



LIFE AFTER HATE

Written testimony of

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Life After Hate

Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention

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Introduction

Chairwoman Lucille Roybal-Allard, Ranking Member Chuck Fleischmann, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss how the Department of Homeland Security's Targeted Violence and Terrorism Prevention (TVTP) program is supporting Life After Hate's work to better understand and disrupt the threat of white supremacist violent extremism.

My name is Sammy Rangel, and I am a cofounder and the current executive director of Life After Hate, the first nonprofit in the U.S. dedicated to helping men and women leave the violent far-right to connect with humanity and lead compassionate lives. Our vision is a world that allows people to change and contribute to society without violence.

I have more than 20 years of experience building and leading direct service programs and teams for at-risk youth and adults at the local and national levels. I spent most of my youth in and out of correctional institutions. Though I was deemed "incorrigible" at just 17 years old, I made it out of the criminal justice system alive and began the lengthy process of changing my life. I eventually went on to earn a Master of Social Work and fully dedicated my life to helping other people change.

That's how Life After Hate's story begins. Our organization was founded in 2011 by former violent extremists (formers) who came together knowing two things: 1. We had each gone through the complex, exhaustive work of exiting violent extremism without peer or professional support, and 2. We were committed to making sure that any one wanting to exit would never have to do it alone.

Four years later we launched our flagship program ExitUSA, the US-based intervention program of Life After Hate, modeled on the examples of successful exit programs in Germany, Norway, and Sweden.

By 2020, our group has grown to serve hundreds of individuals and families, and we count among our allies some of the most respected names in the field, including academics, practitioners and other experts.

In addition to direct client services, we also partner on research projects to advance the public's understanding of white supremacy and ideologically-driven violence, as well as contribute to the field, in general; assist in launching online messaging campaigns to expand our reach; and train mental health practitioners, law enforcement and other direct community service providers as we build a robust national response to the growing need.

White supremacist violent extremism is the most pressing national security issue facing the U.S. right now, and Life After Hate is a critical part of the whole-of-society approach to make our country healthy and safer.

We have identified three key areas of focus to achieve our mission and vision: ExitUSA intervention and aftercare services; training and capacity building; and community engagement. These three areas are directly supported, in part, by the Department of Homeland Security's generous two-year grant.

ExitUSA Intervention and Aftercare Services

Life After Hate is built on the belief that anyone willing to take steps toward accountability for their journey creates the possibility for redemption.

Participation in ExitUSA is voluntary and is informed, in part, by the client's risk, needs, goals, and barriers to change. Cases are categorized as response (i.e., short-term) or support (i.e., long-term), with the latter often requiring 70+ interactions. Following the intervention, clients may continue engagement with ExitUSA aftercare services and support. Since our founding, we have helped more than 500 individuals and family and friends grappling with hate groups and the deadly ideology.

As a program designed and informed by formers, Life After Hate is a credible voice for anyone who grows disillusioned with white supremacist violent extremism. Many adherents do eventually become disillusioned—a process that begins when an individual observes a “gap between their memory of the past or their initial expectations of the movement and their perception of the present.”¹

We also know that many non-ideological factors can contribute to a person’s decision to join and stay in an extremist group. Multiple research projects explored the relationship between these factors and radicalization to violence. In one paper published in 2016, a research team (which included Dr. Pete Simi, one of our board members and a consultant on the current grant) conducted intensive life history interviews with 44 former members of violent white supremacist groups who lived in 15 different states across all regions of the U.S.

Some of what the research found:

- 45 percent of those interviewed reported being the victim of childhood physical abuse while 21 percent reported being the victim of childhood sexual abuse; 46 percent of those interviewed reported being neglected as a child.
- 57 percent of the sample reported experiencing mental health problems either preceding or during their extremist involvement.
- 72 percent of the subjects reported having problems with alcohol and/or illegal drugs.²

This type of research supports our overall strategy to help individuals disengage from violent behavior and begin the exit process.

