

Jewish centers, schools react to threats and cemetery vandalism

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Rabbi Joshua Bolton of the University of Pennsylvania's Hillel center surveys vandalized headstones at Mount Carmel Cemetery on February 27, 2017, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The headstones were damaged less than a week after similar vandalism in Missouri, authorities said. AP Photo/Jacqueline Larma

Jewish centers and schools across the nation dealt with another surge of bomb threats Monday. In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, officials made plans to repair and restore hundreds of vandalized headstones at a Jewish cemetery.

Jewish Community Centers (JCCs) and day-schools in at least a dozen states received threats, according to the JCC Association of North America. No bombs were found. All 21 buildings — 13 community centers and eight schools — were cleared by Monday afternoon and had continued normal operations, the association said.

It was the fifth round of bomb threats against Jewish institutions since January. The latest threats prompted outrage and frustration among Jewish leaders as well as calls for an aggressive federal response to put a stop to it.

JCC Calls For Swift Action

"The Justice Department, Homeland Security, the FBI and the White House, alongside Congress and local officials, must speak out — and speak out forcefully — against this scourge of anti-Semitism impacting communities across the country," David Posner said. He is an official with the JCC Association of North America. "Members of our community must see swift and concerted action from federal officials to identify and capture the perpetrator or perpetrators who are trying to instill anxiety and fear in our communities."

The FBI and the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division are probing the threats.

U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions called the vandalism and bomb threats serious, unacceptable behavior and said the department will "do what it can to assist in pushing back ... and prosecuting anybody that we can prove to be a part of it."

"We are a nation that is a diverse constituency, and we don't need these kind of activities," Sessions said.

Police, Mayor Say Vandalism Was Not Random

In Philadelphia, police investigated what they called an "abominable crime" after several hundred headstones were damaged during the weekend at Mount Carmel Cemetery, a Jewish cemetery dating to the late 1800s, said Steven Rosenberg. He is chief marketing officer of the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia.

Police said the vandalism appeared to be targeted at the Jewish community, though they cautioned they had not confirmed the motive. Philadelphia Mayor Jim Kenney said authorities were doing everything possible to find those "who desecrated this final resting place."

"I'm hoping it was maybe just some drunk kids," said Aaron Mallin, who discovered the damage during a visit to his father's grave. "But the fact that there's so many, it leads one to think it could have been targeted," he told WPVI-TV.

The vandalism comes less than a week after a Jewish cemetery in suburban St. Louis was targeted. More than 150 headstones there were damaged, many of them tipped over.

Both acts of vandalism spurred offers of help.

A "Cowardly Act"

The Philadelphia Building & Construction Trades Council, an umbrella group for more than 50 union locals that work in the construction industry, offered to repair the damage at Mount Carmel free of charge. The group called it a "cowardly act of anti-Semitism that cannot be tolerated." A community cleanup organized by the Jewish Federation was to begin Tuesday with as many as 50 volunteers per hour.

In Missouri, a Muslim crowdfunding effort to support the vandalized Jewish cemetery near St. Louis had raised more than \$136,000 in a day. Organizers announced they would use some of the money for the Philadelphia cemetery.

Monday's bomb threats caused no physical damage but were no less troubling.

"There's plenty of people who are scared," Rosenberg said, denouncing the hoaxsters as "an embarrassment to civilized society."

Security Strengthened Across Community Centers

Some 200 people were evacuated from a Jewish Community Center in York, Pennsylvania, after a caller told the front desk there was a bomb in the building, said Melissa Plotkin, the York JCC's director of community engagement and diversity. Police entered the building and cleared it, she said.

Pennsylvania Governor Tom Wolf has ties to the York center, having served on its board. He called the bomb threats and cemetery vandalism inexcusable.

"These acts are cowardly and disturbing," Wolf told reporters on a conference call. "We must find those responsible and hold them accountable for these hate crimes."

Jewish centers and schools in other states also were threatened, according to the JCC Association of North America. They included Alabama, Delaware, Florida, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Rhode Island and Virginia.

Since January, the group has tracked 90 incidents in 30 states and Canada.

Paul Goldenberg is director of the Secure Community Network. It is a nonprofit founded by several national Jewish groups to strengthen security in the Jewish community. He said Jewish Community Centers and other Jewish institutions have many detailed security standards in place.

After dealing with Monday's threats, he said, the "Jewish community is back in business."