



Civil Rights Department
Commission on the State of Hate

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Minutes

Commission on the State of Hate Community Forum

September 5, 2025, 2:30 pm PT

Commissioners Present

Chair Brian Levin
Commissioner Cynthia Choi
Commissioner Regina Cuellar
Commissioner Cece Feiler
Commissioner Russell Roybal
Commissioner Erroll Southers

Civil Rights Department (CRD) Staff Present

Kevin Kish, Director
Rishi Khalsa, Deputy Director, Communications
Julia Parish, Deputy Director, Legislation, Regulation, and Policy Division
Yvonne Hsu, Deputy Director, Strategic Initiatives and External Affairs
Alec Watts, Assistant Deputy Director
Rebecca Goodsell, Research Data Specialist
David Kalkstein, Research Data Specialist
Shilpa Ram, Assistant General Counsel
Gregory Mann, Senior Attorney Mediator

Others Present

An estimated 34 members of the public attended virtually.

I. Welcome

Commissioner Cuellar welcomed everyone to the Commission on the State of Hate’s second community forum of 2025. She reviewed the process for closed captioning, announced that Spanish interpretation was available for the meeting, shared the goals of the Commission’s community forums, and introduced the rest of the Commissioners. She also reviewed resources available to the public, including the CA vs. Hate Hotline and the Community Conflict Resolution Unit services.

Commissioner Cuellar introduced the topic of the forum: Dialogue Across Differences.

Links Shared in the Chat:

<https://www.CAvsHate.org>

<https://calcivilrights.ca.gov/community-conflict-resolution-unit/>

CSH@CalCivilRights.ca.gov

II. Informational Presentations on the Topic: “Dialogue Across Differences”

A. UCLA Bedari Kindness Institute

Commissioner Cuellar introduced Maia Ferdman, Deputy Director of the UCLA Bedari Kindness Institute.

Maia Ferdman presented the following information:

- The Bedari Kindness Institute at UCLA supports multidisciplinary research and programs focused on cultivating kindness and improving systems and relationships.
- The Dialogue Across Difference Initiative addresses rising societal polarization through bridge building, empathy, and dialogue.
- U.S. political and affective polarization are at historic highs, leading to mistrust, division, and potential for hate or violence. Perception gaps about opposing groups are widespread and often worsened by media consumption and education level.
- Bridge building is defined as a broad set of skills and approaches for resolving conflict, fostering empathy, and leading across differences.
- Goals of bridge building include improving democratic processes, reducing hate, repairing harm, fostering belonging, and strengthening communities.
- Approaches to bridge building include mediation, restorative practices, multi-stakeholder dialogue, and coalition building.
- UCLA’s initiative was launched in response to increasing campus tension. Programs include student internships, faculty seminars and fellowships, public dialogues, and campus-wide skill-building workshops. The initiative aims to create a shared language and culture of dialogue, integrating multiple frameworks to promote empathy, understanding, and resilience.

B. Western Justice Center

Commissioner Cuellar thanked Maia Ferdman and introduced Elissa Barrett, Executive Director of the Western Justice Center.

Elissa Barrett presented the following information:

- The Western Justice Center is focused on empowering youth with conflict resolution skills primarily in Southern California. The organization aims to equip young people to

manage conflict, reduce violence, and embrace differences to positively impact their futures and communities.

- They promote restorative practices in schools, emphasizing prevention through community-building circles, mediation, and restorative case conferencing.
- The organization partners long-term with school districts to build trust and adapt conflict resolution models collaboratively.
- Their partnership with Azusa Unified School District has led to measurable positive outcomes, including decreased chronic absenteeism, increased academic performance, a rise in student trust and belonging, and a reduction in suspensions.
- Restorative approaches focus on accountability through repair and reconciliation rather than punitive measures alone, fostering peaceful coexistence.
- Student-led peer mediation and restorative circles build critical skills including emotional self-awareness, active listening, cultural competency, and collaborative problem-solving.
- These skills improve school climate and are essential for building a just, pluralistic society.
- Some examples of this work include mediation with a student who defaced a laptop with hate symbols, resulting in restored trust and allowing him to graduate, and a restorative circle addressing cyberbullying among 5th graders, which led to new social norms adopted school-wide.
- Students trained as mediators have taken initiative on serious issues, such as addressing drug trade in school bathrooms and creating amnesty and treatment programs.
- High school students from rival gang areas collaborated to form a student union advocating for peace, mentoring programs, inclusive curricula, and community events, demonstrating how dialogue can transform conflict into collective action.

