



Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland

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Testimony of Suzanne Lafreniere, on behalf of the Catholic Diocese LD 2107 An Act to Establish the Maine Nonprofit Security Grant Program

Senator Carney and Representative Kuhn and all members of the Joint Standing Committee on Judiciary, my name is Suzanne Lafreniere and I represent the Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland in its support of LD 2107, An Act to Establish the Maine Nonprofit Security Grant Program. The diocese presently has a population of 279,159 Catholics. In addition to its 48 parishes, it has eight elementary schools, one private elementary/middle school, and one private high school. It also includes one Catholic college, Saint Joseph's College of Maine in Standish. Within the diocese, there are also seven subsidized housing units, four rehabilitation and residence facilities, and two child-care centers. There are three Catholic hospitals operating independently of the diocese as well as Catholic Charities Maine, the state's largest social service agency, which operates as a separate corporation.

Our diocese encompasses parishes, missions, schools, and charitable ministries serving communities from our coastal towns to our most rural areas. Each parish campus is more than a building; it is a spiritual home, a gathering place, and often a key provider of food assistance, crisis support, and community programs for our neighbors regardless of faith background. In a time of increasing polarization, religious communities and other nonprofits are facing a heightened risk of harassment, vandalism, and, in some cases, violence. We have a moral responsibility to protect the people who walk through our doors—children, the elderly, volunteers, and staff—so they can worship, learn, and serve in safety.

LD 2107 takes a prudent, targeted approach to this responsibility. The bill would establish the Maine Nonprofit Security Grant Program in the Office of the Attorney General to provide grants to nonprofit organizations to “improve security at property owned or occupied by those nonprofit organizations to protect against hate crimes and terror attacks.” It authorizes support for three essential categories: physical security enhancements, the cost of security personnel, and the development or enhancement of security plans and protocols. These are precisely the tools that allow organizations like ours to move from good intentions to concrete, professional, and effective safety measures.

For Catholic parishes and schools, this program could mean installing secure entry systems at buildings that currently have open, easily accessible doors; improving exterior lighting in rural parking lots where evening Masses, youth ministry, or recovery meetings take place; updating camera systems that are outdated or nonexistent; and ensuring that staff and volunteers have clear, trained protocols for responding to an emergency. It could also allow us to conduct formal security assessments and develop written security plans that align with best practices and with federal programs such as the Nonprofit Security Grant Program, ensuring that state investments are coordinated and efficient rather than duplicative.

There has been a sustained pattern of vandalism, arson, and threats against Catholic churches and related sites across the United States since 2020, with several hundred incidents documented by Catholic and church-monitoring organizations.

Overall scale

- A Catholic advocacy group has tracked more than 500 alleged attacks on Catholic churches in the U.S. since late May 2020, including arson, smashed windows, destroyed statues, and graffiti.¹
- The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has separately logged at least 400-plus publicly reported incidents of arson, vandalism, or other destruction at Catholic sites across 43 states and Washington, D.C. in roughly the same period.²

This program is also structured in a way that respects the diversity of Maine's nonprofit sector. It does not privilege one faith or mission; it is open to nonprofit organizations broadly, including houses of worship, schools, community centers, and social service providers. That breadth is important to us as a Catholic diocese. Our concern is not only for our own churches but also for synagogues, mosques, temples, and secular nonprofits that share our commitment to the dignity of every human person and that may be targeted because of who they are or whom they serve. LD 2107 provides a framework for the State to partner with this entire ecosystem to reduce the risk of catastrophic harm.

In Catholic social teaching, government has a legitimate role in promoting the common good and protecting the vulnerable. LD 2107 is an expression of that role. It does not fund religious activities, doctrine, or worship. Rather, it helps ensure that Mainers of all faiths and none can gather, receive services, and contribute to civic life without undue fear for their safety. It is a measured investment in prevention that is far less costly—in human and financial terms—than responding after a tragedy.

For these reasons, on behalf of the Diocese of Portland, I respectfully urge you to vote Ought to Pass on LD 2107. Thank you for your attention and for your service to the people of Maine. I would be happy to answer any questions.

¹ <https://catholicvote.org/tracker-church-attacks/>

² <https://www.usccb.org/committees/religious-liberty/Backgrounder-Attacks-on-Catholic-Churches-in-US>