

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 2, 2017

The Honorable Jeff Sessions
United States Attorney General
Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20530

Attorney General Sessions,

We write to urge you to make combatting hate crimes a major focus at the Department of Justice and prioritize funding for the protection of civil rights as you evaluate budget priorities. As you have no doubt seen, there has been an alarming increase in bias-motivated violence in our country. Many members of racial, ethnic and religious minority communities, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people, live in very real fear for their safety. They are scared, and it is incumbent upon you as our nation's chief law enforcement officer to demonstrate to them and all Americans that discrimination and violence against any individual because of who they are, how they worship, or who they love will not be tolerated in our country.

In the aftermath of the election, there have been hundreds of documented instances of discrimination, harassment and even violence against members of minority communities, as well as increased hostility in our nation's schools. In just the few weeks after Election Day, the Southern Poverty Law Center collected reports of nearly 900 episodes of harassment and intimidation. More recently, arsonists have attacked mosques in Florida and Texas, dozens of Jewish Community Centers across the country have received repeated bomb threats and Jewish cemeteries were vandalized in Missouri and Pennsylvania. Last week, a Kansas man opened fire on two Indian immigrants, killing one, while yelling "get out of our country," according to witnesses.

Beyond this recent spike, there has been a longer-term increase in these types of appalling incidents. Last November, the FBI issued its annual report on hate crimes that occurred in 2015. The Bureau found a seven percent increase in these incidents from 2014, including an astonishing 67 percent jump in such crimes against Muslims. Anti-Semitic incidents remained the most prevalent type of crime based on anti-religious bias reported. More than half of all reported racially motivated hate crimes were motivated by anti-Black or anti-African-American bias. The number of anti-LGBT crimes also increased compared to 2014.

Against this troubling backdrop, year after year there are problems with the extent to which many state and local jurisdictions report hate crimes, making it likely that the FBI's annual reports undercount the number of hate incidents. Around the country, 17 percent of police and sheriff's departments have not reported a single hate crime in six years. Others report hate crimes irregularly, adding to the unreliability of the statistics reported by the FBI.

During your confirmation, many of us expressed concerns about your commitment to enforcing federal hate crimes laws, given your opposition to the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act as a Senator. You stated publicly during your confirmation hearing that you would indeed enforce this law. Now, more than ever, we need a clear demonstration of your commitment to doing so.

We urge you to include full funding for the Justice Department's Community Relations Service and Civil Rights Division, both as you work with Congress to address funding for the Department of Justice for the remainder of Fiscal Year 2017, and as you develop your Fiscal Year 2018 budget request. The Community Relations Service oversees a force of professional mediators and trainers charged with bringing together communities in conflict to help them enhance their ability through local, independent mechanisms to prevent and resolve existing and future concerns. The Civil Rights Division leads the Department's efforts to uphold the civil and constitutional rights of all Americans, and enforce federal civil rights and hate crimes laws. Together, these components of the Department play a critical role in addressing discrimination and bias-motivated crime in our country.

We also believe it is imperative that you reaffirm the Department's commitment to work with state and local officials in prosecuting hate crimes, in working with state and local jurisdictions to improve their assessment and reporting of such crimes, and to prosecute such crimes at the federal level when appropriate.

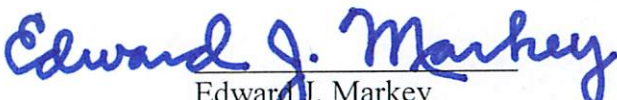
We must do everything we can to protect our shared values as Americans and ensure that this is a country united in embracing the diversity of its people. It is imperative that the Department, under your leadership, send a strong message that violence borne out of hatred based on race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity or any other characteristic will not be tolerated. We the undersigned stand as your full partners in the effort to ensure equal justice for all.

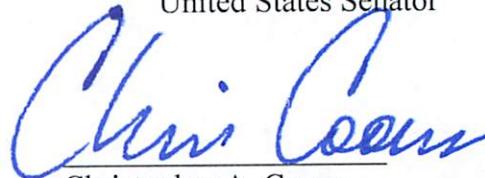
Sincerely,


Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator


Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senator


Richard Blumenthal
United States Senator


Edward J. Markey
United States Senator

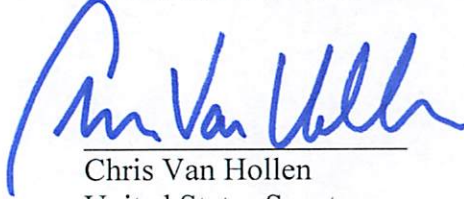

Christopher A. Coons
United States Senator



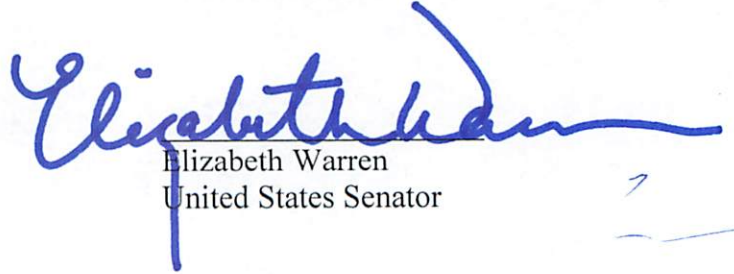
Sheldon Whitehouse
United States Senator



Bernard Sanders
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator



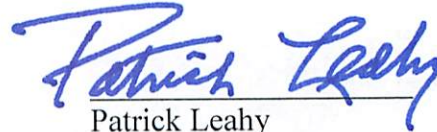
Al Franken
United States Senator



Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator



Ron Wyden
United States Senator



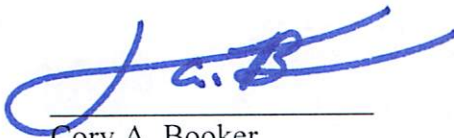
Patrick Leahy
United States Senator



Robert Menendez
United States Senator



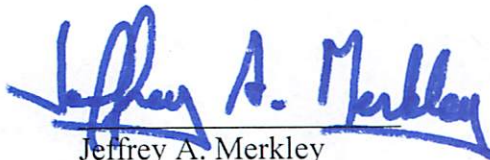
Kirsten Gillibrand
United States Senator



Cory A. Booker
United States Senator



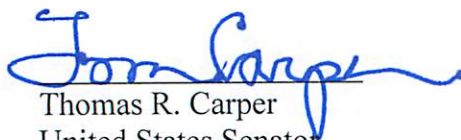
Sherrod Brown
United States Senator



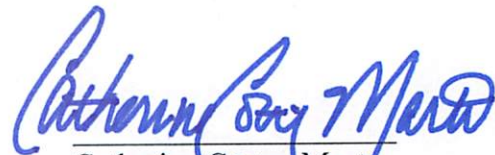
Jeffrey A. Merkley
United States Senator



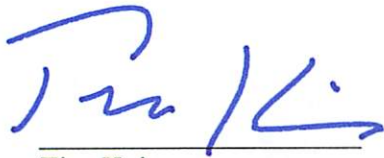
Debbie Stabenow
United States Senator



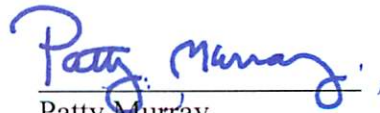
Thomas R. Carper
United States Senator



Catherine Cortez Masto
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Patty Murray
United States Senator



Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator



Mark Warner
United States Senator