



Texas Holocaust, Genocide, and Antisemitism Advisory Commission

## STUDY ON ANTISEMITISM IN TEXAS

#### PREPARED FOR THE 2025 LEGISLATURE

#### **SUBMITTED TO:**

Gov. Greg Abbott
Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick
House Speaker Dade Phelan
Members of the Texas Legislature



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Cover page art - Hundreds gather for a solidarity rally for Israel outside the Texas Capitol on Oct. 15, 2023. Source: Aaron E. Martinez, American-Statesman

# Letter from THGAAC Leadership

November 18, 2024

#### Dear Gov. Abbott, Lt. Gov. Patrick, and Speaker Phelan,

When we submitted the first-ever Study on Antisemitism in Texas to you two years ago, we highlighted troubling public acts of Jew-hatred at that time. We noted that in the coming months, "there will undoubtedly be new, equally hateful, and dangerous episodes of antisemitism in the headlines, perhaps even from Texas. This has been true for 2,000 years — and the trend has grown worse in the past few years."

We had no idea at the time just how true those words would be.

As you know well, Hamas' October 7, 2023, attacks on Israel unleashed a historic rise in global antisemitism, from verbal harassment and blatant discrimination to vandalism and physical assaults. In the aftermath of these attacks, antisemitic expressions — tied closely to hate and misinformation around Israel — surged, targeting Jewish children, families, business owners, public officials, and communities.

Throughout our own state, public schools, synagogues, and Jewish community centers have been on high alert.

<u>The Texas Holocaust, Genocide, and Antisemitism Advisory Commission (THGAAC)</u> has been actively fighting back. We submitted an addendum to our Study on Antisemitism in December 2023 and expanded partnerships and collaborations with Jewish and non-Jewish organizations.

One of the most troubling developments has been the spike in anti-Israel protests on college campuses. A Texas Senate hearing in May 2024 highlighted the presence of campus-based antisemitism since the October 7 attacks, with Jewish students reporting harassment and fears for their safety.

Thankfully, under your leadership, the State of Texas has made clear that antisemitism, whether disguised as political protest or blatant hate, is unacceptable in any form. This approach was embodied by Governor Abbott's issuance of Executive Order GA-44, mandating Texas colleges and universities to update their policies to protect Jewish students and align with the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism.

In addition, Gov. Abbott has directed the Department of Public Safety to properly address antisemitic threats, delivered millions of dollars in public safety grants to Jewish organizations, personally traveled to Israel in the aftermath of October 7 to affirm Texas' support, ensured our

public schools accurately bring awareness to the Israel-Hamas war, and prevented state agencies from conducting business with Hamas and the Gaza Strip.

These efforts culminated with Gov. Abbott proclaiming the first anniversary of the October 7 attacks as a Day of Observance for Israel. This entailed a 7 a.m. moment of silence, the lowering of flags to half-staff, and asking religious leaders to light a candle at their next service in observance of this solemn day.

The Legislature has also been a leader in these efforts with the prior passage in 2023 of Senate Bill 1517, which prohibited public colleges and universities from boycotting study and research in foreign nations. The Commission is especially thankful for the passage of House Bill 3466, which authorized our survey of K-12 school districts about Holocaust Remembrance Week.

The Texas Legislature boldly responded to the October 7 attack by passing resolutions, SR 2 and HR 10, which condemned the horror of that day and reaffirmed the State of Texas' support for the people of Israel. Finally, the Legislature's critical work in holding interim hearings on these issues has led to a better-informed public.

We have worked closely with each of you to take these critical steps and are proud of the millions of Texans who stand against hate. However, the recent protests and other acts of antisemitism reveal the need for additional education, legislation, and vigilance. To achieve this, we have developed a set of recommendations for your consideration.

We extend our deepest gratitude to those who contributed to this crucial study and who stand with us in the fight against antisemitism.

