



CALIFORNIA RURAL LEGAL ASSISTANCE, INC.

FIGHTING FOR JUSTICE, CHANGING LIVES

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Combating the backlash against LGBT equality is a battle my colleagues at CRLA and I have been grappling with every day since November 9th, and really since the earlier victories in the marriage equality cases and transgender rights cases.

To address how to resist the backlash, I have to challenge the narrative that has taken hold in many circles – the notion that rural America is inevitably the root of the political crisis we are facing, and urban America will have to go it alone to advance progressive policies and protect equality.

The truth is we can't separate ourselves out. We can't cede territory in this red state and that red county or town. We can't walk off the field in large stretches of our country and at the same time expect true, sustained progress on the issues we care so much about – LGBT rights, criminal justice reform, education or economic justice, to name a few.

We must show up and engage those parts of the country – rural areas, the South – parts of the country that many might find easier easy to write off. If we disengage from these areas we are consenting to political walls that divide. Not to mention it is just plain wrong to leave people behind, to leave LGBTQ people, to leave immigrants and so many others behind just because of where they live.

Rural communities are rich in leadership and in capacity to contribute to our resistance to bigotry and oppression. My colleagues and I at CRLA see this strength every single day in Salinas, Delano, Marysville, Stockton, Bakersfield and so many other areas that we serve.

The foundation for Freedom Summer in 1964, which helped drive passage of the Voting Rights Act, that effort was years in the making. It was built in small towns across rural Mississippi. The farmworker rights movement was built and won in the Central Valley. The masterminds and the bodies at the forefront of these fiercest of human rights movements hailed from rural America, and they didn't all necessarily have top shelf education and fancy degrees.

When we recognize this story of ourselves, as capable of fighting and winning on all fronts, we avoid building political walls. We're better positioned to link arms with those who are so bravely, fearlessly raising hell and demanding justice throughout the Central Valley, and in the South right now, in this very moment.

So we need less pathologizing of rural America, and more allyship across the map. The real America is all of us. The only way we will effectively resist and move forward is to do so together.

How do we show up for LGBT equality in rural America. What does that look like in practice?



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First, let go of the stereotypes – especially the stereotype that rural America is uniformly lacking in diversity. Most people in Kern County and many other counties in the Central Valley are majority people of color. Nebraska will be a quarter Latino by 2050. LGBT community centers are opening all over the place from El Centro in Imperial County to Visalia in Tulare County to Alabama. Openly gay young men of color are winning local school board elections in the Central Valley.

Next - get engaged in a multi-dimensional way.

When you think about your personal game plan for engagement, include support for local and regional organizations, in addition your contributions at the national level. Our simultaneous engagement at multiple levels is the strongest formula for a truly robust resistance to anti-LGBT backlash.

Of course, our national orgs will need your contributions and your pro bono support. The development of local leadership is also indispensable.

The climate that an LGBT person experiences in their daily lives and individual support for LGBT equality are profoundly influenced by what people see and experience in their immediate community, in their schools and churches, in local businesses and in the media. Local LGBT leaders, including those who are young and immigrant--which many of them are--are the next generation of leaders who can win over this contested terrain.

Have a look at your hometown, or that town where your parents are living, or you're always visiting family. Find out what organizations are active on LGBT equality issues. My organization, CRLA is connected with many of them. Figure out how you can support their efforts.

The most active and effective local group might be an LGBT center, a pride group, a legal aid organization, a youth or arts group, a transgender group. There are few rural areas, at this point, that do not have at least one organization that is making waves, that is a steady, consistent presence in support of equality. You can help those groups incorporate as nonprofits, you can help them with a legal clinic, your dollars can help them pay rent and maybe even a staff member. CRLA is constantly working with these groups, and we direct resources and dollars to them.

Ultimately, we must reach beyond our city limits. We must defend equality at multiple levels of society. Partners--true warriors for justice--are there in rural America. We have been there for a long time. We're ready to fight alongside you.