

LGBT →

Pride Organizers Try to Keep Marches and Festivals Safe in a Year of Anti-LGBTQ Hate

RAINBOW REALITY

Pride organizers across America reveal their determination to plan safe marches and events after last week's incident in Idaho, and amid anti-LGBTQ hate and Republican-led bigotry.



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This is not Debra Porta's first time at the Pride-organizing rodeo. She has been involved with Pride Northwest, which oversees the [Portland Pride Parade and Festival](#), taking place this weekend, since 2006, serving as Board President (2007-2015) and since 2017 as Executive Director.

"People don't realize how often Pride festivities and events are threatened in some way, and so nothing surprises me any more," Porta told The Daily Beast, referring to the events of last

weekend in Idaho, [when a group of activists from extremist group Patriot Front](#) were arrested after being discovered inside a U-Haul.

They had detailed plans and protective gear to “antagonize and cause disorder” at the Coeur d’Alene Pride event, [per a court filing reported by CNN](#). [As The Daily Beast reported](#), Idaho police then received death threats for arresting the men.

“I still allow myself to be shocked because I don’t want to get used to being threatened,” Porta said. “What happened in Idaho isn’t taking anything away from how I feel about this weekend in Portland, but it does remind me again why Pride is important. If it wasn’t this important, bigots wouldn’t pay any attention to it.”

Alongside what happened in Idaho, Porta and other Pride organizers are doing their jobs, and trying to ensure safe marches and festivals, in a sharpened atmosphere of anti-LGBTQ hate.

As The Daily Beast has reported, this year has already seen nearly 300 pieces of [anti-LGBTQ legislation tabled in Republican-run legislatures](#), many focused on trans youth and their health care and access to playing sports, alongside a pronounced uptick in anti-LGBTQ rhetoric being voiced by Republican lawmakers like [Ron DeSantis](#), [Greg Abbott](#), [Marjorie Taylor Greene](#), and [Lauren Boebert](#), amplified by their many conservative supporters and commentators online and in the media.

Right-wing extremists have laid siege to events where drag queens read to schoolchildren, and are also focused on removing books with LGBTQ content from libraries, under an official campaign named “Hide the Pride.” Anti-trans sentiment is at a particular zenith, with former President Trump Friday geeing up support by claiming children are being “taught transgender,” presumably after math class. Right-wing politicians and extremist groups appear as one in their intention to cause as much misery for LGBTQ people as possible in legislation and imperiling their safety while going about their daily lives. Every day seemingly brings a fresh barrage of bigotry.

The vigor with which Republican politicians are stoking the fires of this bigotry to play to their base has not yet been matched by equally vociferous Democratic Party pushback—despite [President Biden’s executive order of this week](#), which, for all its august words and directions to government agencies, does little to directly counter the onslaught of legislative animus aimed at LGBTQ people. It is in this relentlessly hostile and threatening climate that this year’s Pride festivities are being planned.

Jeremy M. Helfgot, spokesperson for [Phoenix Pride](#), which takes place in October because of the extreme summer heat in the state, told The Daily Beast: “The safety and security of our community and community members who participate in our events is paramount. When the news broke of the arrests in Idaho, we were immediately in contact with our partners at

federal, state, and local level in the public safety community. Even though there was no reason to suspect a specific local threat we will keep an eye on the situation.”

As with the other Pride organizers The Daily Beast contacted, Helfgot said he could and would not divulge specific security plans, but that these were “constantly being looked at, re-evaluated, and modified as needed. We do not do this in a vacuum, but alongside law enforcement, public health, and emergency service personnel.”

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— Jeremy M. Helfgot

The Phoenix march—taking place in the city’s downtown, “well-patrolled” by law enforcement—is open to the public, while the festival component is a ticketed event. Helfgot said organizers would be looking at plans “right up to the last minute, and making decisions as necessary. The level of vigilance we have is already extremely high. Phoenix is a relative liberal oasis in a conservative state. We are well aware of what is around us.” Helfgot said Phoenix Pride organizers enjoyed a close and co-operative relationship with the local police.