As we move forward, the Texas Holocaust, Genocide, and Antisemitism Advisory Commission will continue to lead efforts to counter antisemitism, coordinating with your offices as well as with educators and community leaders across Texas. Together, we must remain vigilant and united, committed to making Texas a modern-day model for fighting this age-old hate.

Respectfully submitted,

Kenneth E. Goldberg, Chair

Joy Nathan, Executive Director

Sandra Hagee Parker, Vice Chair

Texas Holocaust, Genocide, and Antisemitism Advisory Commission



### **OVERVIEW**

In 2021, the Texas Legislature reconstituted a prior state commission to create the Texas Holocaust, Genocide, and Antisemitism Advisory Commission (THGAAC) under the auspices of the Texas Historical Commission. THGAAC's legislative charge is to "identify and root out antisemitism and ensure that all Texans are able to exercise their religious freedom without fear."

Central to that mission is a biennial Study of Antisemitism in Texas.

THGAAC submitted the first study to the Governor, Lieutenant Governor, Speaker of the House, and lawmakers in December 2022 before the 88th legislative session. It included eight recommendations to promote awareness, improve security, and fight back against hate.

In an addendum submitted after Hamas' October 7, 2023, attacks on Israel, the commission provided an emergency overview of the surge in Jew-hatred and two additional recommendations.

Tragically, those trends have continued during the two years since the initial report and the year since the addendum were submitted. Antisemitism has been normalized globally and remains a statewide concern in the wake of the October 7 attacks.

However, as this study also details, THGAAC, Gov. Greg Abbott, state leaders, and Texas as a whole have been at the forefront nationally in fighting back and protecting Texas' approximately 200,000-personstrong Jewish community.

The Secure Community Network (SCN), the official safety and security organization of the Jewish community in North America, reported that incidents against the Jewish community in Texas nearly doubled between 2022 (97 incidents) and 2023 (187 incidents) and remained elevated (138) through the first nine months of 2024.

Much of this torrent of hate can be tied directly to an anti-Zionist ideology that has been exposed during Israel's war with Hamas. The incidents include criticism of Israel that goes well beyond legitimate questioning of a foreign government and, instead, applies hateful, centuries-old tropes to the world's only Jewish state.

## Understanding Antisemitism and Anti-7ionism

Antisemitism exists in many forms across geographies and ideologies, often drawing on centuries-old tropes about Jewish greed, control, and influence. A primer on "Understanding Antisemitism" was included in THGAAC's 2022 Study on Antisemitism in Texas and is available online at the THGAAC website.

During 2023 and 2024, much of the antisemitism that erupted globally and in Texas has been intertwined with deep-seated anti-Zionism. But what does this mean?

Zionism is the belief in Jewish self-determination — that Jews have the right to a homeland in the place where they have millennialong historical, religious, and national connections. Anti-Zionism denies Jews the right to self-determination that other groups have. Such anti-Zionist views are pervasive on many college campuses. According to the think-action tank Boundless Israel, the beliefs are often anchored by the academic theories of post-colonialism, post-nationalism, and post-modernism.

### "Antisemitism is never acceptable in Texas, and we will do everything we can to fight it."

- Gov. Greg Abbott

#### Criticism of Israel Versus Antisemitism: The IHRA Definition

The International Holocaust
Remembrance Alliance's (IHRA)
definition of antisemitism recognizes
that "Manifestations might include the
targeting of the state of Israel, conceived
as a Jewish collectivity. However,
criticism of Israel similar to that leveled
against any other country cannot be
regarded as antisemitic."

So, what's the difference between legitimate criticism of Israel's government, policies, and military actions and antisemitism targeting the world's only Jewish state?

Human rights activist Natan Sharansky
— who rose from being imprisoned as a
Soviet dissident to serving as a minister
in the Israeli government — has three
criteria to identify when criticism of Israel
crosses into antisemitism.

**Demonization** – As an example, falsely comparing Israel to Nazis or accusing it of genocide while ignoring actual genocides. This rhetoric is intended to deliberately depict modern-day Israel as the embodiment of evil.

