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Countering Hate

The urgency of this moment

By Daniel Staffenberg and Jonathan Zur

The numbers are staggering. The Anti-Defamation League's recently released "Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents" documented 1,879 attacks against Jewish people and institutions in the United States last year.

This total marked a 48% increase over 2016 and a 99% increase over 2015. Statistics from the FBI, the Virginia Office of the Attorney General and other sources reflect a similar rise in hate crimes targeting the Jewish, Muslim and African American communities, LGBT people, immigrants and many other groups in Virginia and across the country.

The Richmond region is sadly not immune to these realities. The recent anti-Semitic, racist and threatening graffiti at Godwin

High School and in Henrico County are just two examples.

That the three individuals allegedly responsible for these acts have been apprehended is a relief, but the need to actively confront hate remains. Far too frequently, the Jewish Community Federation of Richmond and the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities receive reports of bias or bullying at local schools, threats directed at houses of worship or harassment in public spaces. Whether widely publicized or known only by those targeted, such incidents cause hurt and inspire fear.

We are gratified by the outpouring of support and concern from people of all backgrounds in the immediate aftermath of hatred. For example, this solidarity was demonstrated by the more than 2,500 people gathered in unity just days after

the tragic shooting at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh.

We regularly receive meaningful expressions of care following hateful acts. These messages let those targeted know that they are not alone. Such outreach is important and sincerely appreciated.

But the work of fighting anti-Semitism, racism and all forms of bigotry must happen all the time, and especially to prevent incidents from occurring. Proactive work must take place in our schools, workplaces and throughout our communities. The Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities has developed a three-part framework for ways that people can ACT to counter hate: Analyze, Commit and Teach.

First, we recommend that individuals analyze how stereotypes and bias have shaped



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you, knowingly and unknowingly. Ask yourself what early messages you received about different groups. Identify opportunities to interact with people from different backgrounds and reflect on the power dynamics in those settings. Explore where you can access information that challenges your biases.

With that foundation, you then commit to stepping out of your comfort zone. Reflect on what is keeping you from having the hard conversations. What makes them hard for you? And how can

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you overcome those barriers? Additionally, search for local events and organizations that provide opportunities to connect across lines of difference. It is also helpful to prepare some phrases and actions to have ready in case you are confronted with hate.

Finally, it is critical to teach what you are learning. Be a light to others by speaking up when you hear misinformation and advocate for inclusive policies and practices. Ask yourself: Who is most harmed by inaction if hate isn't confronted? Explore what conditions allow hatred to exist in our community. Identify opportunities to advocate for policies that stand against hate and advance equity.

What does the ACT model look like in practice? Over the past six months, the Jewish Community Federation of Richmond has joined with the Islamic Center of Henrico, Islamic Center of Virginia, Muslim Community Center of Chesterfield, VCU Muslim Student Association, West End Islamic Center and Randolph-Macon Hill to convene "Stronger than Hate."

Members of the Muslim and Jewish communities have come together to

socialize, build trusting relationships and plan volunteer opportunities.

Similarly, the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities' Standing Together program is a diverse, interfaith coalition that engages the greater Richmond region to stand in solidarity with targeted communities by promoting justice and advancing human dignity, inclusion and equity. This group has convened many community events to support learning, relationship building and demonstrations of solidarity.

But there is so much more to be done. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. This is no time for apathy or complacency. This is a time for vigorous and positive action." This moment in 2019 demands the same urgency that Dr. King spoke of in 1967. For it is going to take all of us working together to fight the rising tide of bias.

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