

Safety in unsafe times

ADL forum focuses on ways for Jews to guard against terrorism

By Jason Nielsen
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NEWTON — The Massachusetts attorney general told representatives from more than 150 Jewish community and religious organizations that they need to work “shoulder-to-shoulder” with law enforcement agencies to fight terrorism.

Tom Reilly stressed to the more than 200 people who attended last week’s forum, “Security Awareness in a Time of Threats and Uncertainty,” at the Leventhal-Sidman Jewish Community Center in Newton that local and state law enforcement agencies and the Jewish community must “work together against these threats.”

“You have to take them seriously and to realize that the reality of the world that we live in has changed,” he said. “I don’t think it’s any worse, I don’t think it’s any better. We don’t know exactly (what the threats are), but we know there are terrorists who have made specific threats against this country and the Jewish people.”

The primary objective of the event, which was organized by the Anti-Defamation League’s New England office, was to quell unrealistic fears about terrorism and provide ways for community leaders to ensure the group’s safety. The meeting was originally scheduled to take place in March, but was moved up several weeks after the U.S. terrorism threat level was raised a month ago. It has since been lowered.

The session came a week after leaders of the organized Jewish community met to discuss ways to efficiently disseminate information to different organizations.

“Part of what we did was to try and provide a more realistic perspective as to the extent of the threat that we actually face,” said Robert Leikind, executive director of the ADL. “The issue of security is as much a facet of how one thinks about the problem as what

you do. Our second goal was to provide clear guidelines for what it means to be a responsible community leader who is able to thoughtfully address the security question.”

Middlesex County District Attorney Martha Coakley said there was no evidence of threats targeting the Greater Boston area. “Just because we haven’t received threats doesn’t mean we aren’t threatened,” she said.

The Jewish community, she explained, represents a symbolic group for Al Qaeda and other terrorists. The community also faces increased risks of anti-Semitism from those who blame Jews for a potential war with Iraq.

She advised people to be “aware and tuned into what’s happening, what threats are out there, and what kind of threats are available,” she said.

A four-person panel of experts spoke about making sense of terrorist threats, how the information is collected, and how the Jewish community could protect itself from potential threats and anti-Semitic incidents.

Edward Flynn, the state’s secretary of public safety, said community groups should prepare for the “functional equivalent of a winter storm or a power outage” by stocking up on canned foods and bottled water.

“The conversation (that needs to happen) as an American society and as individual communities is: Who do we want our role models to be?” he said. “We can choose our role models. We can choose to be courageous. We can choose to face our challenges with courage as faced London during the blitz (in World War II) or Israel right now, or we can be like Chicken Little and every time there is a change in the threat level panic.”

Richard Schlbach, supervisory special agent of the FBI’s counterterrorism squad, said there hasn’t been any cell activity to suggest Al Qaeda or any other group is planning an attack in Massachusetts. A more likely scenario, he added, would be “individuals acting alone disassociated from Al Qaeda but using it as a catalyst to attack the Jewish community.”

The best thing Jews can do is to be aware of their surroundings and report anything unusual to local authorities, he said. Information from the local level gets shared by law enforcement agencies as part of the Joint Terrorism Task Force.

A panel of experts fielded questions from the audience about steps that they should take to protect their own organizations.

Panelist Larry Curran, vice president at Pinkerton Consulting and Investigations, felt the level of concern within the community was higher than the actual threat warranted.

“From a randomness point of view, any target is a potential terrorist target, but from a probability point of view, there’s no reason a terrorist will do anything markedly different at this point in their efforts to target high-profile, relatively soft targets,” he said.

Curran said organizations could employ volunteers to stand guard at the entrance of synagogues or other facilities. He pointed out that there is always a “period of surveillance by targets of their targets that precedes any action.”

Richard Cole, senior counsel at the Civil Rights and Civil Liberties Office of the state Attorney General, said the most important thing to prevent hate crimes is building coalitions and partnerships with law enforcement and other community groups.

Anti-Semitic incidents, he explained, can vary from desecration of cemeteries to defacing synagogues with swastikas to “school-based incidents where young people are targeted because they’re Jewish and being blamed in some fashion for loss of American life or the fact that soldiers are dying.”

Cole said that after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, there was no increase in the number of hate crimes against the Jewish community in the state.

“In Massachusetts, there has been a lower number of incidents compared to the rate of other states because the relationships that were already there,” he said. “The Arab Muslim community didn’t have that relationship, so the challenge has been to bring them into the coalition that has been so effective over the years.”

The ADL also released an advance edition of a new handbook, “Keeping Your Jewish Institution Safe.” It provides guidelines on security planning, developing a relationship with emergency personnel and threat response planning.