



July 12, 2021

The Honorable Gary C. Peters
Chairman
Committee on Homeland Security
and Governmental Affairs
United State Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Robert J. Portman
Ranking Member
Committee on Homeland Security
and Governmental Affairs
United State Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Peters and Ranking Member Portman:

We commend you for scheduling the mark-up of S.2123, the “Pray Safe Act” this week, and respectfully urge Members of the Committee to support the bill. The consideration of S.2123 comes at an unprecedented time for faith- and community-based security.

Only two weeks ago, the Department of Homeland Security’s Office of Intelligence & Analysis assessed violent extremists might seek increased opportunities for attacks this summer.¹ Three days later, a rabbi was threatened at gun point and stabbed 9 times in an alleged hate crime outside of a Jewish day school and synagogue in Boston.² This was not an isolated incident.

Eight weeks ago, Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas warned that Racially or Ethnically Motivated Violent Extremists presented the most lethal threats among Domestic Violent Extremists and Attorney General Garland warned that the deadly consequences of domestic violent extremism included, “the burning and bombing of places of worship throughout the country, as well as other acts of hate-fueled violence that are less likely to make national news but that still terrorize entire communities.”³ These concerns are not merely theoretical.

In April, Brad Wiegmann, Deputy Assistant Attorney General, National Security Division, recounted some of the most serious DVE attacks in recent years, including:

- The killing of nine African-American parishioners engaged in religious worship and Bible study at Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, in June 2015.

¹ OIA Intelligence Brief, 28 June 2021 (IA-52535-21)

² NBC-10 Boston, July 8, 2021; Link: <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/man-accused-stabbing-boston-rabbi-charged-hate-crimes-n1273437>

³ Senate Appropriations Committee, “Domestic Violent Extremism in America,” May 12, 2021; Link: <https://www.appropriations.senate.gov/hearings/domestic-violent-extremism-in-america>

- The bomb plot against a mosque used by Somali immigrants in Garden City, Kansas, in October 2016.
- The killing of 11 Jewish congregants gathered to engage in religious worship at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in October 2018.
- The bomb plot against the Temple Emanuel Synagogue in Pueblo, Colorado, in November 2019.⁴

The scope of the threat is considerable. According to the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), “there are approximately 350,000 to 400,000 individual congregations within the United States. Each represents a critical part of the local community, and houses of worship of all faiths are traditionally regarded as sanctuaries that value openness and inclusion. At the same time, that openness, social prominence, and symbolic importance create unique security challenges.”⁵ In response, CISA recommends Houses of Worship develop and implement sound security practices to mitigate future incidents.⁶ However, for many faith- and community-based organizations, knowing about the availability of and navigating available resources can be daunting and a significant bar to accessing them.

The Pray Safe Act will help effectuate CISA’s recommendation and counter the challenges to accessing critical resources. The bill will establish a federal clearinghouse through which faith-based organizations and houses of worship can access information on safety and security best practices, available federal grant programs, and training opportunities.

Faith-based and communal institutions across the United States ought to be free from fear when gathering for religious worship and service. Protecting the ability of all Americans to live out their faith and gather as a community without fear or harm is one of the most important duties of the federal government. For these reasons, we thank Ranking Member Portman for introducing the Pray Safe Act with Senator Maggie Hassan and for Chairman Peters and Senators Ron Johnson and Jacky Rosen for co-sponsoring the bill. And for these reasons, we respectfully urge the Committee to favorably report the bill without objection.

Sincerely,



Robert Goldberg
Senior Director, Legislative Affairs
The Jewish Federations of North America

⁴ House Appropriations Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science, “Violent Extremism and Domestic Terrorism in America: The Role and Response of DOJ,” April 29, 2021; Link: <https://appropriations.house.gov/events/hearings/violent-extremism-and-domestic-terrorism-in-america-the-role-and-response-of-doj>

⁵ Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency; December 18, 2020; Link: https://www.cisa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Mitigating%20Attacks%20on%20Houses%20of%20Worship%20Security%20Guide_508.pdf

⁶ Ibid.