

August 23, 2017

Mayor Will Sessoms
2401 Courthouse Dr # 234,
Virginia Beach, VA 23456
wsessoms@vbgov.com

Dear Mayor Sessoms,

We the undersigned national and local civil rights, faith-based, human rights, and community organizations, write to ask you to join us in publicly embracing our nation's core values of pluralism and religious freedom for all while firmly rejecting the forces of hate and bigotry that seek to divide us.

As you may be aware, ACT for America, the nation's largest anti-Muslim hate group, called for a protest in Virginia Beach as part of a coordinated series of protests in over 60 cities on September 9th. Timed near the anniversary of the September 11th attacks, ACT branded these events as "America First" rallies to explicitly target Muslims at a time when hatred and bigotry have swept the nation. ACT announced this week that it is canceling the rallies for September. This suggests that ACT fears backlash in the likely event white supremacists participate in the rallies and threaten or perpetrate violence.

ACT's support for bigotry is overt, and it has a documented history of attracting white nationalist support. ACT's founder, Brigitte Gabriel, regularly vilifies Muslims, claiming that practicing Muslims cannot be loyal to the United States. She also once said that "every practicing Muslim is a radical Muslim" and that Muslims are a "natural threat to civilized people of the world, particularly Western society." Both she and ACT have had a long history of promoting policies at the federal and state levels intended to manufacture fear of Muslims.

ACT held similar rallies on June 10th of this year that not only attracted anti-Muslim activists, but also a host of armed militia-type groups and white nationalists. At least two of ACT's scheduled protests for September 9th featured organizers who openly embraced white nationalism.

As the country recently witnessed in Charlottesville, Virginia, rallies organized to promote bigotry similar to events planned for September 9th can lead to states of emergency, physical violence and even murder. The horrific events in Charlottesville occurred despite a prepared response from state and local officials and law enforcement.

Although ACT has removed its endorsement and branding from any rallies that may take place, many of the rallies have already been organized, and may continue with or without ACT's brand attached. In light of this possibility, and recent events, we urge you to

unequivocally condemn white supremacist and anti-Muslim hatred and make it clear that bigotry and violence are not welcome in Virginia Beach.

We are deeply concerned about the type of message that anti-Muslim protests send to the American public and to the good people in your city--that it is acceptable to vilify people simply because of their faith.

Between 2014 and 2015, FBI data indicates that hate crimes against Muslims increased by 67%. Bias-motivated violence continues to target Muslims, Sikhs, Arabs, South Asians, and a number of other communities. Just this year alone there have been numerous murders of individuals who are Muslim or were targeted based on anti-Muslim bigotry, regardless of their religion. In addition, several mosques around the country have been targeted by arson. Incidents like these do not occur in a vacuum; anti-Muslim bigotry and violence is being fueled by hateful rhetoric and discriminatory policies at the highest level of government. The current atmosphere has also contributed to an environment in which children are the target of anti-Muslim sentiment, sometimes rising to the level of discrimination, intimidation, and harassment, impacting their right to attend school without fear.

Now, more than ever, we must come together and support one another from viewpoints and groups that seek to divide us.

Please do not stay silent in the face of bigotry and hate. As Americans take cues from their elected representatives, you are in a powerful position as a leader in your city to reject hatred and bigotry inspired by ACT.

We urge you to issue a statement to send a strong message that every person is welcome in your city and has the right to feel secure regardless of how they worship, where they're from, or who they love. Furthermore, we ask that you acknowledge that American Muslims have been an essential part of the fabric of our society since before our nation was founded. The members of your community, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, must be reassured that bigotry, hatred, and prejudice against any individual or group based on their faith, gender, gender identity, ethnicity, nationality, race, sexual orientation, or disability status will not be tolerated.

We look forward to hearing from you and hope that we can work closely with you in the future to positively engage all communities.

Please contact Madihha Ahussain with Muslim Advocates at madihha@muslimadvocates.org or Lindsay Schubiner with Center for New Community at lindsay@newcomm.org with any questions or to discuss this further.

Thank you in advance for your partnership and principled leadership.

