

Law Bulletin

Hate crimes a priority for Alvarez as reports continue to decrease By John Flynn Rooney
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While reports of hate crimes continue to decline in Chicago and throughout Illinois, prosecutors, police and others must remain committed to prosecuting such crimes, said Cook County State's Attorney Anita M. Alvarez. Hate crimes are a priority for her office and will be fully prosecuted, Alvarez said Wednesday at a gathering of the office's Hate Crimes Prosecution Counsel in Skokie. "In my view, no one should have to endure the pain and humiliation of a hate crime, which is truly a repugnant act," according to a copy of Alvarez's prepared remarks. "The damage of a crime such as this goes well beyond the original victim and extends through the entire community." Orli Gil, consulate general of Israel to the Midwest, delivered the keynote remarks during the event at the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center, 9603 Woods Drive. About 70 people attended the event, said a spokesman for the state's attorney's office.

Alvarez said hate crimes have decreased significantly during the past decade or so in Cook County and throughout the state. Specifically, in 1998, Chicago police reported a total of 204 hate crimes, Alvarez said. That number plummeted to 72 in 2008. The number of hate crimes reported statewide in 1998 was 398, but fell more than half to 180 in 2008, Alvarez said. "(W)hile we are encouraged by this downward trend, we must also be mindful that hate crimes may often go unreported as victims may fear reprisal — or even public humiliation if they come forward and report the crime to authorities," she said. "And that is why it is so important that all of us here today renew our commitment to this issue."

Elizabeth Shuman-Moore, a member of the prosecution council, said Thursday that less than half of all hate crimes are reported. "We know that hate crimes are widely underreported just in general," said Shuman-Moore, project director of the Project to Combat Bias Violence at the Chicago Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law Inc., which provides free legal representation to victims of hate crimes. "So it's always a challenge for us." A contributing factor to the lower number of hate crimes reported locally relates to smaller staffs due to budget cuts at offices and agencies that handle hate crimes, including the Lawyers' Committee, state's attorney's office and the Chicago Police Department, Shuman-Moore said. "All of us should be doing more outreach and education," she said. Chicago lawyer Jeremy H. Gottschalk, who attended Wednesday's event, said the local gay community has paid great attention to the issue of hate crimes. "It does not surprise me that the numbers [of reported hate crimes] are down, especially as of late," said Gottschalk, president of the boards of directors for the Lesbian and Gay Bar Association of Chicago and for Equality Illinois, the statewide gay and lesbian civil rights organization. "I can see them going down more based on the state's attorney's initiatives." Alvarez cautioned that "crimes of hatred can rise up any time, and we must remain vigilant." She said that last week the state's attorney's office charged three men with a hate crime for beating up a gay man on a Chicago Transit Authority train in Chicago. jrooney@lbpc.com