Radicalization to violent extremism is not a linear process and very often does not begin with the ideology. Deradicalization, or, the cognitive

¹ Mehr Latif , Kathleen Blee , Matthew DeMichele , Pete Simi & Shayna Alexander (2020) Why White Supremacist Women Become Disillusioned, and Why They Leave, *The Sociological Quarterly*, 61:3, 367-388, DOI: 10.1080/00380253.2019.1625733

² Simi, Pete, Karyn Sporer and Bryan Bubolz. 2016. “Narratives of Childhood Adversities and Adolescent Misconduct as Precursors to Violent Extremism: A Life-Course Criminological Approach.” *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency*, 53, 4: 536-63.

break from the ideology, therefore, is not about challenging the belief system; it's about helping the person trapped behind it. As one of our clients said recently: "ExitUSA is helping me process my transition and find ways to improve my mental health. I've only been communicating with them for a month but I'm already learning to be more empathetic and forgiving."³

A major component of successful exit programs, including those in Germany, Sweden and Norway, includes the construction of an alternate community away from violent ideology. We saw similar success when we created a safe space online for formers to talk about their experiences. What began as a secret Facebook group in 2012 has evolved into a community of individuals who have been touched in some way by white supremacist violent extremism and who mentor and support one another today.

In June 2020, we relaunched our online "Community Forum," which offers compartmentalized, secure spaces for formers, individual exit clients, friend and family clients, and volunteers. Each sub-community has its own trajectory. Individual exit clients, for instance, are given graduated access to different permission-based levels of the forum as they transition through their service plans.

Individual ExitUSA clients are encouraged to maintain participation in the forum to continue to build resilience and reduce the likelihood of re-engagement as they face new challenges and opportunities post-exit, reintegrating back into society while negotiating potentially persistent feelings and thoughts of shame and guilt. Additionally, continued participation offers the opportunity for mentorship, self-healing, and personal growth.

Friend and family clients, on the other hand, are encouraged to remain active in the forum to build and foster resilience, not only for themselves and their loved ones, but for those new to our community who are looking for understanding and support.

³ Life After Hate. (2020). [Unpublished raw data on ExitUSA client survey].

The forum offers tailored discussion groups as well as open forums for organic conversations on timely issues. Forum users can also discover and share new resources, such as news articles, academic papers, and Life After Hate's "Former's Media Toolkit," in user-friendly, dedicated resource areas.

How DHS funding advances ExitUSA Intervention and Aftercare Services

ExitUSA managed 200 new cases in 2019 and 128 in the year prior; these data are exclusive of ongoing cases which can span months or even years. During the two-year grant period, we anticipate 360-450 new cases. With DHS's support we will expand our ExitUSA staff to meet this anticipated increase, including new hires and enhancing existing staff roles. In addition, we will build out client supportive services and resources, including life skills coaching, developing our referral network, creating new resources for the "Community Forum," and updating the intake process for family and friends by refining existing screening tools.

Training Mental Health Practitioners, Formers and Other Co-Responders

Most ExitUSA individual clients have self-identified a dissonance between their personal needs and the reality of their lives. There is often a sense, however vague, that they wish to get back to a version of their lives before their involvement.

Our overall strategy through the use of adapted Motivational Interviewing and Trauma Informed Care is to broaden a client's awareness about the decisions needed to affect positive life changes. Motivational interviewing is an evidenced-based approach that enhances systems of support so practitioners operate through a shared language and framework to help clients safely work through their exit. Trauma Informed Care is a treatment framework that recognizes trauma and acknowledges its impact.

In order to expand our network of mental health referral partners and ultimately build capacity, we have developed an online training to build a

cadre of volunteer mental health professionals to support ExitUSA. (All ExitUSA staff must also complete this training as part of onboarding).

In the Mental Health Professional Co-Responder Development (MHPCD) training, participants learn ExitUSA's novel Motivational Interviewing + Trauma Informed Care approach as well as complete our Violent Far-Right Extremism 101: Cultural Competency (101) training.

Life After Hate developed the 101 training in 2017 in part using the 2014 National Institute of Justice (NIJ)-funded "Research and Evaluation on Domestic Radicalization to Violent Extremism: Research to Support Exit USA" led by RTI with subject matter experts Drs. Pete Simi and Kathleen Blee.⁴ The 101 provides practical tools to identify white supremacist violent extremism ideology and its manifestations.