**Double Standards** — Criticisms and expectations of Israel's policies being applied differently than to other nations.

**Delegitimization** — Denying the legitimacy of the Jewish religion, the Jewish people, or both. Slogans such as "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" suggest eliminating a Jewish entity in the region.

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#### **Key Incidents 2023-2024**

**On campus:** Following national and global trends, antisemitic incidents increased at Texas colleges and universities during 2023 and 2024, and many Jewish students reported facing hostile climates. This has happened at schools such as The University of Texas at Dallas, Rice University, and The University of Texas at Austin. Tensions at UT Austin reached a crescendo at anti-Israel protests in April 2024 that required intervention by state troopers and campus police.

**In school:** Jewish students have felt marginalized and unsafe at various public schools across the state. High-profile episodes included a student at Hillcrest High School in Dallas who was called a "dirty Jew," told to "go bathe in Auschwitz where you belong," and taunted by swastika graffiti, according to a federal civil rights complaint alleging that district officials failed to respond adequately.

**Antisemitic flyering:** Two Texas cities – Austin and Houston – are among the 10 worst nationally in the number of antisemitic flyers that are distributed, according to the Anti-Defamation League. During the first month of 2024, antisemitic flyers were left outside homes in neighborhoods from Flower Mound to Johnson County to Austin.

**City councils:** At public hearings in many cities, anti-Israel activists have regularly gone beyond their free speech rights to bully and intimidate elected officials and Jewish community members, using antisemitic language and sometimes being forcibly removed by police.



Source: Julius Shieh for The Texas Tribune

UT Austin students begin to form an encampment on the South Lawn on April 29, 2024.

"The number of folks who are now open about their antisemitic hatred has grown. In the past, they were behind the scenes. But, post-October 7, no one is hiding their feelings anymore."

— Bill Humphrey, Director, Community Security - Jewish Federation of Greater Dallas

## Texas Incidents Reported to Secure Community Network Duty Desk

2019	3
2020	8
2021	33
2022	97
2023	187
2024*	138

\*Through September

Source: Secure Community Network

To meet the legislative requirement to develop this study, THGAAC and its designees reviewed data and reports from law enforcement agencies and groups dedicated to fighting antisemitism and hate in Texas and nationally. The commission's team interviewed more than 20 members of the Texas Jewish community as well as public safety officials, educators, leaders of national Jewish organizations, and academics.

As lawmakers review the data, episodes, challenges, successes, and opportunities cited in this study, they should assess the accompanying recommendations to continue promoting awareness, improving security, and fighting back against hate.

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## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on this Study of Antisemitism in Texas, the Texas Holocaust, Genocide, and Antisemitism Advisory Commission has developed a series of recommendations to continue fighting hate and raising awareness statewide.

These recommendations fall into three categories:

- Recommendations requiring legislative action
- Public Safety
- Recommendations that can be implemented by THGAAC

#### **Requiring Legislative Action**

IHRA definition: Expand the application of the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, currently applied to higher education institutions under Executive Order GA-44, to public K-12 schools by codification within the Texas Education Code. This recommendation comes after Gov. Abbott signed onto a letter with 25 other governors, calling for the U.S. Senate to codify the IHRA definition in federal statute through the passage of HR 6090 (Antisemitism Awareness Act (AAA)).

**Anti-masking:** Establish a state law that creates a penalty for anyone who wears a mask or otherwise takes active steps to hide their facial features while committing a criminal offense, in addition to the penalty for that offense. This would address the national trend of protesters masking themselves to intimidate others, which builds on the ugly historical trend dating back to at least the early days of the Ku Klux Klan in the United States.

#### **Public Safety**

Continue security grants: In the wake of Hamas' October 7 attacks on Israel and the surge in antisemitism, Gov. Abbott established grants to help religious organizations, schools, and community centers harden their security infrastructures. This will provide \$10.4 million in funding to Jewish organizations during the current biennium. We are grateful for this support and recognize that this program can have even more impact moving forward. To accomplish this, the state should continue funding in the upcoming biennial budget.

