

Building Resilience in the new Threat Paradigm:
Targeted Violence Against People of Faith

Conference Summary

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From June 11th to June 12th, 2019 at Stockton University, a conference took place to discuss ways to build resilience for vulnerable faith based communities against targeted violence. During the conference, many speakers from Rutgers University, Stockton University, houses of worship, and other law enforcement organizations offered their insight on certain topics.

The first day of the conference began with welcoming remarks from John Farmer, Paul Miller, Lee Levine, Dr. Michelle McDonald, Jared Maples, Colonel Patrick Callahan, and John Hill. We heard about “Facing Down Extremism & Building Resilient Communities” told by Rabbi Francine Roston in White Fish, Montana, where there was a sudden rise of anti-semitic violence and hate speech, led by white supremacist Richard Spencer, against the Jewish community in late 2015. This involved false news about Spencer’s mother being “harassed” by a Jewish realtor in late 2016, causing more anti-semitic cyberattacks towards the Jewish community. As Rabbi Francine Roston talked in depth about this incident, she concluded that despite all the targeted harassment the community had faced, “there are always a lot more kind people than cruel ones”. It is important to “build many relations among the community as well as the Paradigm”. Rabbi Roston also specified how the mindset of “it can’t happen to us” or “that wouldn’t happen here” mentality needs to be stopped because an attack can happen to other houses of worship as well. After this keynote, a group of international law enforcement experts discussed about ways to mitigate targeted violence against vulnerable communities. Jonathan Biermann explained that the Government provides resources to help vulnerable communities and organizations helping those communities. He also claimed that years of trust within the communities helped in building its strength and resilience. Gunnar Appelgren agreed with this point, explaining that elite forces must ensure trust and connection in their communities to build their resilience. So it is important for police forces, social organizations, and the Government to think about how to protect vulnerable communities. In response, Shahzad Tahir pointed out that law enforcement agencies are actively working to make sure which laws can ensure one’s safety and rights. However, they must need the adequate experience and knowledge on the background of each community to work more effectively. The panel ends with Appelgren arguing that if terrorists also rise to power, nothing can be done to stop them. So we need to make an organized move to counter their organized crime. During lunch, Dr. Ronald Clark presented his keynote, which featured the R.E.S.I.L.I.E.N.C.E Model he and our Best Practices team had worked on.

Afterwards, everyone went to a church for an exercise of prevention, protection, and mitigation strategies against a crisis. The exercise included a scenario of a white supremacist group terrorizing a few churches in Atlantic City by hacking printers and web pages with threatening messages. This gradually escalated to someone throwing molotov cocktails at a few houses of worship, causing damage to a church and a mosque. He was eventually arrested by law enforcement officials after trying to throw a molotov cocktail at another mosque. Speakers offered their insight on what they would do in that scenario and what this indicates about social media rhetoric causing and affecting real world violence. After the exercise, everyone returned to Stockton University for the Final Words of the first day, "Replicating Success". Each panelist emphasized the importance of communication and sharing information to spread awareness and ensure the safety of vulnerable communities. This needs to be done not on a national scale, but on a global scale. One responsibility for community leaders to help their community is to build relationships on a local level in order to build more trust. They need to listen to the public and encourage them to report anything suspicious or out of place to authorities, who are willing to help them feel safe. It is also important for law enforcement officials to be more responsive to any kind of warning or threat in order to distribute any specific information that needs to be addressed as soon as possible.

The second day of the conference opened up with a panel featuring Deputy Chief David Robinson and Rabbi Emeritus David A. Nelson of the Dearborn Police Department, and Kassem Allie, Executive Administrator of the Islamic Center of America. We listened intently to their experiences of unifying the interfaith community (the Islamic Center, churches, as well as synagogues), law enforcement, and surrounding organizations against threats from Pastor Terry Jones to burn the Quran in 2011, and again in 2019 when the Bureau of American and Islamic Relations wanted to come and protest. It was a great example of unification and what to do in the face of violence, as "an attack on one house of worship is an attack on all." After this inspirational story, we heard from multiple individuals who experienced violent acts of extremism. Todd Stetner from the Jewish Federation of Kansas explained that despite their top relationship with law enforcement, tabletop exercises, and training, they were not prepared for the shooting that occurred at their facility. In his words, "we had done everything right," but "no matter how much you plan ... it doesn't go how you planned it." While they had prepared for an active shooting on a weekday inside the facility, they were not ready for what actually occurred - a weekend shooting outside in the parking lot. A lot of improvisation was done. In addition, the "hardest part was not the shooting itself, but the aftermath." We learned that changing the culture and mindset of a religious community following this attack was difficult, but because of the resources they had from local law enforcement and DHS, the community was able to push through. Next was Richard Benson, who spoke of the UK's ways in "Managing the Fallout." He underscored the importance of building good relationships, training with all stakeholders, as well as the psychological support for everyone involved. Adam Hammatt of Whitefish, Montana also

emphasized establishing relationships and the need to stand up to hate immediately. Jonathan Biermann spoke of his involvement in the aftermath of the Belgium Jewish Museum attack. He discussed the importance of having a crisis team to deal with not only security afterwards, but the trauma. “Security is a condition through resilience” and “the only way to succeed is to prepare.” Last on the panel was Saad Amrani, Chief Commissioner of the Belgian Federal Police. The main take-away from his speech was that the “local police is important in countering terrorism” as they are better placed to detect suspicious activity and can create better relationships with their community.

After discussing the planning and relationship between law enforcement and houses of worship, the next panel discussed the uses of social media and falling victim to it, featuring Tony Sgro, Bryan Cunningham, Alex Goldenberg, and Susan Fahey. Educating the youth on how to think critically regarding aspects of disinformation and hateful ideology was a common theme among the panelists. It was agreed that the responsibility of educating children fell both on the parents as well as other projects, such as Sgro’s “Peer-to-Peer” program that allowed undergraduates to develop social media initiatives focused on preventing violent extremism. Following this panel, Reverend Dr. B. Herbert Martin spoke to the audience about “Finding Common Ground among Communities of Faith.” To find this common ground and secure houses of worship, he asked the following questions: “why are we being attacked? How do we protect ourselves? And who can we rely on?” Martin ends his speech by emphasizing the need for religious leaders to work together as well as with law enforcement. After a panel with Stockton University discussing their ways in educating the youth, the conference ended with a Closing Roundtable - “A Closed-Door Discussion between Selected Executive Leadership: Preparation for FBI Meeting and Presentation June 18.”

There were many takeaways and lessons repeated throughout the conference. Despite all the different backgrounds and perspectives of every panelist, everyone had a general idea on how to build resilience effectively. The mindset of “it can’t happen here” needs to end and people need to start preparing and planning ahead. Training sessions and table top sessions need to happen so houses of worship or any communities can be more prepared to handle the situation if it ever happens. Law enforcement and houses of worship need to do more to stay in communication and learn from each other so they can help one another. Moreover if we just take notice how serious the problem is and start working towards a solution now, we can have a better future for the future generations.