May 31, 2018

Dear Members of the Los Angeles City Council,

We, the undersigned community-based and advocacy organizations, express our concerns and objections regarding the City of Los Angeles’ potential receipt of funds from the Department of Homeland Security’s Fiscal Year 2016 Countering Violent Extremism Grant Program.

All municipalities and organizations involved in the Department of Homeland Security’s Countering Violent Extremism (“CVE”) Program (“Grant Program”) should understand its stigmatizing impact on Muslim, immigrant, brown, and black constituents and community members. Although CVE programs have recently been framed as “public health” initiatives that include mental health and social services, these programs complement and often work hand-in-hand with the Trump administration’s fundamental law enforcement focus for CVE. The “public health” framing is used to mask CVE’s true objective to surveil, profile, and collect intelligence on Muslim, immigrant, brown, and black communities and stigmatize them as inherently suspect.

CVE programs have a negative impact on free religious practice and political expression. They can also lead to the possible loss of organizational independence and autonomy for groups asked to participate in them, when they are coerced into cooperating with the Federal government for fear of being isolated and losing funding or other support. Lastly, despite years of experience with CVE programming in the U.S. and abroad, there is no evidentiary basis for concluding that these programs contribute to reducing terrorism.

From the beginning, the Grant Program has always had and will likely continue to have a dangerous and ill-advised focus on Muslims. The Trump administration doubled down on this focus, both through rhetoric and action. Two examples include the administration’s desire to rename the program to “Countering Islamic Extremism” or “Countering Radical Islamic Extremism,”¹ and the rescinding of the grant to Life After Hate, a group that proposed using CVE funding to combat white supremacist violence. This harmful and problematic focus reinforces the Islamophobic rhetoric and fear-mongering by certain politicians and members of the media, which has increased distrust of, hostility, and violence towards Muslim American communities.

Thus, the undersigned organizations ask that the City of Los Angeles decline any funding under the Grant Program.

CVE in Los Angeles

CVE is a federal counter-terrorism initiative launched in 2011 that targets Muslim American communities and threatens their civil rights and religious freedoms. In 2014, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) named Los Angeles one of the first CVE pilot cities. As a pilot city, the City collaborated with DHS, FBI, U.S. Attorney’s Office, Los Angeles Police

Department, Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department, mental health agencies, and hand-picked Muslim groups whom these agencies persuaded to support the program with the prospect of federal funding.

In February 2015, Congress authorized state and local officials to divert existing federal funds earmarked to combat national security threats locally to undertake “countering violent Islamist extremism” programs. Through this funding, the LA Mayor’s Office launched a local CVE program entitled, Building Healthy Communities Grant Program (“Building Healthy Communities”). Building Healthy Communities led to a pilot program, Safe Spaces, which did programming in local mosques and Muslim Student Associations.

Local and national civil rights and community groups have opposed the City’s involvement in CVE since the public inception of a formalized CVE program in Los Angeles. This opposition is best highlighted by the unanimous decision by the Islamic Shura Council of Southern California, an umbrella organization that represents over 75 mosques and Muslim organizations in Southern California, to oppose CVE in February 2015. Additionally, some local groups that originally were lured to CVE based on the prospect of funding have since abandoned it in response to community backlash. Unfortunately, the City of Los Angeles has continued pursuing federal funding through the Grant Program, despite widespread community opposition, which disproves the claim that CVE programs are “community led.”

Below we highlight three of the most pressing issues with the Grant Program and its potential and realized consequences on Muslim, immigrant, brown, and black community members.

**Surveilling, Profiling, and Stigmatizing Muslim Community Members by Framing CVE as Mental Health and Social Service Programming**

The City’s Building Healthy Communities grant funded Safe Spaces provided “prevention and intervention behavioral and mental health services” through forums (e.g. “Let’s Be Honest” and “I am Change”) and mental health care professionals at two mosques for a duration of one year. The application established a structure for “Community Safety Team(s)” that included a “(1) Community Institution administrator (2) Religious leader (such as an imam) (3) Social worker (4) Psychologist or psychiatrist (5) Lawyer (6) Law enforcement officer (7) Communications manager (8) Anyone else on an ‘as-needed’ basis.” These Community Safety Teams would gather information about “a potential threat/suspicious behaviour, [sic] review the warning signs and all background information of the person in question” through intake forms that asked for the “Name of Person(s) of Interest,” “Reported Threat(s)/Concerning Behavior(s),” “Warning Signs,” and “Risk Factors.” They would then “Assess Information & Determine the Level of Risk” and “Make a Team Recommendation” regarding how to proceed, including whether to notify law enforcement.

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The “After Action Report” for Building Healthy Communities reported that “threats of public violence did not appear from any of the over 100 individuals who participated in counseling/therapy.” Yet it came to the unfounded conclusion that there was the possibility of the existence of “symptoms” discovered through indications of “cognitive closures, rigid thinking, insecure attachments and the ability to be exploited by nefarious groups” that if left untreated “in a portion of cases” could have led to violence.

Building Healthy Communities and Safe Spaces operate under the guise of behavioral and mental health programing, but publicly available information reveals that these programs’ true objectives are to target the very communities they purport to serve and to stigmatize them as potential threats. Programs providing social and mental health services are essential, and both government and community organizations should provide them to their constituents, however such programs must not be funded by national security and counter-terrorism programs such as CVE.

**Impact on Free Religious Exercise, Political Expression, and Other Civil Rights**

Among the potential adverse consequences of the Grant Program are the censorship of free religious exercise and political expression, the violation of individual privacy rights, and the potential for unconstitutional governmental intrusion.