Noting the anti-trans bills that have passed in Arizona, Helfgot said he would love to see those anti-LGBTQ politicians “have an open mind, and take time to get to know trans people to see they are human beings like everyone else, and that trans rights are human rights. Unfortunately, some folks are close-minded, and that close-mindedness can lead to ignorance, and that ignorance to hate. Not only don’t we have legislators denouncing extremists, one of our legislators (Wendy Rogers) has been censured for calling for violence ([in this case, hanging](#)) against her political rivals.” (Rogers did this at a conference organized by white nationalist Nick Fuentes.)

“We have lived with the fear of this extremism taking hold since the start of the Trump era,” Helfgot told The Daily Beast. “I can’t think of a Pride month in the last several years where there has been this much aggression leveled at the LGBTQ community.”

In an emailed statement, a spokesperson for Phoenix Police told The Daily Beast: “In the past we have staffed these events with on and off duty resources. Additionally, our Homeland Defense Bureau monitors for any active threats or concerns.”



Members of the Carpenters Union march with the Oregon Labor Movement during the Portland Pride Parade and Festival on June 16, 2019, in Portland, OR.

Debra Porta said what happened in Idaho “hasn’t made a significant difference” to the planning for the two-day Portland Pride, simply because safety and security is always a top priority for us, and we always have a specific strategy in place and strong communication and co-ordination with the Portland police department, city of Portland, de-escalation teams, and other teams. We always plan with the assumption that the potential for something always exists because it’s Pride.”

Regardless of the uptick in anti-LGBTQ animus, this year’s Pride festivals were always going to be challenging, being the first full-scale events since 2019, Porta said.

Local law enforcement continue to monitor the activities of the Proud Boys, who along with other extremist groups have turned the city into “a proving ground,” as [Rolling Stone put it](#). While unwilling to discuss specific security measures such as increased street closures, Porta said there was a “heightened level of communication with law enforcement, and sharpened coordination between a number of city agencies.” Law enforcement and private security will be patrolling the gated and fenced festival area in Portland, said Porta.

In a statement, Lt. Nathan Sheppard, Public Information Officer at the Portland Police Bureau, told The Daily Beast: “We’re definitely keeping our ears to the ground, but as of yet we haven’t found or received any information that would lead us to believe there will be any planned disruptions. That being said, we plan to have resources available should they be needed.”

In New York City, there will be two marches on June 26th—the [main Pride parade](#), and the [Queer Liberation March](#) organized by the Reclaim Pride Coalition. The former last occurred in the pre-pandemic era of 2019—a totemic year marking the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall Riots as well as World Pride in New York. [QLM debuted that year too](#)—it is sponsor-free, corporation-free, and, by its own request, police do not actively patrol its flanks—as it sees law enforcement as one of the levers of LGBTQ oppression and violence it seeks to challenge.



2019 Queer Liberation March on 6th Avenue in Manhattan.

Iterations of the march happened in 2020 and 2021, where, Reclaim Pride Coalition spokesperson Paul Nocera said, cops had baited and harassed marchers at the end of the route in Washington Square Park.

New York Police Department (NYPD) officers marching in uniform were officially banned last year from doing so at the main Pride parade, and the same ban will continue this year, Dan Dimant, media director for NYC Pride, told The Daily Beast. However, the NYPD would be providing its usual retinue of officers at the parade as in previous years.

Nocera told The Daily Beast that plans for [this year's march—in the name of “trans and BIPOC freedom, reproductive justice, and bodily autonomy”](#)—had not changed because of what had happened in Idaho. Organizers hoped NYPD would keep traffic away from the route from at least a block away, while on the march route itself marshals on foot and bike would help shepherd and protect those attending. Nocera hoped cops and law enforcement authorities were “doing all their policing research ahead of time” to ensure any planned attacks on the Queer Liberation March and/or main Pride parade did not reach a bloody and tragic fruition.

Nocera hopes, in the spirit of the QLM's theme of bodily autonomy especially, that this year that people will feel safe to come out, march in the streets, and express the feelings they feel that day. “It's a wonderful celebration,” said Nocera. “We hope the politicians listen, the police step back and do their jobs, and we have a great day.”

“We want to be able to show up, to say, ‘We’re still here, we’re still visible, and we are not going to let others who want to erase us get their way.’ That’s what the spirit of Pride is all about.”

