



Citing Charlottesville, Dems Ask Trump for Answers on Anti-Extremism Funding

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Citing the recent violence in Charlottesville, Senate Democrats last week asked the Trump administration for answers on its decision to rescind a \$400,000 grant for combating homegrown far-right extremism shortly after the president took office.

Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) and 23 Democratic senators penned an Aug. 18 letter to Acting Homeland Security Secretary Elaine Duke asking about the administration's decision to "de-emphasize combating far-right extremism."

Earlier this month, *The New York Times* reported about the administration's decision to defund Life After Hate, a group dedicated to reforming extremists. The Obama administration awarded the group a \$400,000 grant to combat far-right extremism through DHS' Countering Violent Extremism program. CVE was established in December 2015, with Congress appropriating \$10 million in state and local grants.

The senators asked that DHS "clarify reports" that Trump transition team member Katharine Gorka may have influenced the decision for Life After Hate. Gorka, a national security analyst who has been criticized for her views on Islam, is married to Trump aide Sebastian Gorka, who has been linked to the alt-right.

The lawmakers' letter weighs the grant's elimination against the Aug. 11-12 protests in Charlottesville, Va., which resulted in the death of one woman and injuries to 19 others when James Alex Fields Jr. allegedly drove a car through a crowd of counter-protesters. Two state troopers also died in a separate helicopter crash.

The rally was organized by far-right activists – including white supremacists and neo-Nazis – in protest of the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue in Emancipation Park. Violence repeatedly erupted as members of the protest clashed with counter-protesters from the left. The senators described the events in Charlottesville as "domestic terrorism."

"Yet as our nation confronts the problem of growing racial, religious and even political hatred, we are concerned that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) may not be adequately addressing one of the most significant threats of domestic terrorism," the lawmakers wrote.

The senators noted that several new groups have been added to the CVE program, but the emphasis on far-right extremism has been "significantly reduced, if not completely eliminated." The group criticized the Trump administration's "troubling" priorities when it comes to combating right-wing extremism, and blasted the president for not immediately denouncing far-

right groups for their involvement in the Charlottesville violence. The lawmakers condemned Trump's comments blaming "both sides" for the altercations in Charlottesville and also criticized Trump for his "silence" after the Aug. 5 bombing of the Dar Al-Farooq mosque in Bloomington, Minn.

Patrick Eddington, a former CIA intelligence officer and current Cato Institute policy analyst, in an interview on Tuesday described Fields' alleged actions in Charlottesville as a "textbook" example of terrorism.

"When a white supremacist gets behind the wheel of a car and deliberately mows down people demonstrating against what he stands for, that's politically motivated murder," said Eddington, who also served as a senior staffer for Rep. Rush Holt (D-N.J.) between 2004-14, when he handled security-related issues.

However, Eddington noted that there is no published or peer-reviewed evidence showing that the CVE program has ever been effective in detecting terrorists or foiling terror plots. There is no set criteria or list of behaviors that indicate whether someone will become radical, he noted, adding that both the FBI and Britain's MI5 support this claim, despite their reliance on terrorist behavior checklists.

Leahy's letter, Eddington said, either shows gross ignorance about the issues with CVE or a willful disregard for the lack of evidence showing the effectiveness of the program.

"If it's the latter, it's simply playing politics with another human and political tragedy," he said.