#### To Be Implemented by THGAAC

Antisemitism training for Institutions of Higher Education: THGAAC will be available to advise universities and university systems on providing antisemitism training — including the antisemitic roots of many anti-Israel efforts on campus — for all groups that have historically had a role in "shared governance" at these institutions.

Antisemitism training for K-12 Institutions: THGAAC will be available to advise K-12 schools and districts on providing antisemitism training for educators, staff, and community members.

**Jewish Heritage Month:** Expand the state's commemoration of Jewish Heritage Month each May to include formal programming at the Capitol and to provide educational resources for schools to incorporate into their teaching.

**Holocaust Remembrance Week:** Clarify that K-5 instruction during HRW should be broad and foundational to prepare students to learn about the Holocaust as they get older. Lessons should include understanding Jewish identity, prejudice and bullying, and recognizing hate.

RECOMMENDATIONS



# FIGHTING BACK: TEXAS TAKES THE LEAD

The State of Texas has long been at the forefront nationally in fighting back against antisemitism and supporting the Jewish community, which includes approximately 176,000 Texans. Prior to the 2023-24 period detailed in this study, key efforts by elected officials included:

- 2017 Anti-BDS Law: Gov. Abbott signed House Bill 89, one of the strongest anti-BDS (Boycott, Divestments, and Sanctions) laws in the nation. It prohibited state agencies from contracting with, and certain public funds from being invested in, companies that boycott Israel.
- 2019 Holocaust Remembrance Week: The Legislature approved Senate Bill 1828, which established Holocaust Remembrance Week in Texas public schools and set out requirements for all K-12 public schools to recognize it.
- 2021 THGAAC: The Legislature approved House Bill 3257, which reconstituted the Texas Holocaust and Genocide Commission to become the Texas Holocaust, Genocide, and Antisemitism Advisory Commission, the first commission of its type in the nation. The measure codified the IHRA definition of antisemitism in Texas law.

#### Efforts in 2023-24 have included:

#### **Governor Abbott**

- **Public Safety:** Immediately after the October 7 attack, Gov. Abbott directed the Texas Department of Public Safety to work with local partners and federal intelligence agencies on heightened public safety measures, with an intensified focus by the Joint Terrorism Task Force and Texas Fusion Center to elevate awareness about potential threats by Hamas or Hezbollah organizations against the Jewish community in Texas. Further, the Governor's Public Safety Office will award \$10.3M in grants for the FY 24-25 biennium to Jewish organizations.
- Higher Education: In the aftermath of the October 7 attack, Gov.
   Abbott issued Executive Order GA-44 that directed colleges and
   universities to revise their free speech policies to address antisemitic
   speech and acts on university campuses, establish appropriate
   punishments, and promptly report back on these efforts to state
   leadership. To date, more than 100 colleges and universities (106) and
   five university systems have complied with the executive order.
- Israel Trip: In November 2023, Gov. Abbott traveled to Israel and pledged Texas' unwavering support for the State of Israel. During the visit, he met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Israeli President Isaac Herzog, and other Israeli officials in Jerusalem and visited with victims and affected families to gain firsthand knowledge about the effects of the Israel-Hamas war and ways Texas can continue to support Israel.
- **State Contracting:** Gov. Abbott issued Executive Order GA-43, directing all Texas state agencies to refrain from purchasing goods produced in or exported from the Gaza Strip and from any organization or state actor with ties to Hamas. He also signed House Bill 89 (85R) into law, banning all Texas state agencies from engaging in business or investments with companies that boycott Israel.

