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N.J. leaders honor Jersey City shooting victims and warn of rising bias crimes

By Blake Nelson

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New Jersey's top law enforcement officials gathered virtually Thursday, the first day of Hanukkah, to commemorate the one-year anniversary of the Jersey City kosher market shooting.

Leaders remembered the heroism and compassion they saw that day and in the aftermath, while also raising red flags about troubling crimes and hate speech witnessed since.

"One year ago we saw the very worst of humanity," state Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said at the beginning.

But while Dec. 10, 2019 was the "deadliest domestic terrorist event in New Jersey history," the way communities came together to care for others also represented the very best of the state, he said.

Six people died a year ago, including Jersey City Det. Joseph Seals, Douglas Miguel Rodriguez, Leah Minda Ferencz and Moshe Deutsch. The two shooters, who died as well, were also accused of killing Michael Rumberger days before.

Officials have said the shooters were motivated by hatred for both Jews and law enforcement, and they've credited Seals with preventing more deaths.

Rodriguez also saved a life by holding the door for a customer to escape, said Craig Carpenito, U.S. Attorney for the District of New Jersey. He marveled at how quickly the federal government, especially the FBI, mobilized to help hours after the shooting began.

Officials thanked the entire Jersey City police department. Grewal recalled one officer who stepped into the line of fire to pull a colleague out of harm's way. Police Chief Michael Kelly's calm direction throughout was unforgettable, said Col. Patrick Callahan, acting superintendent of the New Jersey State Police.

The group also drew a straight line from the shooting to the rising number of bias crimes reported in the state, the recent murder of a judge's son and reports that some people have used the pandemic as an excuse to harass Jewish and Asian residents.

"In 2020, we've actually seen the normalization of extremism," said Jonathan Greenblatt, head of the Anti-Defamation League.

Greenblatt said the state's recent lawsuit to break up Facebook could help, since officials have long said the social media giant wasn't doing enough to combat hate speech.

Houses of worship can also receive free security assessments, and grant money is available to fortify buildings, said Jared Maples, director of the New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness.

The state's civil rights office is expanding efforts to prevent bias crimes, said Rachel Apter, the state's civil rights director, and she reiterated a call for all students and teachers in the state to receive anti-bias education.

"Children don't wake up one day and simply decide to commit a hate crime," Apter said. "Children begin to recognize, and unconsciously internalize, the systemic bias that is prevalent in our world."