

Government agencies urged to speak out against a wave of anti-Semitism

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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 faced another round of bomb threats last Monday. Meanwhile, officials in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, made plans to repair 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 affected, including 13 community centers and eight schools, were cleared by Monday afternoon and had resumed normal operations, the association said.

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

Government Agencies Are Investigating

David Posner is an official with the JCC Association of North America. He said the Justice Department, Homeland Security, the FBI and the White House, with lawmakers in Congress and local officials, must speak out forcefully against this anti-Semitism affecting communities across the country. Anti-Semitism is hostility or hatred toward people of Jewish descent.

"Members of our community must see swift and concerted action from federal officials" toward those trying to spread fear, Posner said.

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

U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions is the head of the Department of Justice, which enforces the laws. He 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."

Sessions said the country has many different kinds of people. He added, "We don't need these kind of activities."

19th Century Jewish Cemetery Vandalized

In Philadelphia, police were investigating after several hundred tombstones were damaged during the weekend at Mount Carmel Cemetery, said Steven Rosenberg. He is chief marketing officer of the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia. Mount Carmel is a Jewish cemetery dating to the late 1800s.

Police said the vandalism appeared to have been targeted at the Jewish community. However, they said they had not confirmed a reason for it. 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. He 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 a local TV station.

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

Both acts of vandalism led to people offering to help.

Community Comes Together To Clean Up

The Philadelphia Building & Construction Trades Council is a group of more than 50 union locals that work in the construction industry. Its workers 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 set to begin the next day with as many as 50 volunteers per hour.

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

Governor Says The Acts Are Inexcusable

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

"There's plenty of people who are scared," Rosenberg said. He called those behind the threats "an embarrassment to civilized society."

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. She is 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 in a conference call Monday. "We must find those responsible and hold them accountable for these hate crimes."

Many Incidents Already This Year

Jewish centers and schools in other states also were threatened, said 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 group founded by several national Jewish groups to strengthen safety in the Jewish community. He said Jewish Community Centers and other Jewish institutions have extensive safety standards in place.

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