

Daughter of Jasper man asks Congress to strengthen law against hate crimes

WASHINGTON (AP) — The oldest daughter of a Texas man who was chained to a truck and dragged to his death urged Congress today to strengthen the federal law against hate crimes.

Francis Renee Mullins, 27, of Lufkin, said a Senate bill is important because "it makes hate crimes like the terrible act that took my father a federal crime and says that anyone who commits a hate crime will pay the price for their crime."

The bill, sponsored by Sens. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., and Ron Wyden, D-Ore., would expand the definition of federal hate crimes.

The bill would broaden current law to cover offenses based on gender, disability and sexual orientation. It also would allow federal authorities to prosecute such crimes when the victim is not engaged in a federally protected activity, such as voting or serving on a jury, as the law now requires.

Mullins was to testify at a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on the bill late yesterday.

A grand jury in Jasper County, Texas, this week indicted three white men with links to racist groups in the alleged hate-slaying of James Byrd Jr., on June 7.

Authorities believe the 49-year-old Byrd, who was black, accepted a ride from the three as he walked home from a niece's bridal shower. The men allegedly drove to a wooded area where they beat and chained Byrd to their truck and drove down a bumpy east Texas road. The ride severed Byrd's head, neck and right arm, which were found about a mile from where his shredded torso was dumped.

Mullins, who attended a news conference today with Kennedy and Wyden, said she and her mother, brother and sister have only just begun to experience the tragedy of her father's death.

"Nothing that Congress does will bring my father back," she said. "I hope that my presence here to discuss the pain my family has suffered will help Congress to strengthen the law of the land and provide greater punishment for those who commit hate crimes."

Waste-site debate

Mauro seeks Texas governor to say 'no' to radioactive dump

EL PASO (AP) — Citing the misgivings of two administrative judges about a proposed radioactive dump, Democratic gubernatorial candidate Garry Mauro is urging Gov. George W. Bush to reject the facility.

The state hearings officers, after considering weeks of testimony, recommended against licensing the rural site selected by the state to bury tons of irradiated waste from Texas utilities, hospitals and universities.

"Bush has said repeatedly that if this wasn't a safe site, he would be sure it was rejected," Mauro said. "Now he has a hearings examiner saying it isn't safe. I am calling on him to instruct his appointees on the TNRC to reject the permit immediately."

The Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission has the final say on the license for the site in Sierra Blanca, 90 miles southeast of El Paso, and is not bound by the hearings officers' recommendation.

A Bush spokesperson said Wednesday that the governor was troubled by the judges' finding that the site had not been proved safe by the Texas Low-Level Radioactive Waste Disposal Authority and is asking TNRC commissioners to carefully review the evidence.

"He expects his appointees to make an informed decision based on facts and science, not based on political rhetoric," spokesperson Karen Hughes said Wednesday.

Administrative law judges Kerry Sullivan and Mike Rogan, who held hearings throughout the state earlier this year on the dump, found the disposal authority had failed to adequately determine whether a fault beneath the Sierra Blanca site connected with an active fault.

Disposal officials also failed to adequately address the dump's potential negative socioeconomic impacts, wrote Sullivan and Rogan, who are

with the State Office of Administrative Hearings.

Authority officials said they were reviewing the recommendations and will respond.

In the meantime, Mauro, a dump critic, said that he was pleased the administrative judges recommended against the dump on two grounds.

"I was more surprised that they raised the deficient report on economic grounds. I was really surprised to see that. That's something I've been talking about a lot," Mauro said. "The state's land commissioners are the ones who should be looking at this."

Critics contend the dump poses a threat to the environment, particularly groundwater resources, and that it would be a particularly high-minority area. They also contend that the dump is a practice of putting waste in high-minority areas. They also contend that the dump is a particularly high-minority area.

Authority officials and dump opponents say exhaustive studies of the facility will be safe.

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Mansfield convicts escape by creating hole in metal fence

MANSFIELD, Texas (AP) — Two convicts escaped from a prison Tuesday by cutting a hole in a metal fence.

The men disappeared during their work shift in the furniture factory, a prison of 1,000 inmates. Workers in the factory used cutting tools, but prison officials are unsure how the men cut the hole in the fence.

Garland Gilbert Lenoir, 34, and Clarence Edwin Smith Jr., 31, from Oklahoma, were arrested this morning. Lenoir was given a 20-year sentence for a narcotics conviction, and Smith was given a 10-year sentence for forgery.

Prison officials said the men should be considered dangerous. "You have to consider that a convicted felon escapes from here today, they are going to be armed," prison operations manager Paul Mertz told the Fort Worth Star-Telegram.

The men turned up missing during a routine head count, and officials said they conducted a search for minutes during work details.

Prison officials found an 18-inch hole in one of the fences surrounding a recreation yard.

Mertz said Lenoir and Smith were part of a crew making pictures in the furniture factory.

"The majority of the inmates are for working with wood and aren't capable of cutting through the fence, and we aren't sure what they used to cut it," Mertz said.

Clinics vandalized with butyric acid

HOUSTON (AP) — At least two Houston women's clinics that provide abortions were vandalized this morning with what authorities believe was butyric acid, the stinky, acid-smelling chemical used in the clinics in New Orleans on Monday.

Officials say about a gallon of rotten-smelling material was spilled in the entrance of a building containing a clinic at 8 a.m. The substance was in the air conditioning system, forcing occupants outside.

A few people were reported to feel dizzy and nauseated, but no serious injuries were reported.

Other smelly spills also were reported at least two other women's clinics just a few miles away.

FBI spokesperson John M. New Orleans said he had been to the Houston incident and was checking to see if there were any similarities between the attacks on the women's clinics there.

The stench shut down the clinics for a day. They were closed Tuesday as a federal terrorism team took samples of the material, believed to be butyric acid, in moderate doses beyond the vomit-like smell.

Rook said the bioterrorism team was due to leave New Orleans yesterday, but it may stay in Houston to see if it can help with the new incidents.

Three abortion clinics in central Florida were targeted by vandals believed to have used butyric acid.