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**STATEMENT OF SENATOR EDWARD M. KENNEDY ON HOUSE PASSAGE  
OF ENDA**

*(As Prepared for Delivery)*

Last night the House passed the Employment Non-Discrimination Act with a strong bipartisan vote. The House bill prohibits employers from discriminating against workers on the job because of their sexual orientation. It protects Americans from being fired, denied a job or promotion, or otherwise intentionally discriminated against because of their sexual orientation. Although the bill is narrower than many of us had hoped, the House action is still a main step in the long journey toward full civil rights for every American.

In the Senate, I will work to move the Employment Non-Discrimination Act this Congress. The bill that the House passed is being held at the desk and I'm working with leadership to move this bill forward as quickly as possible.

This nation was founded on the principle of equal justice for all. That noble goal represents the best in America – that everyone should be treated fairly and should have the chance to benefit from the many opportunities of this country. The House action brings us closer to that goal.

Forty-three years ago, President Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Civil Rights Act of 1964. At that time, some in our country were violently opposed to outlawing racial discrimination, and it was very difficult for Congress to reach a consensus. But the best in America, and the best in the Senate, prevailed. My first major speech in this body as a freshman Senator was on the Civil Rights Act. I said then that I “firmly believe a sense of fairness and goodwill also exists in the minds and hearts” of Americans, and that laws creating the conditions for equality will help that spirit of fairness win out over prejudice. I still believe that today.

Since the 1964 Act was passed, we've seen enormous progress in this beloved nation of ours. Civil rights laws giving national protection against discrimination based on race, national origin, gender, age, and disability have made our country a stronger, a better, a fairer land. African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Asians have made extraordinary advances in the workplace. People with disabilities have new opportunities to fully participate in our society. The workplace is far more open to women in ways that were barely imagined four decades ago. In countless businesses (large and small), glass ceilings are being shattered. Women and girls have far greater opportunities in the classroom and in the boardroom.

But that progress has left some Americans out. Civil rights is still the nation's unfinished business. Today, it's perfectly legal in most states to fire an employee

because of sexual orientation or gender identity. Many hard-working Americans live every day with the knowledge that, no matter what their talents and abilities, they can be denied a job simply because of who they are. Many young students grow up knowing that no matter how hard they study, the doors of opportunity will be locked by prejudice and bigotry when they enter the workplace.

Although some states have outlawed job discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, in most of the country, workers have no recourse at all if they are fired simply because of who they are. That's unacceptable, and we have a duty to fix it, and to do so on our watch.

In the past 40 years, our country has made great progress in guaranteeing fairness and opportunity.

When we passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and then the Fair Housing Act of 1968, we took courageous steps, and we were proud that the Senate did the right thing each time. We must also do the right thing -- the courageous thing -- today. In the 1960s, these laws were controversial. But today, none of us, Democrat, Republican, or Independent, would question that they were the right steps to take, and we must take the right steps today.

Over the years, the Senate has recognized time and again the importance of our goal of equal employment opportunity. Even if we have sometimes disagreed over the years about its proper interpretation, there is no division among us that the principle of equal employment opportunity is a core American value.

That is what the Employment Non-Discrimination Act is all about -- equal job opportunities for all Americans. By extending the protection of Title VII to those who are victimized because of their sexual orientation, we are moving closer to that fundamental goal. No one should be denied a job simply because of who they are.

That ideal is at the heart of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act.

In 1996, we fell one vote short of passing the bill in the Senate. In the decade since, public support for outlawing such discrimination has only grown stronger. Now that the House has acted, I hope that we will be able to finally succeed in the Senate in passing the Employment Non-Discrimination Act this Congress, and I look forward to the coming debate.

America stands for justice for all. Congress must make clear that when we say "all" we mean all. America will never be America until we do.

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