The Grant Program partly seeks to fund efforts aimed at “identifying the early signs of radicalization to violence.” Yet extensive and thorough research conducted on this topic establishes that profiles of violent extremists vary enormously and defy the creation of predictive checklists of radicalization.

CVE training and guidelines identify “indicators” and “predictors” of violence that include patterns of lawful political activism and religious worship. According to the City’s Safe Spaces program, having disagreements over US foreign policy, “misguided interpretations of Islam,” “troubles at home,” and “a desire to look cool” are all possible indicators of the propensity to use violence. The program’s Community Safety Teams collect information on the participants to determine future dangerousness based on these “indicators.” The records are not confidential or privileged and can easily be used by law enforcement, including Federal law enforcement to set up sting operations to entrap the most vulnerable for pre-emptive prosecutions.

Generalized monitoring, as described in the City’s CVE programs creates a climate of stifling fear, suspicion, and self-censorship. People are made to feel that they must forego lawful activity and instead watch what they say and with whom they speak, to avoid being reported for engaging in behavior vaguely labelled as “suspicious.” The First Amendment protects freedom of religion, speech, and association, which government-sponsored programs such as CVE threaten.

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CVE Programs are Ineffective and Have Resulted in Participating Organizations’ Loss of Autonomy

Moreover, the encroachment on rights comes without any evidence that CVE programs are effective at combating violent extremism.

On the contrary, CVE programs have resulted in weakening the organizational autonomy of the groups asked to participate in them, which diminishes their ability to effectively advocate for the basic needs of their communities. The maintenance of organizational independence and autonomy, to the greatest extent possible, is of extreme importance to Muslim, immigrant, brown and black communities given the Trump administration’s Islamophobic, xenophobic, and white supremacist agenda. This struggle for autonomy from the federal government to preserve the safety and privacy of these vulnerable communities is at the core of the City of Los Angeles’ Sanctuary movement as well as the State of California’s passage of SB54, The California Values Act, and SB 31, The California Religious Freedom Act.

A 2009 analysis of the United Kingdom’s Preventing Violent Extremism Program, commonly known as PREVENT, a program structured similarly to DHS’ CVE Grant Program, found that “funding and support is often allocated and withdrawn from organisations [sic] depending on whether they align themselves with local and central government, and their policies.” The research further explains, “the general atmosphere promoted by PREVENT is one in which to make criticisms is to risk losing funding and face isolation as an ‘extremist’.”

The author of the report also found that Prevent “fosters social divisions among Muslims themselves and between Muslims and others, encourages tokenism, facilitates violations of privacy and professional norms of confidentiality, discourages local democracy and is counter-productive in reducing the risk of political violence.”

Despite years of experience with CVE programming in the U.S. and abroad, there is no evidentiary basis for concluding that these programs contribute to reducing terrorism, which is their stated goal. Despite years of federally-funded efforts, “government studies and scholars have repeatedly highlighted the difficulty of predicting which individuals are likely to commit violent acts.”

For the foregoing reasons, the undersigned organizations urge the City of Los Angeles and subgrantees of the Department of Homeland Security’s Fiscal Year 2016 Countering Violent Extremism Grant Program to reject all funding for the Program.

Sincerely,

18 Million Rising
ACLU of Southern California

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Activate Labs: Beautiful Resistance Project
American Friends Service Committee
American Friends Service Committee - Los Angeles
American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee
American Indian Movement Southern California (AIMSoCal)
American Muslims for Palestine (AMP)
API Equality-LA
Arab American Caucus of California Democratic Party
Arab American Civic Council
Asian Americans Advancing Justice – Asian Law Caucus
Asian Americans Advancing Justice – Los Angeles
Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council
Black Alliance for Just Immigration
Black Lives Matter – Los Angeles
Black Lives Matter Youth Vanguard
Cage UK
California Immigrant Policy Center (CIPC)
The Campaign to Take on Hate
Central American Resource Center (CARECEN)
Church of the Epiphany
Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA)
Council on American-Islamic Relations, Greater Los Angeles (CAIR-LA)
Defending Rights & Dissent
Esperanza Community Housing Corporation
Faculty & Staff for Justice in Palestine
Ground Game LA
Holman United Methodist Church
Holy Faith Episcopal Church
ICNA Council for Social Justice
Idle No More Southern California
Immigrant Defenders Law Center
Jetpac
Jewish Voice for Peace, Los Angeles
March & Rally Los Angeles
MPower Change
Muslim American Society – Greater LA (MAS-GLA)
Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative (MuslimARC)
Muslim Justice League
Muslim Student Association West
National Day Laborer Organizing Network
National Immigration Law Center (NILC)
National Lawyers Guild – Los Angeles Chapter
National Queer Asian Pacific Islander Alliance (NQAPIA)
Nikkei for Civil Rights & Redress
Nikkei Progressives
Orange County Communities Organized for Responsible Development (OCCORD)
Palestinian Youth Movement LA/OC/IE
People Power – Marina del Rey
Presbytery of the Pacific
Progressive Asian Network for Action (PANA)
South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT)
South Asian Network
Southwest Asian & North Afrikan - Los Angeles (SWANA-LA)
St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in Hollywood, CA
UCLA Labor Center
Vigilant Love
White People 4 Black Lives
Women’s Foundation of California
Yemeni Student Association of UC Berkeley
Young Muslim Collective
Youth Justice Coalition