— Dan Dimant

Dimant told The Daily Beast the main New York City Pride march had “pretty robust safety plans in place to begin with. At least at this time we do not see any need to make any changes to those. With all the agencies we work with, we are truly prepared for any and every threat that may or may not come our way.” Dimant said no threats had yet been made or seen online, but that all platforms were constantly being monitored. “Obviously, things happen pretty quickly and that can change in a matter of minutes.”

As in other parades, participating vehicles are strictly credentialed, and must display their permits prominently. The parade takes place in an area closed off to traffic, said Dimant, apart from certain crosstown traffic routes where the “the limited traffic is highly monitored by government agencies.” Parade volunteers do anti-active shooter and de-escalation training.

Dimant, like other Pride organizers, thought the present velocity of anti-LGBTQ hate was “pretty unprecedented. I do anticipate that there may be some Pride-goers who think twice before coming, and I understand and appreciate that. But I also believe it’s important we stand defiant against the attacks on our community. That’s why it’s so important that in spite of whatever may be going on, that we still show up and stand our ground. We don’t want our naysayers to win. We want to be able to show up, to say, ‘We’re still here, we’re still visible, and we are not going to let others who want to erase us get their way.’ That’s what the spirit of Pride is all about.”

“We would like politicians to stop using our community as a political football”

Pride organizers around the country are closely monitoring events as they happen. Nikkie Trahan, Vice President and Secretary of [Heartland Pride in Omaha](#), told The Daily Beast in emailed statements: “We are discussing the incident [in Idaho] and how we will move forward in Omaha... We will meet and discuss the information as a team. We will then decide as a team what we want to make public and what we wish to keep in house as to not allow others with negative intentions to work around our plans of prevention and security.”

Katrinna Marsden, President of [Fayetteville Pride](#) in North Carolina, told The Daily Beast that volunteers and attendees had sought reassurances about the provision of security at the event in recent days, and further meetings with police had been set up to discuss safety plans. The area where the festival will take place was being made as safe and secure as possible, she added.

At the last festival in 2019, Marsden said a couple of anti-LGBTQ protesters showed up, alongside some people handing out anti-LGBTQ literature. All were asked to leave, and did so. Marsden had noticed an uptick in anti-LGBTQ rhetoric at council meetings to discuss the event, “with comments of a religious nature, like ‘It’s sinful to be gay.’ There have been messages of a similar kind online and sent to newspapers. Because of that we are expecting more protesters this time, or people handing out literature.”

The state’s senate recently passed its own version of a “Don’t Say Gay” bill, targeted at LGBTQ issues being discussed in schools; however Democratic Governor Roy Cooper is expected to veto it if it lands on his desk.

“What is concerning is the amount of comments of support it has had when articles run about it,” said Marsden. “It empowers people to say something in other forums. As we have seen in other states too, the level of business and other pushback like when HB2 [the notorious 2016 trans student bathroom ban] was passed just doesn’t seem to be there now.”

Carolyn Wysinger, board president of [San Francisco Pride](#), said in two statements sent to The Daily Beast: “This week marks six years since the Pulse tragedy, and we commemorate the loss of so many lives taken from us. We have always been vigilant when it comes to

safety and are working on a very coordinated basis with local law enforcement, city and community leaders to ensure this year's Pride is safe and people can enjoy themselves knowing we are taking every precaution possible... Historically we haven't disclosed the details of our security planning, but we do work closely with local law enforcement, city and community leaders to take every precaution possible so that people can celebrate in a safe environment."

"The most significant thing, the thing that makes our community most safe, is being together, the power in numbers."

— *Debra Porta*

How safe should people feel attending Pride in Portland, this reporter asked Debra Porta in Portland. "That's a good question. People are definitely nervous after the Idaho incident. Obviously these two incidents cannot be compared directly, but the sense I have is that people, the community response, is feeling rattled, just as they did after the Pulse massacre of 2016, which happened just before Pride that year.

"So, a lot of what we are doing right now, like what we did in 2016, is talking to reporters and more generally with our community sponsors and contingent groups marching, about how we are responding and what we need from them. The most significant thing, the thing that makes our community most safe, is being together, the power in numbers.