#### Recent Actions:

- On September 23, Gov. Abbott signed onto a letter with 25 other governors urging the U.S. Senate to adopt HR 6090, the Antisemitism Awareness Act (AAA), codifying the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) Working Definition of Antisemitism and its 11 accompanying examples.
- The Texas Education Agency issued a bulletin on October 3
  encouraging schools across the state to utilize additional lessons
  and resources to increase awareness and understanding of the
  Israel-Hamas war and root causes of conflict in the region.
- Finally, Gov. Abbott proclaimed October 7, 2024, as a Day of Observance for Israel. This observance included a 7 a.m. moment of silence, the lowering of flags to half-staff, and asking religious leaders to light a candle at their next service in observance of this solemn day.

## Security Grants Awarded to Texas Jewish Institutions

Fiscal Year	No. of Grants	Total Amount
2019	16	\$2.1M
2020	12	\$1.2M
2021	18	\$1.7M
2022	28	\$4.0M
2023	38	\$5.5M
2024	29	\$4.0M
Grand Total	125	\$18.5M

Source: Office of the Governor

# "Antisemitism is not just a problem for the Jews to solve."

- Joel Schwitzer, Regional Director, American Jewish Committee, Dallas

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#### **88th Texas Legislature**

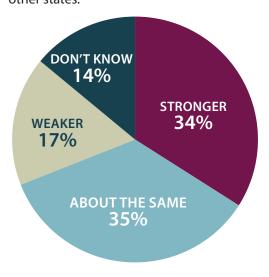
- Approved Senate Bill 1517, prohibiting public colleges and universities from boycotting study and research in foreign nations, as is promoted by the anti-Israel Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement. This followed the recommendation of the 2022 Study on Antisemitism.
- Approved House Bill 3466, authorizing THGAAC to conduct a statewide survey of educators to understand awareness of and participation in Holocaust Remembrance Week and submit findings and recommendations for action to the Legislature.

#### **THGAAC**

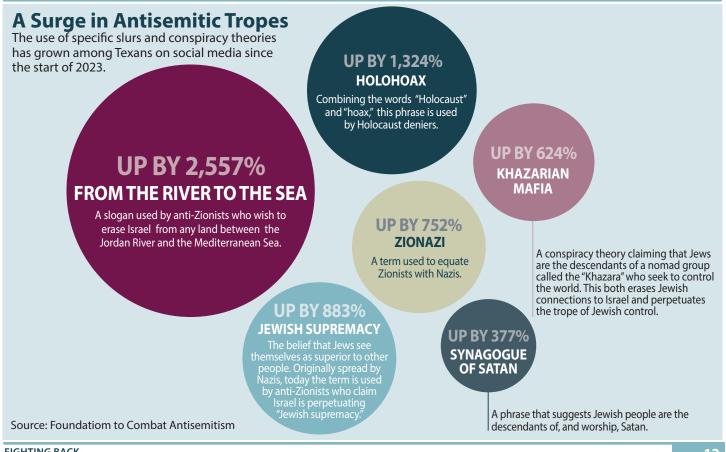
- Submitted an addendum to the 2022 Study on Antisemitism in December 2023, providing emergency updates and recommendations for action while continually giving counsel to the Governor's Office and Legislature.
- Worked with the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and regional education centers to develop educational content related to antisemitism and the Holocaust, ensure resources were distributed statewide, and provide real-time guidance to university administrations and school districts to address antisemitic acts.
- Coordinated with local communities and museums to increase volunteerism, expand its speaker's bureau, and provide accurate information about the Israeli-Hamas conflict, rising antisemitism at home, and opportunities to support Jewish Texans.
- Worked with supporters to launch Friends of THGAAC to better reach the state's "movable middle" in fighting antisemitism.