Sincerely,

#Get Organized Brooklyn (#GOBK)

18MillionRising.org

Advocates for Youth

African American Ministers In Action

Alianza Americas

Alliance of South Asians Taking Action

American Federation of Teachers

American Friends Service Committee

American Friends Service Committee - AZ

American Muslim Advisory Council (AMAC)

American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC)

Americans United for Separation of Church and State

Amnesty International USA

Arab American Institute

Arkansas United Community Coalition

Arts & Democracy

Asian Americans Advancing Justice - AAJC

Asian Americans Advancing Justice - LA

Autistic Self Advocacy Network

Bend the Arc Jewish Action

Center for American Progress Action Fund

Center for Media Justice

Center for New Community

CenterLink: The Community of LGBT Centers

Church World Service

Colorado Muslim Speakers Bureau

Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, US Provinces

Council on American-Islamic Relations

Countryside Community Church, UCC, Omaha NE

Courage Campaign

CREDO

Daya Inc.
Defending Rights & Dissent
Dignity/Houston
Dignity/New York
DignityUSA
Disciples Refugee and Immigration Ministries
Emgage Foundation
End Rape on Campus
Equal Justice Center
Equal Justice Society
Equal Rights Advocates
Feminist Majority
Franciscan Action Network
FREE! Families Rally for Emancipation and Empowerment
Friends Committee on National Legislation
Frogtown community radio
Genders and Sexualities Alliance Network
Generation Justice
Generation Progress
Global Progressive Hub
Granite State Progress
Hollaback!
Hollaback! Seattle
Hope Community
Idaho Coalition Against Sexual and Domestic Violence
Illinois Coalition for Immigrant and Refugee Rights
Interfaith Action for Human Rights
Interfaith Alliance
Interfaith Worker Justice
Iowa Unitarian Universalist Witness/Advocacy Network
Islamic Society of Greater Kansas City (ISGKC)
Islamic Networks Group (ING)
Islamic Society of North America

Japanese American Citizens League (JACL)
Jewish Council for Public Affairs
Jewish Federation of Reading/Berks
Jobs With Justice
KRSM Radio
Lambda Legal
The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights
MALDEF
Matthew Shepard Foundation
May First/People Link
Media Alliance
Mi Familia Vota
Milstein Center for Interreligious Dialogue
MORAL MONDAYS ON DOG ST
MoveOn.org
MPower Change
Multifaith Voices for Peace & Justice
Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative (MuslimARC)
Muslim Advocates
Muslim Community Network
Muslim Justice League
Muslim Public Affairs Council
NAACP
NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc.
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Association of Social Workers
National Black Justice Coalition
National Center for Lesbian Rights
National Center for Transgender Equality
National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs
National Community Reinvestment Coalition (NCRC)
National Council of Asian Pacific Americans (NCAPA)
National Council of Churches USA

National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW)
National Council of Jewish Women Chicago North Shore
National Council of Jewish Women South Cook Section, Illinois
National Council of Jewish Women, CO. Section
National Council of Jewish Women, Los Angeles Section
National Council of Jewish Women, Louisville Section
National Council of Jewish Women, Seattle Section
National Disaster Interfaith Network (NDIN)
National Fair Housing Alliance
National Immigration Law Center
National Iranian American Council
National Justice for Our Neighbors
National Lawyers Guild - DC Chapter
National LGBTQ Task Force
National Partnership for Women & Families
National Religious Campaign Against Torture
New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good
NJ Islamic Networks Group
North Carolina Asian Americans Together
NY Day of Remembrance Committee
OVEC-Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition
Partnership for the Advancement of New Americans
PolicyLink
Poligon Education Fund
Progress Florida
Progress Michigan
Progress South Carolina
Progress Texas
Progress Virginia Education Fund
ProgressNow
ProgressOhio
Race Forward
Reform Ohio

Rockdale Temple
SALAM Center
San Diego Immigrant Rights Consortium
Shoulder to Shoulder
Sierra Club Rincon Group
Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF)
Somos Un Pueblo Unido
South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT)
South Asian Bar Association of North America
Southern Poverty Law Center
SouthWest Organizing Project
Southwest Workers Union
Spokane Interfaith Council
St. Paul Neighborhood Network (SPNN)
T'ruah: The Rabbinic Call for Human Rights
Temple Shalom, Cincinnati
The Good Shepherd United Church of Christ
The Greenlining Institute
The Interfaith Center of New York
The Islamic Center at NYU
The Sikh Coalition
Turning Point for Women and Families
UnidosUS (formerly NCLR)
Union for Reform Judaism
Unitarian Church of Evanston
Unitarian Universalist Mass Action Network
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee
UNITE HERE
UU College of Social Justice
Veterans for American Ideals
Voices for Racial Justice
Voting Rights Forward
We Belong Together

Win Without War

WITNESS

World Without Genocide

Yemen Peace Project

YWCA Greater Austin

YWCA USA