

Testimony in Support of SB398
Randy Blazak, chair Coalition Against Hate Crimes

My name is Dr. Randy Blazak and I'm the chair of Oregon's Coalition Against Hate Crimes. The Coalition was formed in 1997 after the Oklahoma City Bombing as a way to increase cooperation and communication between community groups and local, state, and federal government agencies to interrupt extremist threats and serve the victims of bias in Oregon. For over 23 years, the Coalition has acted as a state-wide civil rights network that has included a range of members, from neighborhood advocacy groups to the United States Department of Justice. That's why I am honored to be here today to lend my support to SB398.

Understanding the nature on hate crimes requires the understanding of context. The use of the "N word" in a rap song is an artistic expression, protected by the First Amendment. The use of the "N word" in an attack by white skinheads on a black victim can be used as evidence of a bias motivation and therefore elevated criminal charges. A swastika drawn on a chalkboard by a history professor discussing the Third Reich can have educational merit. A swastika drawn on a chalkboard by a student wanting to harass a Jewish classmate can have a deeply traumatic impact on the target of that action. And the noose may just be an image in an old western film, or it can be used to invoke generations of racial terrorism.

When people ask, "Isn't every crime a hate crime?" it is incumbent upon us to explain the greater harm of bias motivated crimes. Research has demonstrated that the impact of a single hate crime is much deeper and wider than a traditional crime victimization. First, hate crimes, both violent and non-violent, have longer psychological impacts on the victim as they are targeted for some immutable characteristic about themselves that they can't change or shouldn't have to change. We have documented deeper trauma, including longer periods of depression, higher suicide and self-harm rates, and behavior changes that include social withdrawal. Victims often report saying things like, "How can this still be happening in America?" and "What's to stop this from happening to me again?"

But it's not just the direct victim that experiences this harm. The members of their community also experience a spike in anxiety as they wonder who among them will be next and ask if they are safe or even wanted in a community where the attack happened. An attack on a gay person will create a wave of trauma through the entire LGBTQ community and research shows that people's behavior changes in that community in response to the elevated threat level. Soon, other marginalized communities are impacted. A vandalism of a Korean church, spreads waves of fear through other immigrant communities. We have research that shows communities become divided as residents try

to feel out who is on the side of the victim and who is on the side of the attacker. Finally, the place itself becomes stigmatized by the hate that occurred there. What images come to mind when you say Laramie, Wyoming, Jasper, Texas, Charlottesville, Virginia, or even Portland, Oregon?

On November 12, 1988, three racist skinheads brutally beat an Ethiopian college student to death as he was coming home from work. The murder of Mulugeta Seraw put Portland, Oregon on the global map as a center of hate. After the May 26, 2017 hate-motivated double murder on a Portland Max train, I interviewed numerous members of the Portland Ethiopian community for a study on hate and trauma. Each one told me in strikingly similar terms that the 2017 Max attack brought up the emotional trauma of the 1988 murder, causing them to ask, again, will they ever be safe being a black person in Oregon. The PTSD we associate with war veterans is also found in minority communities that have experienced hate crimes.

If there is one act of hate that has persisted through time it is the use of the noose, connected, not only to vigilante racial murders, often of people who committed no crime, but murder as spectacle. Lynchings occurred in front of cheering white crowds as bodies were burned, mutilated, and castrated. Postcards depicting actual lynchings were often made not only celebrate white supremacy but to keep black people in a constant state of fear of the randomness of white terror. It is worth noting that that first federal definition of terrorism came in the Anti-Klan Act of 1871. Lynchings were acts of terrorism, designed to spread fear and trauma through the black population, including here in Oregon. The 1902 lynching of Alonzo Tucker still serves as a message that African Americans are not welcome in Southern Oregon.

Context matters. A noose might just be a drawing in a gang of Hangman. But in the context of the dramatic increase in hate crimes in Oregon and the nation, a noose can be much more than a piece of rope. Its display can be a terroristic act meant to cause emotional harm to specific targets and entire communities as they ask, again, am I safe or even wanted in this community. The cumulative trauma that the noose has bought as a tool of hundreds of years of racial terror won't be stopped by the passage of this bill, but it will send a strong message that Oregon stands with the victims of hate and not the perpetrators of it. And that's how healing starts.

Thank you.