#### **Public support for Texas policies**

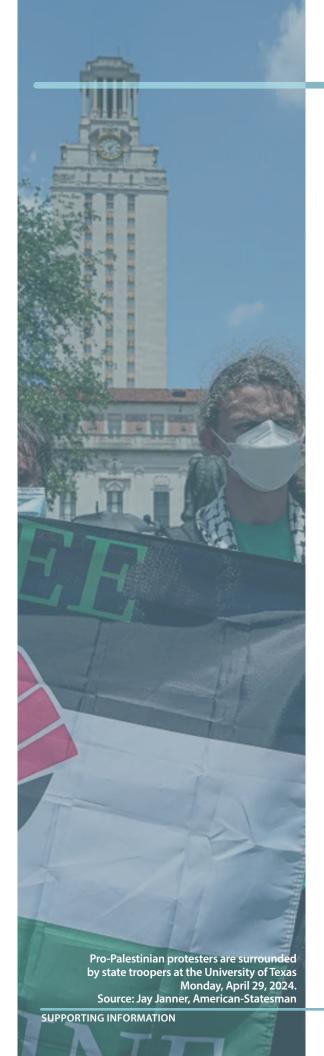
A statewide survey asked how strongly Texas lawmakers and officials are combating antisemitism compared with other states.



Conducted by Sachs Media, August 2024



FIGHTING BACK



# SUPPORTING INFORMATION: ANTISEMITISM ON MULTIPLE FRONTS

#### **On Campus**

As a result of Gov. Abbott and the Legislature's response to the October 7 attacks, college campuses in Texas have not experienced the same levels of antisemitism as those in other states. Even so, there have been too many episodes — and for Jewish students who directly experience this hate, comparisons to other states offer little consolation. Episodes have included:

• At UT Dallas, Jewish students reported an ongoing hostile climate after October 7. This included being followed and threatened; the campus "spirit rocks" being covered with graffiti equating Zionism and Nazism; student encampments set up during the spring of 2024 with a "no Zionists welcome" policy; and activists seeking to schedule an anti-Israel protest on the first anniversary of the October 7 attacks.

"We are harmed, harassed, and threatened based on our religion and nationality," student Ofer Turjeman said at a news conference in May.

• At UT Austin, Jew-hatred simmered throughout the 2023-24 academic year. Vulgar antisemitic epithets were scrawled at Texas Hillel and other West Campus locations. Two teaching assistants in the School of Social Work misused university resources by sending emails to their class that alienated and marginalized Jewish students. Other students barged into and refused to leave a dean's private office to show their disagreement with the university's response.

The tensions peaked in April 2024 when anti-Israel activists — many with no ties to the university — sought to take over outdoor spaces in violation of campus rules. The University of Texas Police Department and Texas Department of Public Safety prevented encampments and takeovers such as those seen at other universities across the country by enforcing campus rules and making necessary arrests.

"Especially during all the demonstrations, it really hit a boiling point... I really hadn't even dealt with antisemitism before October 7 on campus; there was a little, mostly just verbal comments, (but) between October 7 and late March and then April, it kind of just all exploded.

- Levi Fox, UT Austin Student and Houston native

"There is a proud tradition of protest at our university and that tradition is worth protecting. More than a dozen protests throughout the past year — including some that were highly critical of Israel's policies — stirred no controversy and drew no media attention because they were peaceful and within our university policies.

"But at some critical moments, we have seen something more than a desire to protest, and that is a desire to disrupt — disrupt others' right to free expression and disrupt our teaching, research, and operations."

 President Jay Hartzell, UT Austin, testifying to THGAAC, June 2024



Source: Aaron E. Martinez, American-Statesman

#### **In Politics and Policy**

Antisemitism has been at the forefront of discussions about public policy and politics across Texas. Episodes have included:

 At city council meetings in many cities, anti-Israel activists called for the passage of "Ceasefire now" resolutions by bullying and intimidating elected officials and fellow citizens during meetings, sometimes being forcibly removed by police.

