an exception, essentially allowing people to ill-treat people because of their sexual orientation if the treatment was based on the person's personal beliefs.

Delegate Barbara Fleischauer, D-Monongalia, rightly pointed out that there was a time when Americans used religious beliefs to justify racial discrimination.

Critics of anti-hate crimes legislation often argue that no group deserves special protection, and that the anti-hate legislation itself is a form of special treatment or discrimination.

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That argument is not convincing. America's system of laws accounts for motive and intent. The law deals more harshly with a person who commits premeditated murder than with the person who unintentionally causes a death. Similarly, West Virginians increasingly believe that they want a society where all people are free and safe to thrive and prosper. Behaviors that target certain individuals, whether because they are black, women, Muslims or gays are not acceptable. The law applies to majority groups, as well as minorities.

One of the gifts the United States has given the world is the example of a large, pluralistic society that lives and works together in relative peace. It has not always done so. Its black citizens, women and other groups have had to fight and sometimes die for equal treatment. But the progress is undeniable.

If lawmakers turn this bill into law, West Virginians may be proud of advancing this centuries-old cause.