Developing an "Antisemitism Awareness" Public Education Program: An Initiative of Montgomery County Municipalities

Background

Montgomery County is home to approximately 105,000 Jewish residents out of a total population of 1.1 million. Our county has many elected officials who are Jewish and a vibrant Jewish religious, cultural, and political scene. As one of the most diverse counties in the country, this would be the last place to expect a spate of hate incidents directed at the Jewish community, yet that is exactly what is taking place. In just the past several months there have been physical assaults and Nazi Swastikas have been found at area high schools and middle schools, in public parks and in leaflets deposited in front of Jewish homes.

According to a recent report, in 2022, the Montgomery County Police Department reported 48 anti-Jewish bias incidents, up 55% compared to 2021. This was far more than any other religious-based bias incident, with nearly half of the 2022 incidents occurring in the last four months of the year, according to police data. In addition, roughly 85% of the state's religious-based hate crimes are directed against Jews.

In response to this rising threat, the Montgomery County Council and County Executive have taken two concrete actions that we applaud.

First, the County Council passed a resolution on November 1, 2022, to address and combat antisemitism. At its core, this resolution defined antisemitism for county residents as well as government responses to such hate. Here's the definition:

> *Antisemitism is a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.*

Second, County Executive Elrich announced on January 30, 2023 the disbursement of $800,000 in grants to local organizations to improve security and deter hate crimes through the County's Nonprofit Security Grants program. Countering antisemitic activities is included in these grants.

However, much more must be done. Therefore, we believe that it is crucial for local municipalities in Montgomery County -- which are the first level of public engagement for our residents -- to engage in countering this scourge through direct activities that educate our residents about the challenge that we as an entire community are facing. When one group of our residents is unsafe, all of our residents are unsafe.

Resolution

Whereas, we in Montgomery County have seen a sharp increase in the incidents of antisemitic incidents that have horrified County residents of all faiths;

Whereas, the County Council unanimously passed a resolution condemning antisemitism and all forms of hate speech and bigotry towards any racial or ethnic group;

Whereas the County Council resolution states that Montgomery County commits to countering antisemitism and hate through engagement with community leaders; and

Whereas, we elected municipal officials in Montgomery County believe that the voices of our communities should be added to the County's, in expressing our condemnation of these antisemitic acts,

Therefore, we, as local elected municipal leaders of Montgomery County, resolve the following:

Antisemitism has no place in our communities, at our schools, in our public areas, and on our doorsteps. As local elected leaders, we fully condemn this age-old hatred of the Jewish people and stand in solidarity with our Jewish residents.

We stand firmly against any and all actions that aim to intimidate our Jewish residents through the use of hate speech, display of hate symbols, such as Nazi Swastikas, and through physical assault. We oppose with equal fervor, any expression of hate or bigotry against people of any racial, religious, ethnic identity, or sexual orientation.

We support activities undertaken in our schools that educate our children about the history of antisemitism, raise awareness of this bigotry, and encourage students to oppose antisemitism and other hate speech and activities when they see or hear of them.

We also believe that activities must take place in our communities to raise greater public awareness about antisemitism, both historically and contemporaneously, and commit to implementing a public awareness campaign against antisemitism that engages every municipality in Montgomery County.

This campaign will be comprised of public "antisemitism awareness" events in differing municipalities of the county this calendar year. We will seek the broadest possible public involvement in these activities.

We will work with experts and leaders, such as the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, the Jewish Community Relations Council, the Maryland Municipal League's Montgomery County chapter, and local law enforcement and other entities, to provide a full spectrum of topics to increase awareness of antisemitism and hate in our communities. We believe that vigorous, consistent public education will provide the most effective defense against this and other age-old hatreds that have no place in our dynamic, diverse, and inclusive communities.

<u>Draft Action Plan – Events to be held in Municipalities in 2023 [not part of Resolution]:</u>

Each participating municipality will offer community meeting space so experts and leaders can have the opportunity to host an event. The municipality will publicize the event – including its summary – to its residents, and also invite the attendance of residents from other municipalities. The events will be both in-person and online, so that as many of our residents as possible across the County can participate.

Potential Topics for the five "Antisemitism Awareness" events:

1. Status of antisemitic hate crimes in our area.
2. How to discuss antisemitism with your children.
3. How antisemitism can be dealt with in your community.
4. The Holocaust and roots of historic antisemitism.
5. Broader trends of hate in the U.S. and how communities can counter them.