



# A Message From the President

John E. Keefe Jr., Esq.

NJSBA

On behalf of the entire membership of the New Jersey State Bar Association, and with a heavy heart, I extend our deepest condolences to the families and friends of the victims of the mass shooting at the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh, who are now being laid to rest. I also extend our sincerest wishes for a speedy recovery to those who were wounded, including all of the first responders who reacted with such selflessness and courage.

Make no mistake. What transpired is a hate crime, pure and simple, against a Jewish community at prayer. As more is revealed about the perpetrator of this horrific act of violence, and his postings on social media sites are identified, we are learning that vitriolic rhetoric very likely incited his heinous act.

Words matter. A reason that speech is so prized and protected is exactly because it is so powerful. Throughout history words have proven to be the catalyst to action.

As we have seen in the past week – in the atrocities of violence ranging from pipe bomb threats, to a shooting at a Kentucky grocery store, and to what occurred at the Pittsburgh synagogue -- words that fuel hateful, violent actions threaten our basic American values, principles and rights.

As stewards for the rule of law, the New Jersey State Bar Association stands by the right of free expression that is a cornerstone of our Constitution. But, threats of violence and violent actions that are directly related to vitriolic hate should be viewed as what they are: crimes.

As Dr. Martin Luther King stated in 1963 after the murder of four young girls in an Alabama church, “we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers.”

We can all agree we want a peaceful, safer and a more harmonious country for ourselves, our families and our children. To advance that goal, we call upon our brothers and sisters in the legal community to be stewards of truth and to help educate our neighbors and friends about the fundamental tenets of democracy.

Become a volunteer in one of the New Jersey State Bar Foundation’s many programs that educate the public about the law or in the NJSBA’s Benchmarks Civics Program, which sends volunteer lawyers to speak to community groups to foster civics education and a better understanding of our legal rights and responsibilities.

We also call on all those in positions of influence, in particular our political leaders, to be mindful of their words and to always refrain from encouraging or engaging in hateful rhetoric that undermines the safety of our citizens.