

WASHINGTON (AP) -- A House vote Thursday put Congress on the verge of significantly expanding hate crimes law to make it a federal crime to assault a person because of his or her sexual orientation. The legislation would bring major changes to a law enacted in the days after the assassination of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968.

"No American should ever have to suffer persecution or violence because of who they are, how they look or what they believe," said House Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California.

Pelosi noted that it has been 11 years since Matthew Shepard, a gay Wyoming college student, was murdered, on Oct. 12, 1998. Shepard's name was attached to the legislation.

Civil rights groups and their Democratic allies have come close to expanding the hate crimes bill several times in the past decade but have always fallen short because of a lack of House-Senate coordination or opposition from former President George W. Bush.

This time it appears they might succeed. The bill was attached to a must-pass \$680 billion defense policy bill that the Senate could approve as early as next week. President Barack Obama has promised to sign it into law.

The House vote on the defense bill was 281-146. Unlike usual defense bill votes, most of those in opposition -- 131 out of the 146 -- were Republicans objecting to inclusion of what they referred to as "thought crimes" legislation in a defense bill.

Republican Rep. Lee Terry of Omaha voted for the measure. Fellow Nebraska Reps. Jeff Fortenberry and Adrian Smith, also Republicans, were opposed. Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, also was opposed.

Terry said he opposes the hate crimes measure but felt he could not vote against the defense bill that included pay raises and equipment for Nebraska servicemen and women.

"We've got to quit federalizing everything," Terry said. "Criminal laws are best left to the state, unless it's on federal property."

Terry said he was frustrated that the hate crimes provisions were folded into the defense bill rather than brought up as stand-alone legislation.

GOP opponents were not assuaged by late changes in the bill to strengthen protections for religious speech and association. Critics of the bill had argued that pastors expressing beliefs about homosexuality could be prosecuted if their sermons were connected to later acts of violence against gays.

Supporters countered that prosecution could occur only when bodily injury was involved, and that no minister or protester could be targeted for expressing opposition to homosexuality.

Midlands advocacy groups that lobbied for the measure hailed the House's vote.

"It's been a long time in coming," said Michael Gordon, executive director of Nebraska's Citizens for Equal Protection.

"A wonderful development," said Justin Uebelhor of One Iowa. "We're looking forward to its getting on the president's desk."

On the other hand, Al Riskowski, executive director of the Nebraska Family Council in Lincoln, said the vote furthered a flawed legal approach.

"We oppose hate crimes legislation," he said, because the Constitution's 14th Amendment already guarantees equal treatment. Riskowski said hate crimes legislation establishes classes of victims for specialized treatment, with harsher penalties for their attackers and federal money and investigatory power spent on the cases.

All citizens ought to be treated the same, he said. If assault laws need toughening, he said, they should be toughened for all.

The bill also would create a new federal crime penalizing those who commit attacks against U.S. military members on account of their service.

Hate crimes legislation enacted after Martin Luther King's assassination defined hate crimes as those carried out on the basis of race, color, religion or national origin. It also limited the scope of activities that would trigger federal involvement.

The proposed expansion would include crimes based on gender, sexual orientation, gender identity or disability. It would ease restrictions on federally protected activities.

The bill would not change the current practice in which investigations and prosecutions are carried out by state and local officials. But it would provide federal grants to help with the prosecution of hate crimes and fund programs to combat hate crimes committed by juveniles.

The federal government can step in if the Justice Department certifies that a state is unwilling or unable to follow through on a purported hate crime.

The FBI says some 8,000 hate crimes are reported each year in the United States.

World-Herald staff writers Roger Buddenberg and Joseph Morton contributed to this report.

