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Actress and activist Susan Sarandon testifies before Congress in support of a proposed piece of legislation to include people experiencing homelessness as a protected class under the Hate Crimes Statistics Act.

Report on violence against the homeless draws star power before Congress

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Oscar award-winner Susan Sarandon may be most famous for her roles in "Thelma & Louise," "Dead Man Walking," and, of course, the cult-classic "Rocky Horror Picture Show." However, her work and commitment extend far beyond her achievements on the silver screen. She's also a strong activist for numerous causes, including homelessness.

"I have always been very aware of people who are not housed," Sarandon explained.

Growing up in New York City, she often saw homeless people living on the streets, which compelled her to begin her advocacy work for the

homeless. For years, Sarandon has been involved with the National Coalition for the Homeless. She's also volunteered with Habitat for Humanity and has helped out at a soup kitchen for more than two decades. Somehow, she has always found ways to juggle her advocacy work while acting in Hollywood productions.

"I'm in chaos all the time," she smiled. "If I can use my media connections to shine a light on those who are voiceless, that's the point."

Sarandon relies deeply upon her store of empathy to imagine the lives of the characters she plays in films. Similarly, she believes empathy is one of the reasons why she feels drawn to speak out for the homeless.

"If you can imagine yourself in that situation (of homelessness), you want to take action," she said. "It's an organic natural flow."

The actress believes that one of the most

important steps to ending homelessness is to help people who are housed understand and identify with the homeless population.

"Kids don't develop empathy without education," she said. "There's a misconception that people on the street want the easy life, that they don't want to work."

She hopes that a new documentary film, "Storied Streets," directed by her son Jack Henry Robbins and produced by Thomas Morgan, will enable the public to understand the complexities of homelessness and the challenges homeless people face every day—she says it certainly made her more aware of the realities of homelessness.

"They go across the U.S. and debunk myths of how people become homeless," Sarandon explained. "It makes the face of the unhoused specific and human. There are so many ways to end up on the street even if you're working two

jobs. People are on the precipice constantly. I hope the film redefines for people what homelessness is."

Homelessness is for thousands a reality Sarandon says she almost "can't bear the thought of."

"Home means so much to me," she expressed. "I can't imagine not having a place to be clean, to be safe."

Recently, Sarandon lent her voice before Congress.

"It is time for Congress to act," emphasized Sarandon during a recent congressional briefing about violence against the homeless. "We can't allow these people to be invisible any longer."

On June 25, U.S. Reps. Alcee Hastings (D-Fla.) and Eddie Bernice Johnson

National Coalition for the Homeless' Report on Crimes Against the Homeless in 2013

- In 2013, 109 attacks against the homeless by housed perpetrators were recorded
- The total number of attacks in 2013 represents an increase of 24 percent from 2012
- 85 percent of all perpetrators were under the age of 30
- 93 percent of all perpetrators were male
- 65 percent of all victims were 40 years old or older
- 90 percent of all victims were male
- 18 percent of the attacks resulted in death
- 2 recorded attacks involved fire
- 5 recorded attacks were a result of police brutality

Source: *The National Coalition for the Homeless*

(D-Texas) co-chaired a congressional briefing in support of a proposed piece of legislation to include the homeless as a protected class under the Hate Crimes Statistics Act. Sarandon, along with David Pirtle, a survivor of violence against the homeless, and Thomas Morgan, the co-director of a documentary about homelessness, testified during the briefing.

Throughout her testimony, Sarandon stressed that sheltered members of society must recognize the humanity of homeless people in order to overcome their indifference toward a vulnerable population.

"Congress is a proxy of society," she said. "If society is apathetic, Congress will be, too."

Sarandon told the story of Carl Simon, a

50-year-old homeless man who was beaten, stabbed and tortured this past year. When his attackers realized he had not died they forced him into a large suitcase he used to carry his few possessions and then drowned him in a bathtub.

"Carl Simon is one of the thousands we need to remember as we fight to protect those experiencing homelessness right now," Sarandon said.

David Pirtle, a member of the National Coalition for the Homeless' (NCH) Speakers Bureau, described the unprovoked violence he experienced when homeless. He survived five attacks, including being beaten with baseball bats, being spray painted and being urinated on.

"Most [attacks] are done just for fun," Pirtle said. "I don't understand how a person can do that and laugh."

Although fatal attacks against the homeless occurred more than three times as often than those classified as hate crimes from 1999-2012, violence against the homeless is not considered a hate crime by the federal government.

The proposed legislation, HR 1136: Violence against the Homeless Accountability Act, would amend the Hate Crime Statistics Act to make the federal government responsible for compiling data about crimes committed against homeless people. At the moment, the Hate Crime Statistics Act requires the Attorney General to collect information on crimes committed because of a victim's race, religion, disability, sexual orientation or ethnicity.

HR 1136 is sponsored by Eddie Bernice Johnson (D-Texas) and co-sponsored by 23 other members of Congress, including one Republican, Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.).

Since 2007, several efforts have been made for Congress to have crimes against the homeless included in the Hate Crimes Statistics Act. However, all these bills died in committee.

Currently seven states and three cities recognize violence against the homeless as a hate crime. Opponents contend that homelessness should not be included as a protected class in the Hate Crime Statistics Act because homelessness is not a permanent condition, unlike the other classes protected in the Act.

An official from the Anti-Defamation League said in an interview with NPR that there needs to be a better definition of homelessness and an understanding of whether it is, like the other characteristics protected under hate crime laws, an unchangeable characteristic.

"What is the definition of homeless? What is immutable about homeless? Is it an immutable characteristic? Is it exactly the same as race, religion, disability, sexual orientation, gender?" asked Michael Lieberman, the Washington counsel for the Anti-Defamation League.

"It is different."

According to the NCH's new report, "Vulnerable to Hate: A Survey of Hate Crimes & Violence Committed against the Homeless in 2013," bias against the indigent drives many crimes against the homeless. Some crimes are opportunistic, a direct result of the vulnerability homeless people experience because they have no shelter for protection. The NCH only records crimes committed by housed perpetrators against homeless individuals in its report.

"A hate crime is one of the most despicable and prejudicial acts done to another human being by a human being, and, surprisingly, these acts affect homeless people in great proportions," wrote Congresswoman Johnson in an e-mail. "It is imperative that we give this issue the serious attention that it deserves by including homeless people in hate crime statistics."

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