

Testimony of Jeremy Burton before the MA Joint Committee on Public Safety and Homeland Security
January 24, 2002

Good afternoon Chairman Moore, Chairman Naughton, and esteemed Committee members. My name is Jeremy Burton, and I am the Executive Director of the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Boston, a network of 41 organizations representing greater Boston's organized Jewish community.

This coming week the world will mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day, and the beginning of the 75th anniversary of the end of the Holocaust during World War II. That era included a dark episode in our own nation's history, when our failure to live up to our values ended in tragedy.

In June 1939, the St. Louis sailed up and down our east coast, carrying 937 Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany. Canada and the United States refused to allow them entry and they were turned back to Europe. While some found other avenues of escape, 254 of those men and women were eventually murdered by the Nazis.

We have not forgotten the tragedy that resulted from our people being turned back from US shores.

Like earlier immigrants, Jews came to this country seeking refuge and opportunity – as do immigrants arriving today to our great Commonwealth. Then and now, forces rise up to degrade the stranger as a threat, rather than as a neighbor. The story of the St. Louis is just one of the many instances where our nation has abandoned our principles: from the Chinese Exclusion Act, to the days of “Irish Need Not Apply”, to many other instances of stereotyping and vilification of the other. But that is not the end of the story, because in our country, people of good conscience can ultimately prevail. The road is long, but we do not despair.

This is why, in January of 2017, in response to the executive orders on immigrants and refugees, some 40 Boston Jewish religious, philanthropic, civic and human service organizations united to publicly denounce these actions as unjust. We stand together on the side of empathy and religious tolerance, and we urge compassion to those seeking safety, regardless of their faith or country of origin.

We urge our elected and appointed officials at all levels of government to do everything in their legal authority to protect our foreign-born neighbors throughout the Commonwealth.

We need to stop approaching these issues with the rhetoric of fear and demonization and with policies that treat human beings around the world as an enforcement problem. We believe that these issues must be approached as a humanitarian matter, with a commitment to the dignity and welfare of all peoples.

Together with our members and partners we have organized members of Jewish communities to build up an arsenal of accessible resources for families desperate to stay together who are targeted by our devolving immigration policies and laws. With our partners in the Unitarian and Episcopalian churches we have, through the Boston Immigration Justice Accompaniment Network, mobilized hundreds across many faith communities, to support our neighbors in detention right here in Massachusetts. We assist them in securing legal representation, raising money for bonds and offering home hospitality to individuals and families coming out of detention with nowhere else to go. Together, BIJAN members have, to date, bonded out 170 of our neighbors from ICE custody and accompanied people in detention to 850 court hearings.

That is why we at JCRC are here today to support the Safe Communities Act and it is why, over the course of the day, you will hear and receive testimony and messages of support from many of our members who support this legislation including the Anti-Defamation League, the American Jewish Committee, the Jewish Alliance for Law and Social Action, the Jewish Labor Committee, Jewish Family Service of MetroWest, Jewish Vocational Service and the Boston Workers' Circle. Together, we urge you to report the Safe Communities Act out with a favorable recommendation.

Thank you for your time and your consideration.