

Phoenix rally protests LGBT discrimination

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(Photo: Loren Townsley/ The Republic)

A Phoenix rally organized to fight federal "efforts...to persecute and to discriminate against LGBTQ+ individuals" drew hundreds Sunday, with officials and activists ultimately urging equality and respect for all marginalized communities.

The Phoenix effort was one of more than 100 planned throughout the country in solidarity with the national LGBT Equality March for Unity and Pride in Washington D.C.

The marches were held on the eve of the one-year anniversary of the mass shooting at Pulse, a gay club in Orlando. The massacre left 49 dead and dozens injured.

Phoenix Pride, which hosted the local rally, typically shies away from making political statements as a non-profit organization, according to spokesman Jeremy Helfgot. But "where there are issues of injustice or issues of concern within the (LGBT) community, Phoenix Pride will act in whatever manner is appropriate," he said.

"The theme is unity, and the overarching message is we are our strongest when we stand together as a community," Helfgot said. "That means we stand together as a whole, whether it's LGBT or straight allies, regardless of religion or place of origin or legal status, and that's true regardless of the political climate."

LGBT Equality March for Unity and Pride

Phoenix Mayor Greg Stanton and Arizona Congressman Ruben Gallego cautioned against allowing officials to destroy hard-won gains in the LGBT and other communities.

In the days leading up to the rally, officials and activists had called attention to an executive order signed by President Donald Trump that weakened protections for LGBT employees of government contractors as an example.

They'd pointed to the decision not to include questions about sexual orientation and gender identity proposed for the 2020 U.S. Census, saying it effectively "erased" the community.

And they'd highlighted how the Trump White House broke away from a tradition set by the previous administration when it chose not to recognize June 2017 as Pride Month.

"There is nothing more patriotic than dissenting: Dissenting from hate, dissenting from bigotry, dissenting from a government that's trying to erode our civil liberties and your civil liberties every day," Gallego said.

"We are calling on this country to be at its best, not at its worst," he said. "We are calling for every American to believe in each other, not to hate each other."

Stanton said that, "when it comes to civil rights — not just for our LGBT, but for all people in the United States of America — we will not go backwards.

"We will only go forwards," Stanton said. "When you fight for civil rights, everyone benefits."

Reginald Walton, chairman of Black Lives Matter-PHX, said aspects of the LGBT community's fight mirrored parts of the black community's struggle.

"What brings us to the Phoenix Pride event is equality and unity," said Walton, pastor at Phillips Memorial Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in Phoenix. "We are standing against tyranny and the stripping away of rights."

A moment of silence was held for the victims of the Pulse nightclub shooting.

Republic Reporter BrieAnna J Frank contributed to this article.

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