So far, we have trained 19 mental health practitioners since the very first cohort training in September 2018. The feedback has been incredibly promising. Trainees describe feeling empowered to work with this population. "I feel as though I have a few more tools to use when communicating with clients," one volunteer said. "And a greater appreciation of all that Life After Hate offers formers, current extremist members and their families."⁵

Additionally, formers who demonstrate the willingness to work on themselves and who are accountable for their past choices, among other things, have and will continue to be trained to become mentors to others.

Thomas Engelmann, who passed away suddenly and unexpectedly in August 2020, was an example of the strength of this program. Thomas overcame great odds to become the person he was. He spent much of his life engaged in violent white supremacy—and it nearly cost him his life at the hands of his own group when he left. He lived the ideals of compassion

⁴ Supported by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), Office of Justice Programs (OJP), National Institute of Justice (NIJ) through Award No: 2014-ZA-BX0005, <https://nij.ojp.gov/funding/awards/2014-za-bx-0005>.

⁵ Life After Hate. (2020). [Unpublished raw data on ExitUSA training survey].

and he continues to inspire us.

“I really want to help people,” he once said. “The fact that I survived getting shot in the face with a .45-caliber handgun at point-blank range and lived is my motivation. I am doing my best to dedicate the rest of my life to becoming the person I should have been all along.”⁶

ExitUSA recognizes that alone it cannot assist every person who wants to exit, every family concerned about a loved one, or every professional struggling to work with formers. In response, we developed an initiative to train and support local capacity and cultural competency for those in state, local, tribal, and territorial, mental health, law enforcement, faith-based groups, and nonprofits (i.e., local prevention networks) to effectively identify and address white supremacy violent extremism in their practice and community.

How DHS funding advances Training for Mental Health Practitioners, Formers and Other Co-Responders

During the two-year grant period, we will hold eight Mental Health Professional Co-Responder Development training sessions, each composed of 5 – 10 participants, of which we expect half will volunteer with ExitUSA. During the grant period, we also anticipate four formers will complete mentor requirements, of which at least one will be hired as an ExitUSA Outreach Specialist. The former-mentoring effort will be formalized and externally reviewed. In addition, we will train up to 50 direct service providers from existing and new local prevention networks beginning in grant year 2 in at least five states, including California and Colorado.

⁶ A former member of the Aryan Brotherhood talks about why he joined, and how he finally got out. Life After Hate. (Nov. 21, 2018). <https://www.lifeafterhate.org/blog/2018/11/21/qampa-break-away-at-any-cost-a-former-member-of-the-ary-an-brotherhood-talks-about-why-he-joined-and-how-he-finally-got-out?rq=thomas>.

Building Individual and Community Awareness & Resiliency

In addition to violence, death and incarceration, formers face many emotional obstacles to exiting, including shame, guilt and stigma. We have learned that individuals are more likely to exit if there is an alternate community waiting for them, and support to help them through the process.

We can mitigate barriers to exit, in part, by expanding our community outreach and educational campaigns. Ultimately, the problem of white supremacist violent extremism requires a major paradigm shift where compassion and empathy are the main vehicles for reconciliation and intervention. Reconciliation must also include taking responsibility for past harmful actions; making amends in communities where harm was caused; and personal development, self-healing and awareness, at a minimum. We define empathy as listening with open minds and hearts to the journeys and experiences of others. This creates an environment that supports change, healing, and accountability. While we never condone hurtful actions, we also do not condemn the human being.

Community engagement is a critical component of exit. Communities that are informed and engaged are more likely to support formers and, in turn, to promote disengagement and exit as a viable option. One of the most effective ways to inform and engage communities is through the use of firsthand former accounts, which humanize the issues around white supremacist violent extremism, and demonstrate change is possible to someone contemplating exit.

About half of our ExitUSA cases come from concerned family and friends, many who similarly report feeling shame, guilt and stigma. One mother who is now a Life After Hate volunteer, Jeanette Manning, described not knowing where to turn when her teenage daughter became involved in a neo-Nazi network. “That’s why I kept it to myself,” Jeanette said. “There’s a lot of shame involved when your loved one starts believing things that are so different from what they grew up with. Their values change, they become a different person. There’s so much shame involved.

There's guilt, there's shame, there's humiliation.”⁷

Today, Jeanette is one of the most active voices in our forum, which continues to grow its resources for friends and families.

