



Establishing a Uniform Bias Response Hotline in Washington

Senate Bill 5427 / House Bill 1410 (2023)

The Landscape of Hate in Washington State

The FBI reported 576 hate crime incidents in Washington state in 2021—up 28% from 451 in 2020. In Washington, communities are experiencing racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, anti-AAPI hate, and other forms of prejudice. However, the reported level of hate may not encapsulate the full scale of hate and bias incidents due to consistent underreporting.

Unfortunately, **there is no uniform statewide entity responsible for assisting victims of bias incidents in Washington**, which contributes to chronic underreporting of both bias incidents and hate crimes. Instead, we rely on FBI data to track hate crime incidents, which utilizes often incomplete law enforcement data since jurisdictions are not mandated to report.

Many barriers lower the likelihood that victims will report to law enforcement. Members of marginalized groups sometimes have an adversarial relationship with law enforcement. In addition, victims of hate crimes may not report because they believe conviction is unlikely or because the incident does not reach the threshold of a hate crime. This limits their access to existing support networks and limits the tracking of hate and bias immensely, despite the deep impact these incidents can have on victims and communities.

The Legislation – Establishing a Bias Response Program in Washington

The Bias Response Hotline is a victim support and referral hotline and online portal that collects anonymized data to bolster incident tracking. Advocates work to connect victims to existing community and government resources to provide support for victims.

A Bias Response Hotline incorporating uniform bias response and holistic victim support services could increase data tracking, bolster the utilization of existing resources, and encourage reporting to law enforcement.

Demonstrated Success

Hate crimes in Washington are chronically underreported, and there is little to no tracking of bias incidents. As seen in Oregon, creating a uniform body to coordinate bias tracking increases reporting. As of November 2022, the Oregon Bias Response Hotline reported a monthly average of 222. Developing a stronger understanding of the scope of bias in Washington State is fundamental for combatting the problem. Bolstering tracking efforts will also highlight which law enforcement agencies need further training on identifying and addressing hate crimes and bias incidents, which will ultimately make our communities safer.

In the program's inaugural year, Oregon saw a significant increase in bias incident reporting, documenting a 59% increase in reports. In 2022 alone, the hotline received 2,890 total reports, with a monthly average of 241. Most of the incidents reported were bias incidents that did not meet the threshold of hate crime, meaning that they would likely go uncaptured through conventional tracking.



Housing the Program

Within Washington, the Attorney General's office would be the ideal location to house the Hotline. The Attorney General's Office has the necessary resources and infrastructure to house such a Hotline. There is also some precedent for housing a hotline or tip line in the AG's office in WA; for example the AG's office runs a tip line for youth abuse cases.

Supporting Organizations

Organizations who have signed in support of the bill include the Latino Civic Alliance, OCA – Greater Seattle, the National Council of Jewish Women, the Urban League of Metropolitan Seattle, the Jewish Community Relations Council, the Washington State LGBTQ Commission, the Spokane County Human Rights Task Force, and the Holocaust Center for Humanity.

Conclusion

A Hotline staffed by non-law enforcement personnel will generate more trust between members of historically marginalized communities and state social services. If victims of bias incidents receive meaningful support or compensation through the program, it could also bolster faith in government.

If perpetrators seek to disempower their victims, having the Hotline as a resource for victims will limit offenders' power. Empowering victims also serves as a deterrent for possible offenders. A collaborative report by Stanford Law School and Policy Lab and the Brennan Center for Justice found that social service supports, such as the Hotline, can operate as a bulwark against hate crimes.

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Questions?

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