

July 6, 2018

John M. Gore  
Acting Assistant Attorney General  
Civil Rights Division  
U.S. Department of Justice  
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20530

Dear Acting Assistant Attorney General Gore:

On behalf of the undersigned civil rights and anti-violence organizations, we write to express our alarm at a series of unsolved murders of transgender women of color in Jacksonville, Florida in recent months, and to urge the Department to take strong and decisive steps to respond to these crimes. These killings are part of a disturbing pattern of deadly violence against transgender people around the country. One year ago, Attorney General Sessions promised to take “aggressive and appropriate” steps to respond to violence against transgender people. It is especially urgent that the Department act on this commitment in Jacksonville.

Since February of this year, three transgender women of color have been shot dead in Jacksonville. Celine Walker, 36, was killed on February 4 inside a hotel in Jacksonville’s Southpoint area. Antash’a English, 38, died in a local hospital on June 1 after being found in between two abandoned houses in northern Jacksonville. Cathalina Christina James, 24, was killed on June 22 at a hotel in the Baymeadows area of the Jacksonville’s Southside.

Violence against transgender people is a national crisis, and transgender women of color are disproportionately targeted for violence. At least 28 transgender individuals were murdered in 2017. So far in 2018, at least 15 transgender individuals have been killed. Three of those 15 homicides have been committed in Jacksonville, making it the current epicenter of this crisis.

Further, we are troubled that for each of these three homicides neither a suspect nor a motive has been identified, and community members are living with the fearful possibility that these crimes are connected. To make matters worse, local authorities have impeded their investigation by repeatedly misidentifying the victim’s gender identities. Disrespecting the victims strains community relations and delays justice.

The Department has an essential leadership role to play in confronting acts of violence motivated by prejudice. Accordingly, we urge the following:

- (1) We urge Department leaders to publicly recognize and condemn this serious pattern of violence against transgender people in Jacksonville and the national problem it represents;
- (2) We urge the Department to investigate these three killings as possible hate crimes and/or serial crimes, and offer all possible assistance to local authorities;
- (3) We urge the Department’s Community Relations Service to engage with local community members and officials to help them work together on these cases and address community concerns; and,
- (4) We urge the Community Relations Service to support local community groups in providing appropriate training for local law enforcement on with respect to working with transgender people, and in improving relevant policies and procedures.

While less urgent than the above steps, we note with concern that Jacksonville has not reported any hate crime data to the Federal Bureau of Investigation in recent years, and urge the Department to encourage

and assist local authorities in Jacksonville to ensure correct and consistent reporting of hate crime data.

We appreciate your attention to this grave and serious issue, and we urge you to act swiftly.

Sincerely,

ACLU of Florida  
American Civil Liberties Union  
Anti-Defamation League  
Arab American Institute  
Center for the Study of Hate & Extremism, CSUSB  
Human Rights Campaign  
Japanese American Citizens League  
Lambda Legal  
Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law  
Matthew Shepard Foundation  
Muslim Advocates  
NAACP  
National Black Justice Coalition  
National Center for Lesbian Rights  
National Center for Transgender Equality  
National Council of Jewish Women  
National Council of Jewish Women, Florida State Policy Advocate  
National Council of Jewish Women, Greater Miami Section  
National Council of Jewish Women, Valencia Shores Section  
PFLAG National  
South Asian Americans Leading Together  
Southern Poverty Law Center  
Union for Reform Judaism