



FIRES

Anti-hate group keeps eye on investigation in Duluth

The robust investigation into the fire that destroyed Adas Israel Congregation synagogue in Duluth is being viewed as 'very positive and reassuring,' said an Anti-Defamation League official based in Chicago.

Written By: [Brady Slater](#) | Sep 11th 2019 - 4pm.



Smoke still rolls out of a window after fire destroyed the Adas Israel Congregation synagogue Monday in Duluth. Jed Carlson / Forum News Service

On his fifth day on the job back in May, there was an attempted arson at a Jewish worship and community center in Chicago — among the latest in a two-year escalation of anti-Semitic incidents in the United States.

Months later, David Goldenberg is watching closely as events unfold in Duluth following the Monday fire that destroyed the Adas Israel Congregation synagogue at 302 E. Third St. in Duluth. The cause of the fire remains undetermined.

As Midwest regional director for the Anti-Defamation League in Chicago, Goldenberg is tracking developments and monitoring the community response. He was pleased to learn the authorities had quadrupled their presence by Tuesday to about 20 investigators, and that other faith places had been offering worship space and other kindnesses.

“When these incidents occur, the commitment to investigations and supporting the community (involved) is really important,” Goldenberg said on Wednesday. “The community and law enforcement response speaks volumes. The comments I see on social media are coming out in solidarity.”

The Anti-Defamation League is a lead anti-hate organization in the United States. Founded in 1913, its mission was to stop defamation of Jewish people and advocate for fair and just treatment. The ADL conducts training for law enforcement and other professionals, and educates children on anti-Semitism, implicit bias, anti-bullying, cyber hate and much more.

The ADL also keeps a database of anti-Semitic incidents of harassment, vandalism and assault for the past 40 years, and it shows that two of the three highest totals in four decades of tracking came in 2017-18 — an increase to 1,886 and 1,879 incidents, respectively, nationwide.

Shootings at synagogues in San Diego and Pittsburgh in the past year were high-profile examples of the increased violence toward members of the Jewish community. ADL’s 2018 Audit of Anti-Semitic Incidents showed Jewish institutions were the targets of 265 anti-Semitic incidents in 2018 — a 56 percent increase since 2016.

“There’s no question about it, we’re seeing an uptick in anti-Semitic incidents and in hate crimes in general, and it’s concerning,” Goldenberg said.

In its effort to combat and raise awareness about extremism, the ADL even has centers to monitor internet traffic for anti-Semitic hate speech and extremism. ADL shares things they learn with law enforcement in an effort to expose extremism.

Goldenberg prefaced his conversation with the News Tribune by saying he had no insight into anything going on locally with the investigation.

But given the intensity of the investigation, the fact that two “people of interest” have been interviewed, and that Duluth police were offering up the existence of new clues on Tuesday, people could be excused if they braced for the worst.

"(Law) enforcement hasn't made its decisions," Goldenberg said. "The seriousness with which local law enforcement is taking it and the resources being devoted to the incident is very positive and reassuring."

The Duluth Fire Department has yet to release a damage estimate for the property. But St. Louis County valued the Adas Israel Congregation synagogue in 2019 at a modest \$150,000 — \$33,000 for the corner lot and \$117,000 for the wood-framed building built in 1901.

Of course, there is precious more to it than that. On Monday morning as firefighters pulled more than half of the synagogue's 14 handwritten Torah scrolls out of the basement intact, one member called them "priceless."

The scrolls made their way here by ship as the cargo of Modern Orthodox Jewish families emigrating from Lithuania and other eastern European countries. The scrolls were kept and found in the surviving stone basement of the synagogue. The rest of the place is a loss and the members said this week, "The plan moving forward is uncertain and probably a long way off."

City of Duluth spokeswoman Kate Van Daele continued to ask for "time and patience" with the investigation, not wanting to put a timetable on it.

"We want to be intentional," she said.

