



**Proponent Testimony in Support of SB 221
Committee on Government Oversight & Reform | Ohio Senate | November 13, 2019
Howie Beigelman, Executive Director, Ohio Jewish Communities**

Chairman Coley, Vice Chair Huffman, Ranking Member Craig, and Members of the Committee:

As the statewide government advocacy, public affairs, and community relations voice of Ohio's eight Jewish federations, Ohio Jewish Communities submits this testimony today in support of SB 221 regarding firearms safety.

Background and Statement of Interest

This committee and the full Senate are aware of both the dangers facing nonprofit institutions such as schools, community centers, senior living facilities, and houses of worship in our community and in other faith-based or cause-focused communities like ours.

That is why, the General Assembly in partnership with both the current¹ and prior² administration, have taken steps to combat the threats and to help secure our physical campuses and protect those who study, work, and worship in them.

Before I speak to aspects of this bill, I wanted to first say thank you. Thank you of course to Senator Dolan, and Senators Hoagland and Lehner, for sponsoring this. But also, to take a moment to say thank you to all of you here and to your colleagues throughout the Legislature.

There has been vigorous debate and reaction to Governor DeWine's STRONG OHIO proposal. But at least one plank has seen broad, bipartisan and bicameral support. And, it's something this General Assembly has already funded in the current budget: nonprofit security grant programs for some of those most at risk of terror attack.

For that, our communities and others at risk, are grateful.

Ohioans at Risk

We remain worried though.

Just yesterday, the FBI released their nationwide hate crimes statistics.³ For crimes committed with a religious bias, anti-Semitic crimes account for well over half – more than 57 percent.

This month began with two stark reminders that the Midwest is still an unsafe region. The FBI arrests a Holocaust-approving white supremacist plotting to bomb Colorado's second oldest synagogue⁴ and a plea deal by two Iranian spies⁵ has them admitting to plotting against Israeli and Jewish targets here in the Midwest.⁶

¹ https://www.columbusjewishnews.com/news/local_news/new-ohio-budget-lauded-for-supporting-religious-institutions-at-ojc/article_6fbfa472-acb8-11e9-b11e-abc5b7f2e153.html

² https://www.clevelandjewishnews.com/news/local_news/state-makes-million-available-in-nonprofit-security-grants/article_a76d887a-c21f-11e6-b625-cb484d030b40.html

³ <https://forward.com/fast-forward/434661/jews-hate-crimes-antisemitism-fbi/>

⁴ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-colorado-crime/colorado-white-supremacist-charged-with-plotting-to-detonate-explosives-at-synagogue-idUSKBN1XE2CZ>

⁵ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/2-iranians-accused-of-spying-on-jewish-israeli-targets-in-us-plead-guilty/>

⁶ <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1088521/download>

Ohioans are also at risk. The FBI statistics include the eleven dead in the terror attack on the Tree of Life Synagogue, the worst anti-Semitic violence in American history. Since the Pittsburgh terror attack, the ADL counts at least 15 attempted radical attacks against the Jewish community that were foiled by law enforcement⁷, with at least two of those attempts – far higher than the law of averages would dictate - right here in Ohio.⁸

These are the plots that have been made public by law enforcement; counterterrorism officials indicate there are other active and/or secretly closed investigations not in the public domain.

We know at least one of Ohio's Joint Terrorism Task Forces is among the busiest – per agent – in the nation. An Indiana branch of the Ku Klux Klan held a rally in Dayton this past May⁹ and the murderer who mowed down Heather Heyer in Charlottesville at the Unite the Right rally was from Maumee, Ohio¹⁰. Both the Southern Poverty Law Center¹¹ and the ADL¹² have reported a rise in white supremacist activity in Ohio, including at universities, while left wing extremists continue anti-Israel activity on college campuses as well¹³. Recent white nationalist activity on campuses in Ohio include both the private (Ohio Wesleyan¹⁴ and University of Dayton)¹⁵ and the public (The Ohio State University and Miami University)¹⁶. White supremacist propaganda also showed up in heavily Jewish Bexley, a Columbus suburb¹⁷. And, the Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage in Cleveland was tagged with a Holocaust denial poster¹⁸ not even three years after a swastika was spray painted at Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati¹⁹, North America's largest Jewish studies seminary.

And, we have seen a worrying number of potential surveillance and attempted entries into synagogues and Jewish agencies here in Ohio. Police indicate the accused Toledo plotter, a homegrown violent extremist who affiliated with ISIS²⁰ and radical Islam, had even done pre-operational surveillance at the Jewish community campus.

As well, Ohio has been the site of several other recent ISIS linked arrests and convictions in Akron²¹, Columbus²², Dayton²³, and Southwest Ohio.

Lessons from Ohio Plots

It's worth focusing on both the Toledo and Youngstown plots to understand the broader safety picture.