C. Interfaith Speakers Bureau

Commissioner Cuellar thanked Elissa Barrett and introduced Maha Elgenaidi and Karen Stiller, who are members of the Interfaith Speakers Bureau.

Maha Elgenaidi and Karen Stiller presented the following information:

- The Interfaith Speakers Bureau was founded two decades ago to foster dialogue between Muslims and Jews, originally aiming to shift focus from Middle East conflicts to shared challenges in the U.S., such as combating Islamophobia and anti-Semitism.
- The program expanded to include Christians, Hindus, Buddhists, and members of other faiths, offering panels for schools, workplaces, and civic spaces.
- Presenters intentionally appear in partnership with presenters of other faiths to model allyship and civil discourse, which is especially important during times of heightened political and social polarization.
- Islamophobia and anti-Semitism are linked and often driven by the same forces, such as hate groups and conspiracy theories. Joint presentations help confront these forms of bigotry together for greater impact.

- The Interfaith Speakers Bureau relies on lived experience to build empathy, challenge stereotypes, and create understanding, transforming reactive advocacy into a shared pursuit of justice and inclusion.
- A recent UC Davis study shows Jewish Californians experienced sharp rises in depression and anxiety post-October 7, 2023, tied to rising antisemitic incidents, which are deeply affecting Jewish people in schools and workplaces. This has resulted in altering daily routines, hiding identities, or leaving jobs/schools due to anti-Semitism, which is compounded by microaggressions and a lack of institutional understanding.
- A majority of Muslim Americans report discrimination. Muslim students often face bullying from other students and discrimination from adults in schools. Muslim employees report workplace exclusion and lack of accommodations, such as for prayer or holidays. Muslims, Arabs, and Palestinians increasingly face stigma, punishment, or silencing, further burdening already marginalized communities.
- Seeing Muslim and Jewish panelists speak together validates those identities in spaces where they are often underrepresented and offers hope for inclusive community building. The Interfaith Speakers Bureau hopes to expand its reach, deepen interfaith empathy, and foster environments where all faith groups feel seen, respected, and valued. It aims to model how solidarity can counter prejudice and strengthen civic life.
- Community members, educators, and employers can invite Interfaith Speakers Bureau panels into their institutions, partnering for trainings, and promoting inclusive practices in their own circles to support pluralism and challenge bias.

Commissioner Cuellar thanked all the presenters.

Commissioner Feiler reminded everyone of the public comment guidance and process.

Public Comment

No public comment on informational presentations on the topic: “Dialogue Across Differences.”

Commission Discussion

Commissioner Roybal commented that they were excited to hear about the work of Western Justice Center in Azusa and asked if they had plans for expansion to other districts in the San Gabriel Valley. They also asked about the effects of the work by the Western Justice Center on the school-to-prison pipeline. Additionally, they asked about the work with resident assistants with young people coming into college.

Elissa Barrett responded that Azusa is their cornerstone district, and they have also started doing work with Pasadena Unified School District and El Monte City School District. They are also doing an exploratory initiative in another district in the San Gabriel Valley. They are working to evaluate the effectiveness of their implementation and are also piloting an initiative with the LA County Dream Resource Centers to counter hate. They also discussed their Peer Mediation Invitational, which is a youth peace-building summit with students from about 40 schools. Additionally, they mentioned an online curriculum tool they are involved with, SchoolTools.info. They also discussed

intervention in the school-to-prison pipeline at the level of prevention and early intervention.

Maia Ferdman discussed UCLA's efforts to integrate dialogue and bridge-building skills into the student experience. She emphasized the importance of strategic planning given the university's large size and outlined efforts to reinforce dialogue skills throughout students' time on campus, including training for students involved in residential life and embedding these skills into general education requirements. She noted that UCLA contributed to a UC-wide online training on dialogue and discourse, now mandatory for all incoming freshmen and eventually all UC students.