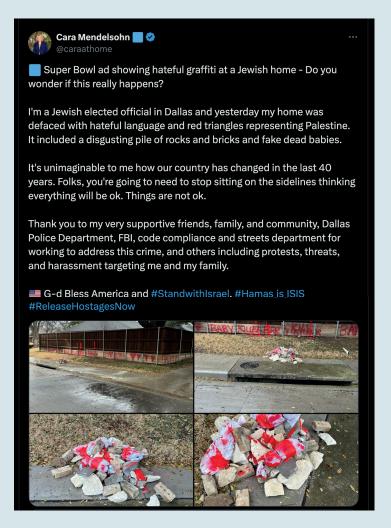
Thus far, no city councils in Texas have supported these resolutions, though dozens in cities outside of Texas have done so.

• Elected officials' homes and offices have been vandalized. In Dallas, City Council Member (and THGAAC Commissioner)
Cara Mendelsohn's home was defaced with hateful language, red triangles representing Palestine, piles of rocks, brick, and dolls depicting dead babies.

And in South Texas, U.S. Rep. Monica De La Cruz's office was spraypainted in red with accusations of "murder" and "genocide" because of her support for Israel.

# "Every Wednesday at the city council is nasty. But they have held firm and refused to pass a resolution."

— Lisa Epstein, Director, Jewish Community Relations Council, San Antonio





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#### In Public Schools

Too often, Jewish students in Texas public schools report feeling marginalized, unsupported, and even threatened at school. The trend became more pronounced after October 7. Episodes have included:

• At Bellaire High School in Houston, Jewish students and parents were shocked to receive the 2024 yearbook, which included a mock news story from the "Times of Palestine" that offered a biased version of Israel's war with Hamas and dismissed the October 7 massacre with the words "what happened, happened."

In response, the 3,000-student school has implemented new editorial protocols for student publications. Jewish parents and their allies have organized a group called HISD Partners Against Antisemitism to raise awareness and fight hate at local schools.

- A student at Hillcrest High School in Dallas was called a "dirty Jew," told to "go bathe in Auschwitz where you belong," and taunted by swastika graffiti, according to a federal civil rights complaint alleging that district officials failed to respond adequately.
- At high school campuses in Austin, anti-Israel demonstrations began to spill over from college campuses in March 2024. Parents of Jewish students who voiced concerns about antisemitic rhetoric displayed on posters at one school told the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) that the principal responded that the slogan "from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free" was "very catchy."

Walkouts and protests followed at least four other high schools, including one with the largest number of Jewish students in the district. Leadership on these campuses met the moment more thoughtfully, according to the ADL. Principals clearly laid out rules of conduct prohibiting hateful or violent rhetoric, outlined expectations of faculty and staff, and more proactively communicated with parents about steps they were taking to keep students safe.

#### **On Front Lawns**

Antisemitic groups continued to leave hateful flyers on properties across Texas, as they have for several years. Austin and Houston are among the 10 worst cities nationally in terms of the number of hateful flyers distributed, according to the ADL. Episodes have included:

- Hundreds of antisemitic flyers in Ziploc bags were distributed in Flower Mound, northwest of Dallas.
- Bags filled with antisemitic flyers and pellets were found outside homes in Godley in Johnson County, about 30 miles south of Fort Worth, in April 2024.
- Antisemitic flyers were left on yards in an Austin neighborhood during the July 4 weekend, drawing outrage from residents of many different backgrounds.



Source: NextDoor app

Neighbors found hateful flyers in the Ridglea North neighborhood in Fort Worth in February 2024.



Source: Flower Mound Police Department

Police found hundreds of bags containing hateful flyers on June 8, 2024.

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## **About the THGAAC**

The Texas Holocaust, Genocide, and Antisemitism Advisory Commission was established by the 87th Texas Legislature in 2021 as an advisory commission to the Texas Historical Commission. THGAAC's mission is to combat and confront hatred, prejudice, and indifference by educating all Texans about the Holocaust and other genocides in an effort to dismantle antisemitism and prevent such future atrocities.

#### **Commissioners**



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The commissioners would like to thank **New West Communications** for its vital role in researching, writing, and developing this Study on Antisemitism in Texas.