⁷ <https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/latest-adl-data-at-least-12-white-supremacists-arrested-for-plots-attacks>

⁸ <https://www.nbc4i.com/news/state-news/report-2-ohio-men-arrested-for-alleged-anti-semitic-terrorism-plots-in-past-year/>

⁹ <https://radio.wosu.org/post/dayton-closing-downtown-streets-ahead-kkk-rally#stream/0>

¹⁰ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2019/06/28/james-fields-jr-charlottesville-sentencing-heather-heyer-unite-the-right/1587233001/>

¹¹ <https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/2019/02/20/hate-groups-ohio-kentucky-up-49-report-shows-southern-poverty-law-center/2927414002/>

¹² https://www.clevelandjewishnews.com/news/local_news/new-adl-report-anti-semitism-increased-in-ohio/article_4ef2d3e0-6b72-11e9-b481-e7717ec0982d.html

¹³ <https://www.ins.org/report-shows-uptick-in-anti-israel-activity-on-american-college-campuses/>

¹⁴ <https://www.dispatch.com/news/20191105/white-supremacist-materials-posted-at-ohio-state-ohio-wesleyan-campuses>

¹⁵ <https://www.whio.com/news/local/investigating-reports-posters-campus-from-white-nationalist-group/vxeJVrfzldzvVnevc3NLIL/>

¹⁶ <https://forward.com/fast-forward/422483/white-nationalist-miami-university/>

¹⁷ https://www.columbusjewishnews.com/news/local_news/white-supremacist-group-stickers-posted-in-downtown-bexley/article_77af8cd8-b2df-11e9-9fb0-a7132c3b8eb6.html

¹⁸ https://www.clevelandjewishnews.com/news/local_news/anti-semitic-poster-found-at-maltz-museum/article_e132b7e4-ae38-11e9-9417-3b07758e1726.html

¹⁹ <https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/crime/2017/01/03/hebrew-union-college-sign-painted-swastika/96116230/>

²⁰ <https://www.newsweek.com/toledo-fbi-holland-ohio-isis-martyrdom-jewish-synagogue-undercover-rifles-1252461>

²¹ <https://www.newsweek.com/man-who-wanted-create-isis-sleeper-cell-us-carry-out-potential-attacks-1318889>

²² <https://www.10tv.com/article/man-arrested-columbus-airport-charged-traveling-train-terrorists>

²³ <https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/crime/crime-and-courts/2019/03/11/man-convicted-supporting-terrorism-says-he-believed-isis-wasnt-evil/3130524002/>

Each was a homegrown, violent extremist, in the mold of the Pittsburgh and Poway shooters. One was a white supremacist; the other an ISIS supporter. Both were active on social media.

Because of statements they made on social media, they came to the attention of law enforcement. In each case, they ran these tips to the ground, resulting in arrests before anyone was harmed. The Toledo plotter was on the FBI's radar for some time and his arrest was as he tried purchasing weapons on a Friday night to execute a Saturday Sabbath massacre. However, the Youngstown plotter's social media comments went unnoticed by law enforcement for weeks.

So while these were instances of good old-fashioned police work they were also the result, in one case, of a citizen who saw the need to speak out. Meaning, our law enforcement, and our targeted communities, were also lucky. We can't always be lucky, and if we're asking our police to always be good, we need to ensure they have every tool they need.

Federal and State Collaboration

We believe there are several proposals in this legislation and contained in STRONG OHIO or similar legislation where there can be broad and bipartisan agreement in both chambers and with the administration, and that would work in tandem with any efforts at the federal level.

Background Checks and Safety Protection Orders

Let us make sure every court order, every mental health record, every dishonorable discharge, and more are in the system in a timely manner. Those who can't buy a weapon shouldn't be able to circumvent a system just because it's incomplete. SB 221 takes real steps towards this by getting updates into NCIC and LEADS. The Seller Protection Certificate created here is, similarly, a good first step in this process.

In the House, Rep. Plummer has legislation that would "fix NICS." We believe that too has merit as part of a final package. Both that legislation & this would utilize InnovateOhio to help relieve the burden on localities and jurisdictions.

Likewise, with safety protection orders and judicially ordered treatment, the proposed legislation is a meaningful improvement over the current situation, and utilizes tweaks to current law to provide another opportunity for law enforcement or concerned family and friends to step in, with appropriate due process, and try to ensure those who are dangerous to themselves and others are not able to do harm.

Again, we note in the House that Rep. Greenspan has a similar bill that could be within a final package as enacted.

Mental Health Counselors

We appreciate the focus within this legislation on mental health issues, and, as a community we recognize that not only is mental illness not an excuse for violence, many times those who do become radicalized and who commit acts of domestic terrorism may have unmet and untreated mental health issues.

Specifically, there is now an opportunity to ensure mental health counselors are in every high school across the state. High school may be the last time that, as a state, we have the opportunity to interact with every teenager across Ohio and to assess, intervene, and treat mental health needs that could otherwise spiral into something very deadly and rather dangerous.

Other Opportunities and Needs

Finally, we would also urge the committee and the General Assembly to continue their work in the security grants arena, as well as expanding needed funding for specific public-private partnerships to detect online and cyber threats before an attack, for trauma kits and real-time communications needs to help in incident management and crisis response, as well as for other next-generation technologies that will predict and prevent attacks or deter and defend those in danger during an attack, saving the lives of civilians and emergency responders in the event of a worst-case scenario.

Favorable Action Requested

We urge the committee and the Senate to move this process forward in a bipartisan and bicameral fashion.

Thank you again, and we look forward to working with you to find the areas of agreement here and helping make Ohio safer today and tomorrow. I am happy to take any questions.

###