We also work with Moonshot CVE to create and launch campaigns to proactively reach more vulnerable populations. In testifying before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs in 2019, Moonshot's co-founder and CEO, Vidhya Ramalingam, who is also a current Life After Hate board member, outlined Moonshot's work: “Efforts to repurpose advertising technology can radically improve the availability of content which discredits extremist narratives, or simply offers alternatives, to those seeking dangerous content.”⁸

How DHS Funding Advances Building Individual and Community Awareness & Resiliency

During the two-year grant period, we will optimize existing, and introduce new, outreach to raise awareness of the exit process as well as ExitUSA. These complementary activities will drive more at-risk individuals to ExitUSA and build societal resilience against white supremacist violent extremist drivers. We will develop and launch five video counter-narrative campaigns. We will launch an online messaging campaign with Moonshot CVE to reach at-risk populations using existing advertising technology.

Conclusion: Incubating Hate

For decades, researchers have faced the impossible task of quantifying membership to white supremacist hate groups. While the internet further obscures this task, it offers reliable clues. For example, before removing pages associated with QAnon last year, Facebook noted

⁷ Life After Hate. (2021). [Unpublished interviewed]

⁸ Examining the Global Terrorism Landscape Before the House Committee on Foreign Relations (2019) (statement of Vidhya Ramalingam, Founder & Director, Moonshot CVE), <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA13/20190430/109376/HHRG-116-FA13-Wstate-RamalingamV-20190430.pdf>.

that there were as many as 3 million followers to the top pages.⁹ Parler, an alternative to Twitter that attracted white supremacists, was downloaded nearly 1 million times in the days following Jan. 6.¹⁰ It has more than 11 million users, 9 million from the U.S. In a nine-month period following the deadly Unite the Right rally Charlottesville, the Daily Stormer, a neo-Nazi website, received 997,000 visits and 284,000 unique visitors.¹² And anti-Semitic tweets number in the millions on Twitter in recent years.¹³

White supremacist violent extremism persists today not just because of a small group of ideologues—they come and go—but because its ideas have a persistent shelf life in the cultural history of the U.S.

We feel this dynamic acutely. As formers, we have an obligation to make amends not just by helping pull others away from hate, but by actively fighting systems of injustice. This process takes years.

While we initially focus on non-ideological factors to hate and violence, our work is deeply informed and motivated by the relationship between overt racism and its more discreet variations; especially more recently, as these points converge more and more. Success therefore means we guide one more hateful voice to a place of empathy and compassion. We get there by broadening an individual's perspective enough so that they recognize how their experiences and socialization have primed them to accept the extreme versions of white supremacy as a solution to problems, real and perceived. In doing so, we're also removing

⁹ *QAnon groups have millions of Facebook, documents show*, NBC News (Aug. 10, 2020), <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/qanon-groups-have-millions-members-facebook-documents-show-n1236317>.

¹⁰ *Parler: Where the Mainstream Mingles with the Extreme*, Anti-Defamation League (Nov. 12, 2020), <https://www.adl.org/blog/parler-where-the-mainstream-mingles-with-the-extreme>.

¹¹ *Parler is offline, but violent posts scraped by hackers will haunt users*, Washington Post (Jan. 12, 2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2021/01/12/parler-data-downloaded/>.

¹² *Op-Ed: What's the alt-right, and how large is its audience?*, Los Angeles Times (Aug. 22, 2017), <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/op-ed/la-oe-main-alt-right-audience-20170822-story.html>.

¹³ *Groundbreaking ADL Analysis Estimates 4.2 Million Anti-Semitic Tweets in One-Year Period*, Anti-Defamation League (May 7, 2018), <https://www.adl.org/news/press-releases/groundbreaking-adl-analysis-estimates-42-million-anti-semitic-tweets-in-one>.

that harmful voice from the environment that catalyzes hate to violence; an environment that is making white supremacy increasingly more palatable to mainstream audiences.

Some white supremacists cycle out without confronting their involvement. Without guidance, where does that leave them and where do they go from there? If we do not offer them the support they need to recover from the violent ideology, we've missed a critical opportunity.

Through the support of the Department of Homeland Security we are better positioned to scale our mission and contribute to the whole-of-society approach to make our country healthy and safer. Thank you for the opportunity to share more about this important work.