

**Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),
Hearing before the Senate Judiciary Committee
On “Responses to the Increase in Religious Hate Crimes”
May 2, 2017**

Over the past many months, like most Vermonters and Americans across this country, I have been horrified by the alarming rise in hate crimes against our fellow citizens and neighbors. Each day seemingly brings a new report of violence or harassment targeting some of our nation’s most diverse and vibrant communities. This trend must not be allowed to continue.

By any measure, statistics documenting the surge in crimes against Americans because of their religion, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation are disturbing. The most recent FBI statistics show that hate crimes against Muslims soared 67 percent in 2015 and reached levels not seen since the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attack. Hate crimes against Jewish, Sikh, Black, Hispanic, and LGBTQ Americans have also continued at a startling pace. In just the first ten days after the November 2016 election, the Southern Poverty Law Center reported that there were over 850 crimes and other incidents of harassment against Americans because of their faith, skin color, or sexual orientation. And already in the first few months of 2017, we have seen bomb threats targeting Jewish community centers and desecration of Jewish cemeteries. We have seen arson and vandalism of dozens of mosques across the United States. We have seen people murdered and assaulted because they happen to look Muslim or Sikh, or simply because they are seen as immigrants to our great country.

In 2009, I was proud to partner with Senator Ted Kennedy to pass the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act. This historic bill made it easier for Federal authorities to investigate and prosecute crimes of racial, ethnic, or religious violence. It also provided additional resources to State, local, and tribal law enforcement to address hate crimes. This was a significant step toward strengthening our laws and giving law enforcement the tools they need. Unfortunately, the dramatic rise that we are now seeing is further proof that more still needs to be done to protect the most vulnerable among us.

I commend the Chairman and Ranking Member for holding this hearing. It is important that we hear from the Department of Justice on how they intend to address this problem, and that we hear from organizations like the Leadership Conference for Civil and Human Rights, the Anti-Defamation League, and the International Association of Chiefs of Police. Each of these organizations brings a unique perspective and understands that solving this problem requires a community-oriented approach. There are many other organizations doing tremendous work to build bridges and increase respect and tolerance for all—organizations like Muslim Advocates, the Sikh Coalition, and the Human Rights Campaign continue in their tireless efforts to better our country. I hope that these groups will be able to share their stories before the Judiciary Committee so that they can provide us with their insight and recommendations. I am also grateful that this Committee will hear Dr. Prabhjot Singh’s story, which underscores that this problem must not be lost in statistics. We must not forget that each incident carries a tremendous human cost that will continue to affect the lives of the victims, their families, and the targeted community.

That is why it is imperative that this hearing today is not the end of our efforts to address violence and harassment of our fellow Americans. One unfortunate byproduct of this surge in violence and bigotry is that these horrific incidents are beginning to almost appear routine and common-place. We cannot allow that to happen. All of us – Democrats and Republicans – must speak with one loud and unified voice to denounce the toxic and divisive rhetoric that has infected our political discourse. It is dangerous to cast aspersions or suspicion on our neighbors and fellow citizens simply because they belong to a particular religious, ethnic, or racial group. That kind of rhetoric makes us less safe. It encourages hate crimes and feeds into the warped worldview of those who believe it is acceptable to harass and intimidate anyone who does not look or act like them.

I have made it clear over the past many months that statements by this President and from his senior officials alarm and trouble me. I remain concerned by the hateful beliefs and conspiracy theories espoused by White House Chief Strategist Steve Bannon, the President's national security aide Sebastian Gorka, and others within this administration. I hope that this administration will begin to take steps to heal, rather than perpetuate and exploit, divides in our country. There is no place in this country for any form of bigotry, racism, anti-Semitism, or Islamophobia. We must all stand together to reject it. I hope we will continue to take positive steps forward together.

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