

**Proponent Testimony in Support of SB 372:
Create Holocaust & Genocide Memorial & Education Commission
Senate Finance Committee | December 1, 2020
Howie Beigelman, Executive Director, Ohio Jewish Communities**

Chairman Dolan, Vice Chair Burke, Ranking Member Sykes, and Members of the Committee:

Background and Statement of Interest

Ohio Jewish Communities is the statewide government advocacy, public affairs, and community relations voice of Ohio's eight Jewish federations and their 150 nonprofit agencies whose cradle-to-grave suite of social, cultural, and human services serve thousands of Ohioans of every faith, and of none, each day. We submit this testimony on their behalf as well. I personally submit this testimony to you as the child of a Holocaust survivor, and on behalf of the survivors as well as the millions of victims, including my father's own immediate family members.

As American Jews with a deep sense of history, as well as an abiding commitment to the ideals on which this republic was founded, we believe it is long past time for Ohio to have a commission dedicated to the memory of the Holocaust and other genocides and the lessons we as a society must learn.

But it is not only the Jewish community or only Ohioans who support this legislation and the commission it creates. As an addendum to this testimony you will see the many community and human rights organizations that have joined together to support it as well.

While there are many bills in both chambers that gain bipartisan consensus, the number of cosponsors for this across party lines is deeply moving and showcases another critical truth: Holocaust remembrance is not a Jewish issue just as antisemitism is not a Jewish problem. The failings of civilized nations and liberal democracies in the years leading up to Hitler's Final Solution and in the years of World War II itself require soul searching and a commitment to learning these lessons lest we repeat them by every country in the community of nations.

We as a community are grateful to Senator Rulli for his leadership in drafting the legislation. As well, we are pleased to see 18 senators, including many members of this committee and both President Obhof and Leader Yuko, as cosponsors.

The reasons for this broad support are clear.

Hatred and Antisemitism Are on the Rise

The most recent FBI statistics show an alarming rise in hate crimes generally and in anti-Jewish incidents specifically. Hate crimes spiked 14 percent in 2019, the last year for which the FBI has records¹. In that year, of hate crimes motivated by a religious bias, over 60 percent targeted Jews².

¹ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/hate-crime-fbi-statistics-show-murders-rose-2019/>

² https://www.clevelandjewishnews.com/news/local_news/fbi-hate-crime-report-troubling-but-not-surprising/article_c3150f48-29e1-11eb-b860-f79ee1536fbc.html

DHS reports³ and FBI warnings⁴ substantiate that the current threats remain very real. The (Acting) Secretary for Homeland Security has recently told Congress that white supremacy remains the most potent threat to the homeland⁵. These FBI advisories have shown Jews and Jewish communities are still the highest priority targets for neo-Nazis and other right wing extremists. Left wing violence has also targeted Jews, Jewish businesses, and Jewish community institutions⁶.

Here in Ohio, white supremacists and other homegrown violent extremists have targeted Jewish communities, and law enforcement has made arrests in at least three advanced stage plots in the last two years in Toledo⁷, Youngstown⁸, and most recently, Kent⁹.

Those hate crime statistics the FBI has just released show here in Ohio hate crimes surged over 11 percent¹⁰. Legitimate public policy debates with then Director of Health Acton descended into explicitly anti-Jewish canards and threats¹¹ and extremists joining protests at the Statehouse on pandemic restrictions carried explicitly anti-Semitic signs¹². In the last two weeks alone, a Jewish cemetery was vandalized in Cleveland¹³ and Columbus police are investigating an anti-Semitic attack in Olde Towne East that is receiving international attention¹⁴.

The very kind of hatred and antisemitism that led to the Holocaust never really disappeared, even after the Allied victory and the Nuremberg Trials. Recently though, it has stepped back into the light.

What this commission will do is help shine the bright light of liberty and tolerance on such hatred and on those who espouse it. There has never been a more critical time for such sunlight.

A Glaring Lack of Holocaust Knowledge and Context

Comparisons in modern day policy disagreements and political disputes with references to the Holocaust unfortunately show just how glaring the lack of knowledge of the Holocaust is. This committee can recall scenes and statements even right here in the Statehouse and on the campaign trail where certain individuals misappropriated Holocaust terminology and comparisons.

Unfortunately, those are not isolated incidents. Recent surveys and polling show the galling lack of knowledge regarding the Holocaust is much more widespread than we might have assumed. The most recent survey¹⁵, a first of its kind 50 state survey by the Claims Conference which was referenced by Senator Rulli in his sponsor testimony before the committee, ranks Ohio 32nd in Holocaust knowledge among the fifty states.

