



Homeland Security

June 9, 2015

Arjun Sethi
American Civil Liberties Union
4301 Connecticut Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20008

Dear Mr. Sethi:

Thank you for your December 18, 2014 letter to the Assistant to the President for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism Lisa Monaco. I have been asked to respond on her behalf.

I personally engaged with communities across the country to address the Department and Administration's approach to preventing violent extremism. From these dialogues, I learned how we can better improve collaborative efforts between the American people and their government.

While in New York City, I took the opportunity to discuss many of the issues you raised directly with the Brennan Center for Justice and your colleagues at the American Civil Liberties Union. My Coordinator for Countering Violent Extremism has also participated in open discussions on these topics, most recently with over 200 attorneys at an event sponsored by the American Bar Association. I write to clarify the Administration's efforts and to dispel any ambiguity that may exist.

Violent extremism prevention and intervention activities must consider the potential impact on civil rights and civil liberties. Efforts to prevent violent extremism are undertaken in full compliance with the protection and preservation of civil rights and civil liberties. The Department's Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties is spearheading these efforts.

Countering violent extremism addresses potential root causes by empowering local partners to intervene while ideally avoiding the need for law enforcement action. To be clear, in instances where an imminent threat to the community exists, law enforcement action, investigation, or prosecution is a correct response. This is one of the many reasons why the Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation are part of the Administration's whole-of-government effort. The overall objective of violent

extremism prevention and intervention is to increase awareness and empower communities who may be in the best position to develop their own innovative approaches. This can only be accomplished by developing trust. Therefore, the objective of these efforts is to work with communities, not to collect intelligence under the auspices of collaboration.

The Administration's approach involves commitment to engagement and amplification of credible voices against violent extremism. These engagement efforts are further supported by research, analysis, and training. Additionally, the Administration plans to work with communities across the country to facilitate the development of locally owned and driven prevention and intervention programs. For example, local government and community members in Boston, Los Angeles, Minneapolis-St. Paul, and other communities across the country have developed grassroots prevention programs that address the issues facing their local communities. Efforts will focus on increasing law enforcement's understanding of violent extremism and improve collaboration with stakeholders—communities, social services, mental health officials, educators, the private sector, academia, and faith-based leaders.

This approach emphasizes the strength of local communities and civil society and acknowledges that well-informed and well-equipped families, communities, and local institutions represent the best defense against violent extremism. Local communities are the front lines of defense and response and are essential in addressing this issue.

Public outreach and community engagement initiatives are central to the Administration's strategy. The purpose of such outreach is to foster positive, productive relationships with the federal, state, local, territorial, and tribal government agencies. Community engagement can undermine key recruiting narratives used by violent extremist groups, such as al-Qa'ida, al-Shabaab, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, and related terrorist affiliates, as well as domestic violent extremists such as violent Sovereign Citizens.

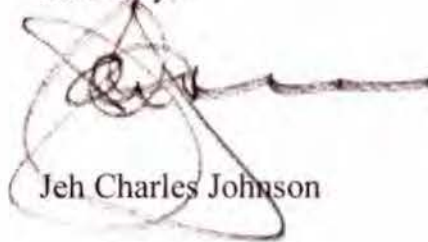
The Department's Office for Civil Rights and Civil Liberties and the Homeland Security Advisory Council's Faith-Based Security and Communications Advisory Committee—among others—builds on community-based activities to strengthen communities targeted by violent extremist threats. Similarly, the Department of Justice is also committed to protecting the civil rights and civil liberties of all Americans, and regularly stresses this commitment through training and other engagement with law enforcement officials. Also, to be clear, the Federal Bureau of Investigation conducts outreach efforts separate from traditional investigative activities to open lines of communication and forge or deepen two-way relationships with vital partner communities, therefore enhancing the Bureau's ability to understand and protect the communities it serves.

Regarding your concerns of community involvement in violent extremism prevention and intervention efforts, the Administration and I believe that every American has a role to play in the safety and security of our Nation. Repeatedly, we have seen the advantage of public awareness and cooperation through information-sharing, community oriented policing, and citizen awareness. The diversity of our communities is a source of strength, not weakness, in the fight against violent extremism.

I appreciate the concerns raised, and believe we share the same goals of ensuring a safe and secure Nation that preserves the civil rights and civil liberties of the American people. Please share this response with the organizations that co-signed your letter.

Thank you again for your letter and your interest in this important issue. Should you wish to discuss this matter further, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jeh Charles Johnson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Jeh Charles Johnson