

Minnesota Muslims Concerned About New ‘Stigmatizing, Divisive, and Ineffective’ CVE Pilot Program

We, the undersigned, urge the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Center on Counterterrorism, Department of Homeland Security (DHS), White House, St. Paul Police Department (SPPD), Minneapolis Police Department (MPD), Hennepin County Sheriff’s Office, Ramsey County Sheriff’s Office, Minneapolis Public Schools, elected officials, and Minnesota foundations, to consider our grave concerns about the government’s proposed Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) pilot program in Minnesota and discontinue this stigmatizing, divisive, and ineffective initiative.

We represent communities that comprise engaged citizens and contributing members of society; our beliefs and faith inspire us daily to perform acts of kindness and generosity; our civic mindedness motivates us to protect fundamental freedoms of association, religion, and speech. Like all Americans, we condemn terrorism and terrorist organizations. Any action that harms innocent civilians is reprehensible and deserves condemnation. We condemn terrorism whenever it happens, wherever it happens and whoever commits it.

Past injustices have taught us to be wary when the government redefines its moral and legal authority in response to overbroad national security concerns. While we support the right of all Americans to live in democratic communities free of violence, we cannot in good conscience condone or help refine programs that are fundamentally discriminatory and are likely to further subject our community members to additional civil rights abuses.

While we are united with the government in our desire to protect our nation’s security and liberties, we are not convinced that the current law enforcement Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) program is the most effective way work with the Minnesota Muslim/Somali community.

The CVE pilot program in Minneapolis raises serious civil rights concerns, which have not been addressed or remedied by the DOJ. CVE is based on the premise that religion or nationality (Somali) determines an individual’s propensity towards violence. The program focuses only on countering violent extremism in Minnesota’s Somali community. It will further stigmatize and marginalize the Somali/Muslim community by treating all of its members as suspects and by holding an entire community responsible for the actions of others. We believe it is morally and democratically repugnant to single out a community based solely upon its religious affiliation and ethnic make-up.

Counter-terrorism work of the last several years has wrongfully stigmatized our communities, through the use of surveillance, informants, and other targeting of Muslim communities not connected to any suspected wrongdoing. These activities have focused upon people’s natural religious expression, labeling them “extremist” or “radical.” Based on these false premises, the DHS, FBI, and other agencies have intimidated our communities through unwarranted FBI visits, airport and border detention, immigration

delays, and selective criminal prosecution. We therefore believe that it is not the place of government to determine what ideologies or religious opinions are problematic, or to fund or encourage groups that believe they can, to make that determination.

There is a recent history of law enforcement using community outreach in the Muslim community to gather intelligence. One example of this is described in a St. Paul Police Department in a program that involved the DOJ, FBI and other law enforcement. It included “a plan in which Somali-speaking advocates would hold outreach meetings with community groups and direct people toward the Police Athletic League and programs at the YWCA. The proposal says that ‘the team will also identify radicalized individuals, gang members, and violent offenders who refuse to cooperate with our efforts.’” (*Spies Among Us: How Community Outreach Programs to Muslims Blur Lines Between Outreach and Intelligence* by Cora Currier in *The Intercept*.)

According to U.S. Attorney Andrew Luger, the Minnesota CVE pilot program offers no guarantees that it will help reduce recruitment efforts by extremist organizations. The program also offers no safeguards or oversight against abuse. These CVE programs seek to do something unprecedented: combine policing and counter-terrorism efforts with social services and outreach targeting only one religious and ethnic community. This runs roughshod over the line between community outreach and intelligence gathering, a tactic which President Obama expressly criticized at the White House CVE Summit (“Remarks by the President in Closing of the Summit on Countering Violent Extremism,” Feb. 18, 2015). Similar to other previously adopted CVE programs in the UK, the Minnesota Somali and Muslim community will also perceive all partners, funders and supporters of the CVE pilot programs to be agents of law enforcement. Therefore, the CVE program will be ineffective, divisive and erode longstanding positive relationships between communities and law enforcement agencies.

Minnesota Somali and Muslim communities join the United States Council of Muslim Organizations (USCMO), and Muslim leaders in Boston and Los Angeles, the two other pilot cities, in opposing the DOJ CVE program. We join civil rights groups, including the Council on American-Islamic Relations, Muslim Advocates, American Civil Liberties Union, Brennan Center for Justice, National Lawyers Guild and others in raising civil rights concerns inherent in the DOJ CVE.

It is our recommendation that the government stop investing in programs that will only stigmatize, divide and marginalize our communities further. Instead, we ask the government to assist our communities to become more fully engaged participants in our democratic system, including by doing the following:

- The government should support our Minnesota Muslim community-based taskforce. This taskforce is a committee that is being developed to serve as a united outreach effort to law enforcement agencies. It will include all segments of the community.

- All funds/resources used for social and education services should come from the appropriate resources such as foundations, corporations, and state and local government, etc. and should be separated from counter-terrorism and law enforcement.
- The DOJ should issue guidelines, similar to Good Samaritan laws, to protect those who act in good faith to prevent violent extremism by engaging with those considering it in order to dissuade them. DOJ policies should make clear that those who intervene to help others should not be penalized for it by being subjected to prosecution, watchlisting, or surveillance because of their association with a potential violent extremist.
- The U.S. Congress should hold hearings, similar to the Church Committee, to investigate the federal government's overbroad surveillance of mosques and American Muslims, absent evidence of criminal activity.

Like all other communities, we cannot guarantee that any person or organization will not usurp our faith and ethnic identities, or manipulate legitimate foreign policy grievances, to justify horrendous acts of violence. We fully recognize that we live in times rife with conflict and grotesque acts of cruelty. In such times it is even more important that our government not descend into marginalizing and stigmatizing communities, whose active participation in our democratic landscape we should be prepared to value and defend.

Organizations

Council on American Islamic Relations CAIR MN
 Global Somali Diaspora
 Muslim Youth and Family Services
 Islamic Relief & Social Services
 African Family and Education Center
 Abubakar As-Sidique Islamic Center
 Tawfiq Islamic Center
 Islamic Center of Twin Ports "ICTP"
 mYouth
 Brooklyn Park Islamic Center
 Building Blocks of Islam
 al-Mahmood Foundation
 ICM-Muslim Youth of Minnesota
 Dar Al-Farooq
 Al Farooq Youth & Family Center
 ICCMN/Al-Iman Center
 Masjid Al-Ihsan
 Islamic Center of Owatonna (Masjid Al Rahma)
 Burnsville Mosque (Al Salaam)

Roshester Islamic Center
Irshad Islamic Center Eden Preairie
Masjid Al-Huda (ICCC)
Masjid Al Tawba/Eden Prairie Islamic Center (ICCC)
Ummatul Islam Center
Masjid Ash-Shafi
Masjid As-Sunnah (St Paul)
Minnesota Dawah Institute
Al Farooq Youth & Family Center
Dar-Alqalam Islamic Center
Abubakar As-Sidique Islamic Center-Faribault MN
Masjid Rowdah
Masjid Ni'mat ul-Islaam
Muslim student association SCSU
Mankato Islamic center
Islamic Center of Minnesota
Abukhadra Mosque
Al-Madinah Cultural Center
University of Minnesota Muslim Student Association
University of St Thomas Muslim Student Association
MCTC- Muslim Student Association
MNIA
MCC
Engage Minnesota Muslims
Global Deaf Muslim the Minnesota chapter

Other Supporters include:
National Lawyers Guild