Among the findings:

³ <https://abcnews.go.com/US/jewish-communities-face-enduring-threat-us-federal-authorities/story?id=68066362>

⁴ <https://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/488919-fbi-white-supremacists-encouraging-members-to-spread>

⁵ <https://www.post-gazette.com/news/crime-courts/2020/09/24/White-supremacists-top-US-terrorist-threats-homeland-security-Wolf/stories/202009240146>

⁶ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/la-jews-take-stock-after-george-floyd-protests-batter-local-institutions/>

⁷ <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/ohio-man-arrested-terrorism-charge-after-planning-attack-jewish-synagogue>

⁸ <https://www.cleveland19.com/2019/08/18/youngstown-police-arrest-year-old-man-who-allegedly-threatened-jewish-community/>

⁹ https://www.clevelandjewishnews.com/news/local_news/police-aryan-brotherhood-member-sought-to-target-kent-state-jews/article_4af82dc0-9e03-11ea-84f8-bf7f22fb54b3.html

¹⁰ https://www.clevelandjewishnews.com/news/local_news/fbi-hate-crime-report-troubling-but-not-surprising/article_c3150f48-29e1-11eb-b860-f79ee1536fbc.html

¹¹ https://www.clevelandjewishnews.com/news/local_news/protesters-picket-dr-amy-actons-home-for-third-time/article_d2025d20-925c-11ea-9e10-732d28564173.html

¹² <https://www.cleveland.com/open/2020/04/some-ohio-coronavirus-protesters-using-anti-semitism-symbolism.html>

¹³ <https://www.cleveland.com/news/2020/11/police-investigate-swastika-other-vandalism-at-jewish-cemetery-in-cleveland.html>

¹⁴ <https://www.jta.org/quick-reads/columbus-jewish-couple-say-they-were-victims-of-anti-semitic-hate-crime-by-their-neighbor>

¹⁵ https://www.columbusjewishnews.com/news/local_news/ohio-32nd-in-holocaust-knowledge-among-millennials-gen-z/article_1a9fb12c-f6cb-11ea-be7d-0be0a440f599.html

- Nearly two-thirds of Ohio respondents did not know 6 million Jews were murdered during the Holocaust;
- Half the Ohio respondents have seen Holocaust denial or distortion online; and
- Nearly a quarter of Ohio respondents said, “the number of Jews who died has been greatly exaggerated, is a myth and did not happen, or are unsure.”

These findings have been supported by other surveys elsewhere in recent years including the 2020, 2018, and 1993 Pew surveys¹⁶, 2020 surveys in Austria¹⁷ and France¹⁸, previous 2018 Claims Conference survey¹⁹, a 2019 Canadian survey²⁰, the 2018 EU poll by CNN²¹, and a 2016 University College London survey of British youth²².

Lack of basic knowledge of the Holocaust, its scope, timeline, geographic centers, and key villains is both unnervingly widespread and stunningly deep. Still, even here, there is reason for hope. In the Ohio survey, over 80 percent of respondents believe it is important to teach about the Holocaust so that it should never happen again²³.

But if we are to make Never Again more than a slogan, now is the time to act.

The Commission Represents the Ohio Way

Many other states and nations have responded to these findings with action. Just last week Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau appointed former Justice Minister and Attorney General Irwin Cotler as his first Special Envoy on Preserving Holocaust Remembrance and Combatting Antisemitism²⁴. Various US states have commissions similar to the one proposed here, and are included in an addendum to this testimony.

But just as we must act quickly, we must act as Ohioans to craft a solution that meets our state’s needs. The commission outlined in this legislation is that solution.

The commission will work with efforts already underway and institutions already established. Many of you have seen firsthand the work of Cincinnati’s Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center²⁵, Cleveland’s Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage²⁶, and the Prejudice & Memory Exhibit at Dayton’s National Museum of the United States Air Force²⁷. You may know about local efforts in Akron²⁸, in Canton²⁹, by JewishColumbus³⁰, in Toledo³¹, and by the Youngstown Area Jewish Federation³².

The proposed commission leverages and mobilizes these cultural, educational, and community assets across the state in a unified way to educate about the horrors of the Holocaust across the length and breadth of our 88

¹⁶ <https://www.pewforum.org/2020/01/22/what-americans-know-about-the-holocaust/>

¹⁷ <https://www.dw.com/en/austrians-lack-crucial-holocaust-awareness-study-finds/a-48564260>

¹⁸ <https://time.com/5767184/holocaust-remembrance-france-survey/>

¹⁹ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/americans-believe-holocaust-education-important-have-gaps-their-knowledge-holocaust-history-180968783/>

²⁰ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/canada-holocaust-survey-remembrance-1.4994602>

²¹ <https://www.politico.eu/article/holocaust-poll-third-of-europeans-know-little-or-nothing/>

²² <https://www.holocausteducation.org.uk/research/young-people-understand-holocaust/>

²³ https://www.columbusjewishnews.com/news/local_news/ohio-32nd-in-holocaust-knowledge-among-millennials-gen-z/article_1a9fb12c-f6cb-11ea-be7d-0be0a440f599.html

²⁴ https://www.clevelandjewishnews.com/jns/human-rights-advocate-irwin-cotler-named-as-canadian-envoy-to-combat-anti-semitism/article_ce37f312-6cee-5645-92d3-e7f9be1e51eb.html

²⁵ <https://www.holocaustandhumanity.org/>

²⁶ <http://www.maltzmuseum.org/stopthehateohio/>

²⁷ <https://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/education/schools/Hands-On/Holocaust/>

²⁸ <https://akronsummitholocausteducation.org/>

²⁹ <https://www.cantonrep.com/article/20140627/NEWS/140629466>

³⁰ <https://www.dispatch.com/news/20190501/holocaust-survivors-memories-carried-on-by-second-third-generations>

³¹ <https://www.toledoblade.com/local/education/2017/03/08/Students-set-up-museum-to-teach-Holocaust-horrors/stories/20170307268>

³² <https://www.wfmi.com/story/41623536/surveys-show-a-need-for-holocaust-education-to-help-combat-antisemitism>

counties, in our K-12 schools, through Ohio's colleges and universities, in partnership with our houses of worship and community organizations, and more.

