

**TESTIMONY: UJA-FEDERATION OF NEW YORK**  
**Before the Joint Fiscal Committees of the New York State Legislature**  
**Public Protection Hearing for Fiscal Year 2026-2027**

**Submitted by:**  
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On behalf of UJA-Federation of New York, our network of nonprofit partners and those we serve, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony.

Established more than 100 years ago, UJA-Federation of New York is one of the nation’s largest local philanthropies. Central to UJA’s mission is to care for those in need—identifying and meeting the needs of New Yorkers of all backgrounds and Jews everywhere. UJA supports an expansive network of nearly 100 nonprofit organizations serving those that are most vulnerable and in need of programs and services and allocates roughly \$200 million each year to combat poverty and food insecurity, nurture mental health and well-being, respond to crises here and across the globe, and strengthen Jewish life.

**Protecting Safe Access to Worship and Health Care**

The FY 26-27 Executive Budget proposes strengthening state law to protect people entering, present in, or leaving health care facilities or places of worship from criminal and aggravated interference, while respecting First Amendment rights.

All New Yorkers should be able to gather freely and without fear of targeted harassment or intimidation. Ensuring safe access to churches, mosques, temples and other religious spaces is essential for upholding this core value and constitutional right. However, this essential freedom is being challenged with increasing frequency, threatening the safety and well-being of communities and congregants.

If enacted, this legislation would safeguard individuals from harassment, intimidation, and obstruction when accessing a house of worship or medical care. It would do this by:

- Creating a twenty-five-foot buffer zone near health care facilities and places of worship, prohibiting certain conduct in places including parking lots, driveways, entrances, exits and adjacent public sidewalks;
- Making it a crime to demonstrate with intent to alarm and annoy individuals seeking to enter, exit, or use a health care facility or place of religious worship;
- Updating the definition of place of religious worship and health care facility to ensure comprehensive coverage and protection and;

- Ensuring violations remain consistent with current law and range from Class A misdemeanors to Class C felonies.

New York has seen an alarming rise in incidents of harassment, hate, and intimidation, with more than 550 religiously motivated hate crimes reported to the state in 2024. Incidents include threats, calls for violence, and vandalism. Members of many faith traditions—including Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, and others—have been deeply impacted by these disturbing events, underscoring the need for real change and action on the part of government to protect religious liberties.

Most recently, there were concerning events with protesters chanting support for Hamas and antisemitic slogans just steps away from individuals entering synagogues. These actions have intensified concerns among worshippers and community members, inspiring a climate of fear and intimidation. Faith communities recognize that protecting the wellbeing and dignity of one group ultimately strengthens the security and freedom of all faith groups. Sacred religious spaces must remain protected from intimidation so that everyone can worship peacefully and without apprehension.

The proposed legislation seeks to carefully balance the right to peaceful protest and free speech with the need to protect religious freedoms and public safety. By establishing a buffer zone, this bill does not mute dissident voices; instead, the new statute forges a “neutral ground,” ensuring that one’s First Amendment rights do not physically infringe upon another person’s right to access essential health care or enter a house of worship.

The proposed legislation included in the FY26-27 Executive Budget reflects New York’s commitment to protecting access to health care facilities and places of worship for all residents. It allows for public protests and debate, while ensuring that the immediate perimeter of a medical facility or religious institution remains a place of refuge for New Yorkers. Through protecting parking lots, driveways, and other areas, the legislation closes gaps in current laws ensuring that from the moment someone arrives to the moment they leave they are shielded from the threat of physical obstruction or intimidation.

**UJA urges the Legislature to include legislation in the enacted budget that will protect access to places of worship and health care facilities, while upholding one’s right to free expression, and ensuring safer communities throughout New York state.**

**Securing Communities Against Hate Crimes (SCAHC):**

Since the attack on Israel by Hamas on October 7, 2023, there has been a surge in hate and bias incidents targeting the New York Jewish community. According to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), antisemitic incidents in the United States saw an almost 400% increase within the first two weeks of the war. This is on top of the 39% increase in antisemitic incidents seen by the Jewish community in New York from 2021 to 2022. In New York, reported antisemitic incidents in 2024 rose by 18%, reaching 1,437 total incidents – the highest number recorded in any state across the country last year.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://nynj.adl.org/resources/report/2024-audit-antisemitic-incidents>

UJA has taken steps to mobilize the community and other allies to unequivocally denounce anti-Jewish hate, as well as stepped up in several other ways, including:

- Strengthening the work of the Community Security Initiative (CSI) by allocating philanthropic emergency dollars to bolster security at 400 under-resourced Jewish communal institutions in the New York area.
- Significantly supplementing funding to 11 Hillels (serving over 20 campuses) to strengthen Jewish programming, support mental health, increase campus organizers, and provide legal counsel for students and academics facing harassment.
- Providing training and material to DEI and HR professionals to help them understand the contemporary face of antisemitism and supporting Jewish employees in the workplace, ensuring that they know their rights and know where to go if they experience harassment.

The state's Securing Communities Against Hate Crimes program is another mechanism that can be used to limit hateful attacks on vulnerable institutions. The state provides grants to nonprofit organizations at risk of hate crimes or attacks because of their ideology, beliefs, or missions. This funding allows community-based organizations to secure their facilities and better protect individuals and families they serve. Grants can fund interior or exterior security improvements, such as alarms, panic buttons, fences, shatter-resistant glass and public address systems, among other items. Funds also may be used to cover costs associated with security training and enhance an organization's cybersecurity.<sup>2</sup>

**The Governor's Executive Budget proposal includes a \$35 million capital investment for the Securing Communities Against Hate Crimes Program. UJA urges the Legislature to support this investment.**

### **Conclusion**

UJA-Federation of New York respectfully asks for your consideration and support for Protecting Safe Access to Worship and Health Care legislation and the Securing Communities Against Hate Crime program. Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony. Please contact Faith Behum, [behumf@ujafedny.org](mailto:behumf@ujafedny.org) with any questions.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.governor.ny.gov/apply-securing-communities-against-hate-crimes-grant-program>