



COLORADO CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

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Thank you, Madame Chair, and thank you members of the committee.

My name is Brittany Vessely and I am the Executive Director of the Colorado Catholic Conference (CCC), which is the united voice of the four Catholic bishops of Colorado in public policy. I speak on behalf of the conference this afternoon to testify in support of HB 1077.

HB 1077 would create a companion Colorado Nonprofit Security Grant Program to the federal program in order to enhance security for our state's faith-based and charitable organizations that are considered at high risk of attack. This state-level grant program is important for all nonprofit organizations, including churches and ministries of all religions, to protect property--, but even more so--, to protect the faithful people within those properties.

Colorado is home to over one million Catholics, over 200 Catholic churches, and hundreds of ministries – including ministries that serve the most vulnerable in our community. According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, there have been at least 120 attacks on churches and religious sites in 31 states and the District of Columbia since May 2020. These incidents include arson, statues beheaded, limbs cut, smashed, and painted, gravestones defaced with swastikas and anti-Catholic language, and other destruction and vandalism. Colorado is no exception.

In the last two years, the Archdiocese of Denver is aware of roughly 30 parishes or ministry locations that have been the target of vandalism, property destruction, or theft. That's 30 incidents just in Denver from the 120 nationwide.

Prominent examples include the downtown Cathedral Basilica, with multiple incidents of defacement, rocks thrown through stained glass windows, and threats against priests and staff; Sacred Heart of Mary Church in Boulder where the Mother Teresa statue was spray-painted with Catholic-hate statements and white Crosses knocked over; and Cure d' Ars parish in Denver, where there was a break-in and theft that included the tabernacle, Eucharist, chalices, laptop, soundboard, security cameras, and copper piping--which caused flooding.

In April 2021, the Archdiocese of Denver submitted applications for the federal grant program on behalf of 10 parishes and ministries. They were only approved for ONE, St. Elizabeth of Hungary, where there was over 350 incidents resulting in police investigation – including a murder in the lunch line and a truck ramming the statue of St. Elizabeth. The other nine applications were denied, despite clear incidents of hate crimes and vandalism.

Our churches and ministries depend on this funding to keep our community safe. The federal grants, when received, still do not cover all the costs of the destruction and needed safety protections—but it is a start. This state-level program is a crucial addition to protecting nonprofits across Colorado.

This is a matter of freedom of religion and freedom of expression. We respectfully ask the committee to vote “Yes” on HB 1077 to ensure the places millions of Coloradans and visitors to our state hold dear – and the safety of those people – are protected against needless acts of vandalism, violence, and prejudice. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Brittany Vessely
Executive Director, Colorado Catholic Conference