

Proponent Testimony: SB 357
Ohio Senate | Finance Committee
November 29, 2022 | Columbus, OH

Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Gavarone, Ranking Member Sykes, and members of the Senate Finance Committee:

Introduction

Ohio Jewish Communities is the statewide government advocacy, public affairs, and community outreach voice of Ohio's eight Jewish federations and their some 150 member agencies providing cradle-to-grave social services and meeting vital human needs of Ohioans of all faiths – and of none – each day, all across Ohio. We submit this testimony on their behalf.

Background and Statement of Interest

The General Assembly – and this Committee - are, we know, well aware of the dangers violent extremists from across the political and religious spectrum pose to the Jewish community. We too, are aware that the Jewish community may be the most targeted religious group¹ but many other faiths,² ethnic groups³, and nonprofit associations of all types are targets of extremist violence. Pro-life pregnancy centers have been threatened⁴ as have pro-choice abortion clinics⁵. Decades after the Civil Rights Movement, arsonists continue to target Black churches⁶, and the list goes on.

The recent attack on Paul Pelosi, husband of Speaker of the US House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi, is an example of right-wing violence on a progressive public official⁷. The arrest of a man threatening violence against Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh in the aftermath of the leaked abortion related ruling is a reminder that political violence comes from the left as well⁸. In the last month, a University of Arizona professor was murdered by a religious fanatic⁹. That student “thought” the professor was Jewish.

¹ <https://www.hstoday.us/featured/new-evolving-terrorist-threats-intersect-with-oldest-hatred/>;
<https://www.voanews.com/a/us-hate-crimes-rise-during-first-half-of-2022-/6713791.html>

² <https://www.fox61.com/article/news/local/fbi-working-with-norwich-pd-to-investigate-hate-messaging-targeting-sikh/520-52f7dfc9-5a9d-43f1-80cf-e39c7f017bfc>; <https://www.npr.org/2022/08/09/1116573128/albuquerque-four-muslim-men-deaths-suspect>;

³ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/a-year-after-atlanta-and-indianapolis-shootings-targeting-asian-americans-activists-say-we-cant-lose-momentum>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/08/us/madison-anti-abortion-center-vandalized.html>;
<https://www.cnn.com/2022/06/24/politics/dhs-warning-abortion-ruling/index.html>;

⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2022/07/26/1113615302/clinics-that-provide-abortion-services-are-increasingly-worried-about-security>

⁶ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2022/11/08/jackson-mississippi-arson-fires-black-churches/8309304001/>

⁷ <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/11/09/suspect-pelosi-attack-indicted-00066141>

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/08/us/brett-kavanaugh-threat-arrest.html>

⁹ <https://www.azcentral.com/story/opinion/op-ed/2022/11/22/ua-professor-thomas-meixner-murder-failure-stop-antisemitism/69668645007/>

For the Jewish community, this is now a steady, unsettling reminder that violent Jew-hatred is not something out of the past. It is a clear and present danger. FBI statistics bear this out¹⁰. So too do arrests. The NYPD arrested two men on a subway platform less than two weeks ago¹¹. They were armed with guns and explosives. Their target: a synagogue. Just days before that the FBI issued an unprecedented statewide, public warning to Jewish New Jerseyans¹²: there was a credible threat against a synagogue somewhere in the state. That terrorist is also now in custody.

Ohio is no stranger to threats like these. Toledo¹³ and Youngstown¹⁴ both have had near misses with terrorist attempts. Good police work saved lives both times. There are other instances in Ohio too. Last April, a Jewish school here in Columbus averted an insider threat by a rogue Ohio National Guardsmen who was also a security guard, who threatened to create an “active shooter” situation on the playground¹⁵.

Tackling Two of the Most Dangerous Factors for Extremism

SB 357 is a narrow, focused attempt at finding common ground on a divisive issue. It also focuses on two critical areas that, if enacted, would directly impact the safety of our communities and others facing similar violent threats.

Keeping guns out of the hands of those who should not have them is critical. Taking on mental health is another.

With its focus on making sure the state’s database of those with orders of protection is updated in real time helps to ensure those who could be a danger to communities like ours are known to law enforcement statewide and would be noted during background checks.

The focus on mental health is vital because many of those who threaten violence or transition to extremism have mental and behavioral health issues. These include the terrorist who took hostages at Beth Israel Congregation in Colleyville, Texas. It includes that murderer who killed a college professor in Arizona. Mental illness isn’t an excuse for those who threaten or commit violence; it’s a flashing danger sign.

Funding & Appropriation Needs Can Be Met As Well

Wise, targeted investment by the state in community safety, nonprofit security, and the clinical, workforce, and technology needs relating to mental health will save lives, stretch scarce financial resources, and yield efficiencies.

We understand today’s hearing is not regarding funding and appropriation requests. When the time comes for such discussion, we look forward to joining as an interested party in where safety and security funding can be best spent as well as what are the best ways to spend on mental health needs.

¹⁰ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/fbi-director-says-us-jews-under-threat-from-all-sides-amid-rise-in-antisemitism/>

¹¹ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/synagogue-new-york-threat-arrests-christopher-brown-matthew-mahrer/>

¹² <https://centraljersey.com/2022/11/16/man-arrested-in-alleged-threats-to-synagogues/>

¹³ <https://www.wtol.com/article/news/local/ohio-man-sentenced-to-20-years-in-prison-after-pleading-guilty-to-plotting-an-attack-on-a-toledo-area-synagogue/512-967b68f3-0f09-49f4-8c8a-8ddf99b29101>

¹⁴ <https://time.com/5654959/white-supremacist-ohio-arrested-jewish-community-center/>

¹⁵ <https://www.thedailybeast.com/thomas-develin-columbus-torah-academy-guard-charged-for-threatening-school-shooting-on-discord>

Conclusion & Next Steps

We continue to believe that “on matters that matter” bipartisanship is always possible. We believe SB 357 is one such area. Despite dealing with a controversial policy issue, it focuses on areas of widespread common agreement. We urge the committee to favorably report the bill.

Progress on security and safety comes in steps and stages. This legislation is one step forward.

We are happy to respond to questions you may have.

###