

POLITICS

Effort to broaden hate crime reporting in Minnesota stalls

Statewide policy on hate crime investigations hits a dead end in the state Senate.

By **Stephen Montemayor** (<https://www.startribune.com/stephen-montemayor/298000161/>) Star Tribune

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A new initiative to beef up hate crime investigations in Minnesota has stalled in the waning days of the state Legislature as lawmakers focus on a budget gap brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic.

A proposal sparked by State Attorney General Keith Ellison and state Rep. Frank Hornstein, DFL-Minneapolis, would require new statewide training for police, new data collection policies, criminalize hate-fueled property damage and set up a statewide blueprint for how police should respond to hate crimes.

Growing out of Ellison's statewide [tour last year](https://www.startribune.com/attorney-general-keith-ellison-goes-on-the-road-to-counter-hate/512005812/) (<https://www.startribune.com/attorney-general-keith-ellison-goes-on-the-road-to-counter-hate/512005812/>) to shine a light on rural and urban hate crimes (<https://www.startribune.com/attorney-general-keith-ellison-eyes-new-minnesota-working-group-on-hate-crime/511379181/>), the legislation hit a roadblock in recent weeks as lawmakers confront a \$2.4 billion deficit stemming from economic dislocations related to the coronavirus.

Ellison said in an interview this week that a recent anti-Asian backlash during the pandemic — which originated in China — underscores the bill's urgency.

"I think that there aren't enough people who understand the true dangers associated with being targeted by a hate crime — particularly for people in the Asian community right now," Ellison said. "I just think that there are too many people who think, 'Well it's not happening to me so it's not happening and it's not a priority.' And I think that's a crying shame."

Hornstein, sponsor of the House bill, said his proposal hit a dead end in the Senate even though it has bipartisan support. GOP state Sens. Karin Housley, of St. Marys Point, and Paul Anderson, of Plymouth, are co-sponsors of a similar bill introduced by Sen. Ron Latz, a St. Louis Park Democrat.

During a House hearing on the bill last week, some Republican legislators mainly cited fiscal concerns. Hornstein's proposal was expected to cost Minnesota \$854,000 next year. That would pay for five new full-time employees to the Human Rights Department and one to the Peace Office Standards and Training Board. It would also cover improved data collection and work on a new law enforcement training course.

"I can't vote for this bill because it still has a significant cost and we don't have any money," said Marion O'Neill, R-Maple Lake. "So I would love to vote for this bill, I think it's a great bill, but unless the Department of Human Rights can just shift staff to do this, I can't support it. It's just too expensive."

Hornstein, the son of Holocaust survivors, noted that his bill passed its first committee unanimously before the virus hit Minnesota. He also pointed out that GOP opposition in a House judiciary committee this month stemmed largely from fiscal concerns.

Hornstein described the bill's reporting, training and property crime provisions as a "comprehensive" change to how Minnesota responds to hate crimes.

"Those are three significant steps forward and those passed two House committees," Hornstein said.

“I think we’re well-positioned to build on this success for next year.”

But backers of the legislation say the pandemic continues to highlight the need for quicker action.

Last month, Gov. Tim Walz [launched a discrimination helpline](https://www.startribune.com/amid-anti-asian-bias-because-of-covid-19-minnesota-launches-discrimination-helpline/569410032/?refresh=true) (<https://www.startribune.com/amid-anti-asian-bias-because-of-covid-19-minnesota-launches-discrimination-helpline/569410032/?refresh=true>) over reports of bias against Asian-Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the complaints have involved people being harassed at grocery stores by other customers.

Another incident involved an Asian-American couple in Woodbury who [received an anonymous letter](https://www.startribune.com/local-asian-americans-face-insults-hostility/569178982/?refresh=true) (<https://www.startribune.com/local-asian-americans-face-insults-hostility/569178982/?refresh=true>) telling them to “take the chinese virus back to china.”

Ellison said he had to abruptly end a recent Zoom conference call with Hmong community leaders when someone infiltrated the call with blasts of hate-filled messages.

[Minnesota law enforcement reported 126 hate crimes to the FBI last year](https://www.startribune.com/attack-on-minneapolis-mosque-comes-as-reports-of-hate-crimes-drop/564818952/?refresh=true) (<https://www.startribune.com/attack-on-minneapolis-mosque-comes-as-reports-of-hate-crimes-drop/564818952/?refresh=true>), its lowest total since 2016 and first decrease since 2014.

But nine out of every 10 Minnesota police departments — including those in cities like Duluth and some of the largest suburban cities — reported zero bias crimes for the year.

Ellison says those figures show that too few law enforcement agencies in the state are reporting bias-motivated crimes, leaving Minnesotans in the dark on the true extent of bigotry in their communities.

“We really exist in sort of this environment where we think everybody’s being nice to everybody,” Ellison said. “No, they’re not, all the time. And I think data collection will give us a truer sense of really how we’re doing.”

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