"When an attack happens or something goes on, it is typically targeted at small groups or individuals. That's not to say Pride is immune. We're not naïve. There is power and safety in numbers. Watch out for each other. Keep an eye on your surroundings. Is someone looking out of place? If something feels weird, find the nearest law enforcement officer or uniformed volunteer and tell them. People underestimate how important that is. At large-scale events there is no such thing as just being able to depend on law enforcement for security. As a community we have to look out for each other. We're our own best protection. That does not mean jumping into the fray, but maintaining vigilance with our eyes and ears."



Pride March - WorldPride NYC 2019 on June 30, 2019 in New York City.

The impact of the actions and words of anti-LGBTQ legislators was significant, said Porta. “The Pacific northwest has been a hotbed of neo-Nazism for decades. The rhetoric and official endorsement of hate on the part of legislators and national leaders totally feeds into giving permission to those who hate to act on it—absolutely. We would like politicians to stop using our community as a political football.”

“I don’t know if I assume acts of violence are inevitable, but it is hard to say they are not if what’s happening in this country right now isn’t addressed,” Porta added. “People hate, and when you’re that consumed with hate and fear at some point someone is going to act on that, especially if they are given permission to do so by political parties and the media. As long as inhumanity towards LGBTQ people is lifted up as OK, it’s always going to tempt someone else to do it.”

When it comes to feeling safe at Pride events this year, LGBTQ people and their allies, “people have to make their own decisions and decide what feels safe for them, and at the same time remember this exact thing is why Pride came about to begin with. We are stronger together as a community than we are apart. Staying away from Pride won’t make us more safe.”

Dimant was not sure if the increase in anti-LGBTQ rhetoric in the body politics would translate to an increase in the number of prejudiced voices along the parade’s route—a smattering of such individuals is usually expected. “They may be more prominent this year, but I would not expect that to disrupt our ability to produce the event, and produce it safely,” Dimant said.

In a statement, an NYPD spokesperson told The Daily Beast: “The New York Police Department provides a significant and complex counterterrorism overlay to the events and celebrations around Pride month each June in New York City. The department’s Intelligence Bureau also closely monitors all relevant streams of intelligence, in real time, as they relate to foreign terrorist groups or domestic violent extremists.

“This level of preparedness and awareness has been honed over time and informed by such events as the fatal terrorist attack at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida, six years ago, and the targeting by ISIS of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people for terror and hate crimes. As these realities have become manifest, the NYPD’s alert posture in these matters has remained ever-vigilant.”

The spokesperson did not return comment on whether what had happened in Idaho, and the general recent uptick of right-wing extremists’ groups anti-LGBTQ rhetoric, had been recognized by the NYPD, and had led to increased monitoring of such rhetoric and such groups in the run-up to NYC Pride. A spokesperson did not respond to another question over whether any threats, credible or otherwise, had been made in relation to this year’s event.

“We and law enforcement are doing all we can to keep people safe, and in addition to that, the public can help. We are all in this together.”

— Dan Dimant

Dimant said that the fallout from the police being banned from marching in uniform in the parade had not in any way affected discussions around them providing the security around the event that they ordinarily would do. “We continue to discuss the status of uniformed law enforcement marching in the event itself. That discussion is ongoing. But in the meantime we have their full commitment in relation to securing the perimeter. They are fully prepared to carry out their duties to the full extent of their capacity,” said Dimant. “As it currently stands, our stance remains as it did last year—we will not be permitting uniformed law enforcement to march.”

“We are making every effort to ensure Pride this year is safe and secure,” Dimant said. “We have been doing this for many years. This is New York City. We know what it feels like to be under threat. I grew up here. I was here after 9./11. I know the feeling of: ‘Is it safe to go out? Is it safe to go on the subway? Is it safe to fly?’ I would just say we are taking every measure to keep the public safe, and have a successful Pride without incident.

“At the same time, as we always say, ‘If you see something, say something.’ The general public is the best resource against any nefarious activity. Everyday people can stop it in its tracks. We and law enforcement are doing all we can to keep people safe, and in addition to that, the public can help. We are all in this together. Stay alert and report anything suspicious, and help keep everyone safe.”



Queer Liberation March, NYC, 2019.

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