It will be a chance to use methods and programs that work for Ohio, to give teachers the chance to gain mastery of this complex subject, to provide opportunities for museums and historical centers throughout the state to engage the public, and, of course, to complement existing civic treasures such as the Ohio Holocaust & Liberators Memorial just outside these doors.

While the Holocaust was a singular event in history, as the commission's mandate is both on the Holocaust as well as genocide more broadly, there will be opportunities both to commemorate the unique atrocities and crimes of the Nazis, but also to learn universal lessons of such heinous acts.

The commission itself will have members representing some of the Administration's most critical agencies in this regard: the Adjutant General or Director of Veterans Services, Chancellor of Higher Education, and Superintendent of Public Instruction. It will include experts in the fields of Holocaust commemoration, memorial, and education. And, it will have members from the General Assembly, both the Senate and the House, from both the majority and minority caucuses. Because this commission will only succeed in its mission when it is a partnership between the legislative and executive branches of our state government.

A Legislatively Endorsed Commission is the proper way forward

We know this from our state's history. Governor Celeste created a similar council to focus on Holocaust and genocide education, but did so by executive order.

This legislation, by contrast, will give the commission the gift of time to perform its necessary work without worrying about the expiration of any executive order.

One Request for Amendment

We would request the Committee make one technical amendment. We ask to strike lines 21-23. The previous lines, 10-20 mimic exactly the United Nations definition of genocide as published in Article II of the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide³³. We believe any commission looking to commemorate and educate on genocide must conform their definition to that of the widely accepted UN Convention.

Next Steps

We understand that this Committee and the General Assembly are in the midst of a very busy lame duck session. But this legislation is on par with the other urgent matters before you.

We urge a speedy favorable report of this legislation.

Every day is another day we may lose a liberator or a survivor, and with it, their firsthand story, their eyewitness account.

Thank you. We are ready to work with the Committee, the full Senate, and the House to enact this critical and timely legislation as quickly as appropriate.

³³ https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/atrocities-crimes/Doc.1_Convention%20on%20the%20Prevention%20and%20Punishment%20of%20the%20Crime%20of%20Genocide.pdf

I am available for any questions you may have.

###

Howie Beigelman, Executive Director

Appendix 1: Coalition Members

Appendix 2: List of Active State Holocaust Commissions

Appendix 1: SB 372 Support Coalition

-  Ohio Jewish Communities
-  Jewish Community Board of Akron
-  Canton Jewish Community Federation
-  Jewish Federation of Cincinnati / JCRC Jewish Community Relations Council
-  Jewish Federation of Cleveland
-  Jewish Columbus / Jewish Community Relations Council
-  Jewish Dayton.org / Dayton JCRC Jewish Community Relations Council
-  Jewish Federation of Greater Toledo
-  Youngstown Area Jewish Federation
-  Agudath Israel of America
-  AJC Global Jewish Advocacy
-  Facing History and Ourselves
-  Hadassah
-  Kol Israel Foundation
-  Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage
-  Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center
-  NCJWCLE / NCJ Columbus
-  Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism
-  The Simon Wiesenthal Center
-  The Negev Foundation

Appendix 2: List of Active State Holocaust Commissions

Alabama Holocaust Commission ([Legislation](#)) 1999

Nevada Governor's Advisory Council on Education Relating to the Holocaust ([Legislation](#)) 1989

Florida Commissioner of Education's Task Force on Holocaust Education ([Legislation](#)) 1994

Georgia Commission on the Holocaust (First by Executive Order, then [Legislation](#)) 1986/1998

Illinois Holocaust and Genocide Commission ([Legislation](#)) 2010

Michigan Holocaust & Genocide Education ([Legislation](#)) 2016

Texas Holocaust & Genocide Commission ([Legislation](#)) 2009

Mississippi Holocaust Commission ([Legislation](#)) 2004

Missouri Holocaust Education and Awareness Commission ([Legislation](#)) (2006)

New Jersey Commission on Holocaust Education (Executive Order) 1994

North Carolina Council on the Holocaust (First by Executive Order, then [Legislation](#)) 1981/1985

Rhode Island Holocaust/Genocide Education Committee (formed to support education mandate) 2016

South Carolina Council on the Holocaust ([Legislation](#)) 1989

Tennessee Holocaust Commission ([Legislation](#)) 1984 & 1996

Governor Richard Celeste created the Ohio Council on Holocaust Education via [Executive Order](#) in 1986. After his tenure as Governor, the Council as created in the Executive Order ceased to be active as a state entity.