

Criminal Justice Reform Lobbying Speech

By Lion Birnecker, Owen Levens, Thalia Selch, and Lila Selch

L'taken - December 2022

Hello Ms. (Kate) Durkin! I'm name (and pronouns). We are here on behalf of Beth Emet the Free Synagogue, in Evanston, IL. Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with us. We would like to talk to you about racial and religious profiling.

Since Nixon started the "war on drugs" in the 1970s, crime levels have increased exponentially. Roughly 1.9 million people are incarcerated in our country now, giving our country the largest imprisoned population per capita.

Looking at local, state, and federal jails and prisons altogether, one in five incarcerated people - approximately 450,000 people - are locked up for a nonviolent drug offense on any given day.

All of this has disproportionately affected people of color. African Americans are incarcerated at a rate that is five times the imprisonment rate of white people. In addition, Latine people are arrested 1.3 more times than white people.

More often than not, racial and religious profiling is the cause of unjust incarceration. Black and Latine individuals are three times more likely to be searched than whites at traffic stops.

Coming from the Chicago-area, we witness this firsthand. Even in our suburb of Evanston, my African-American and latine peers have been suspended from school or arrested due to racial profiling. When one of my latina peers, with stellar grades and heavy community service involvement, was caught with pepper spray, she was suspended for ten days and recommended for expulsion. When one of my white peers was caught with pepper spray, she was excused with no punishment.

This often happens to innocent high schoolers working towards higher education and representing the best parts of our country. The U.S was built on equal opportunity and the right to succeed for all. Profiling has prevented this from happening, by incarcerating innocent people based on looks. Even in our first amendment, we have the right to religious freedom. With religious profiling, or arresting people for their religious appearance, our justice system contradicts everything our government has worked for. This country was built on ideals of equity, but has thrived on dichotomy to better serve the white people in the U.S criminal justice system. It is our moral imperative to fight for compassionate and equitable practices at every level of our criminal justice system.

As Jews, we have an obligation to advocate for justice and fairness in our communities. The Torah and many other important Jewish texts command us to be fair and just and to stand up for justice. One of the most iconic sayings in Judaism is “Tzedek, tzedek tirdof” meaning “Justice, Justice you shall pursue.” The current criminal justice system allows an environment where discrimination and racial profiling can greatly influence who is incarcerated, directly violating this command. In Leviticus, we are told to commit no injustice, nor to favor certain people for their appearance or lineage. As a Jew, I was raised not to favor anyone because of their status, money, or the color of their skin, and to judge everyone with equal righteousness. A criminal justice system that punishes unjustly and is greatly influenced by racial profiling violates many laws that we have been following as Jews for over 5,000 years.

The End Racial and Religious Profiling Act of 2021 (S. 597) would help alleviate this racial disparity. It’d make it so that the justice system – including police – couldn’t misfavor any individuals based on race.

We urge Rep. Schakowsky not only cosponsor and support this act, but to introduce it into the House to demonstrate her commitment to improving police-community relations and ensuring the safety of all people.

The End Racial and Religious Profiling Act of 2021 would prohibit federal, state, and local law enforcement from targeting a person based on actual or perceived race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation without trustworthy information that is relevant to linking a person to a crime. The legislation would further require law enforcement to maintain adequate policies and procedures designed to eliminate profiling, including increased data collection in order to accurately assess the extent of the problem, as well as including training for law enforcement officials on issues of profiling and mandate the creation of procedures for receiving, investigating, and responding to complaints of alleged profiling.

With Rep. Schakowsky’s support, I know profiling in our country will be able to go down, decreasing the number of incarcerated people in our district. This is something extremely meaningful to us, and I know Congresswoman Schakowsky will be able to make a significant difference in criminal justice reform.

Thank you again for speaking with us. We really appreciate your time.