



File

## Town hall to address violence against LGBTQ community

The event will take place Saturday at the Soldotna Library at 2:30 p.m.

By Brian Mazurek

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In the wake of an assault on a local advocate for the LGBTQ community, peninsula residents have organized a town hall to address public safety.

This Saturday at the Soldotna Library at 2:30 p.m. organizers for Soldotna's annual [Pride in the Park](#) event will host a town hall that will feature testimonies from LGBTQ individuals who have experienced targeted harassment or violence. The meeting is also intended as a call to action for local law enforcement and elected officials.

The town hall is open to the public, but organizers said there will be ground rules established at the beginning in order to deter any threatening behavior or harassment.

The town hall was organized after Tammie Willis, an employee of Kenai Peninsula College and one of the organizers for Pride in the Park, was assaulted in her home by an unknown assailant on Dec. 9. In the month leading up to the assault Willis also experienced other forms of harassment — she received a threatening note referencing her sexual orientation and had her truck vandalized.

Willis is gay, and she and the other Pride organizers said they fear other LGBTQ individuals may be the targets of similar forms of harassment. Organizers said they wanted to spread awareness about the issue with the hope that local lawmakers will do more to acknowledge the issue of violence toward the LGBTQ community.

“I’m hoping that the LGBTQ community will feel more comfortable and confident that they’re represented,” Leslie Byrd, Pride organizer and friend of Willis, said on Wednesday. “And I’m hoping our elected officials will walk away thinking that this is a group of people that they need to support.”

Michele Vasquez, who also helped arrange the town hall, said that she has reached out to all of the local and state elected officials and asked them to be in attendance. As of Thursday, Kenai Peninsula Borough assembly members Hal Smalley, Kelly Cooper and Brent Johnson have confirmed that they will be present, Vasquez said. A representative from the Soldotna Police Department will also attend, Vasquez said.

“We want to send the message that what happened to Tammie is unacceptable and will not be tolerated in our community,” Vasquez said. “This is the start of what I think will be several conversations.”

The event will be moderated by Suzie Smalley, who agreed to do it after Vasquez and the other organizers reached out to her.

“Because this is so important, unless I was bleeding from an open heart wound, I couldn’t say no,” Smalley said on Wednesday. Smalley said that she has been studying advocacy resources including Teaching Tolerance and Not in Our Town to prepare for the town hall.

“This is going to make the whole community stronger,” Smalley said. “Not just for one group.”

Smalley said that after the town hall the organizers will be taking action. Examples Smalley and the other organizers gave for the next steps include asking the borough assembly to pass a resolution recognizing June as LGBTQ Pride Month, as well as asking state legislators to change Alaska's hate crime statute, which does not currently recognize sexual orientation or gender identity as protected classes.

"It's not like we're all going to get together and share and then walk away feeling better about ourselves," Smalley said. "We have a plan."



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