Chair Levin thanked Commissioners Feiler and Cuellar for their work on the forum. He reflected on the historic contributions of thought leaders in this field and noted the importance of local, community-based dialogue initiatives. He also praised the speakers' work and raised a question on how grassroots efforts for dialogue and peacebuilding can remain effective in the face of broader societal and institutional challenges, such as the glorification of aggression, widespread misinformation, and the weakening or dismantling of national peace institutions like the U.S. Institute of Peace and the Community Relations Service. Additionally, he also asked how cultural and institutional headwinds can be addressed when larger systems often reward conflict rather than collaboration.

Maia Ferdman acknowledged the real institutional challenges UCLA is facing, illustrating the broader political pressures on higher education. She discussed how dialogue requires first demonstrating understanding and receptivity before offering correction or counterpoints, modeling the kind of society we want to create. She stated that continuing to act and recommit to a better vision of society is hope in action, not passive optimism. She concluded with a reminder not to be naive about power or misinformation, but to remain human and recognize the humanity in others.

Maha Elgenaidi responded, saying the political environment is never an excuse not to work on peacebuilding and bridgebuilding. She said that response has to be tailored and sensitive, drawing on relationships built over time.

Karen Stiller responded that maintaining personal relationships will help bring about change, and it is important to maintain spaces to engage in the work of bridgebuilding. She also stated that it is important to be on the same page about what different terms or phrases mean before having a conversation so that people do not talk past each other.

Elissa Barrett emphasized the importance of focusing on what each person can meaningfully contribute in response to global and societal challenges. She highlighted the value of building strong relationships before crises occur, noting that long-term investment is essential.

Commissioner Choi recognized the work Maha Elgenaidi has been doing and expressed appreciation for the panel, noting that it provided a rare sense of hope in today's challenging

climate. She highlighted that many of the proposed solutions, such as teaching dialogue and resilience skills, are long-term investments, are particularly important for young people. She emphasized the need to acknowledge and address institutional bad actors that hinder honest conversations, including those attacking historical understanding and targeting marginalized groups, such as undocumented individuals. She recognized the speakers' work as essential in building resilience and "inoculating" communities against these harms. She affirmed the value of interpersonal efforts and stressed the importance of also pursuing institutional changes to confront the systemic issues contributing to current divisions. She closed by thanking the panel for their work and the hope it inspired.

Maha Elgenaidi discussed the need for interfaith and intercultural work across religious and ethnic lines to effectively address social justice issues. She stated that the Black Lives Matter movement was a wake-up call in realizing the need to root discussion of Islamophobia within broader systemic frameworks, particularly anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism. She also discussed a commitment to continuing educational efforts that are interreligious and intercultural.

Commissioner Southers thanked the speakers and Commissioners Cuellar and Feiler. He discussed the work of the Commission related to AB449 to encourage reporting. He also discussed 211 LA and other alternatives to police response.

Elissa Barrett responded that she has worked on issues related to response to hate crimes and has found that often people do not feel fully heard when reporting a hate crime to law enforcement. She discussed the work of 211 LA to support and provide resources to those who call in to report hate activity. She also discussed the work that her organization is doing with LA County Dream Resource Centers in partnership with 211 LA and other related organizations. In addition, she recommended the Commission speak with Dr. Shaffan Roberts at Pepperdine Law School, who has done research on community-based trust related to law enforcement. She also suggested that the Commission have a discussion with Robin Toma, the Executive Director of the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations.

Links Sent in the Chat:

<https://kindness.ucla.edu/sign-up-for-emails/>
www.westernjustice.org
<https://jp.linkedin.com/company/western-justice-center>
ing.org
CSH@CalCivilRights.ca.gov

III. Public Comment on Items Not on the Agenda

No public comment on items not on the agenda.

Chair Levin discussed recent hate crime data from the FBI and thanked the speakers and the Subcommittee on Community Forums for this timely forum.

Commissioner Feiler also thanked the speakers.

IV. Adjournment of the Meeting

Commissioner Cuellar thanked the presenters, Commissioners, and the public.

The forum adjourned at 4:22 pm.