

# Task force targets racial, religious bias in Waterbury

## Head alderman forms panel

BY MICHAEL PUFFER  
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WATERBURY — A city Sensitivity Task-Force has been formed to explore whether race- and religion-based intimidation is taking place and how the city might respond.

Board of Aldermen President Paul K. Pernerewski Jr. has formed the task force under his authority and announced its creation Monday. Pernerewski doesn't anticipate hate-related crime and bullying are issues for the city, but feels it is worth exploring concerns recently raised by local activists.

Pernerewski said the group will first meet with school and police administration to see if they've registered concerns, and possibly recommend new resources, ordinances or procedures if needed.

"I don't foresee that at this point, but I won't close it off," Pernerewski said.

The task-force is an outgrowth of an anti-Islamophobia rally on Jan. 18 that drew hundreds to St. John's Episcopal Church. Muslims, Jews and Christians joined together to voice support for Muslims. Many organizers and participants felt threatened by the rhetoric of then-President Elect Donald Trump. Organizers asked city officials to form a group to review the city's response to religious and racial based problems.

Fahd Syed, an administrator with the United Muslim Mosque, has heard of local Muslims being abused with anti-Muslim language and of students being bullied in schools.

"I am tired of members of my community being told racial comments and it seems like there is no justice for them," Syed said. "I need to bring this to light."

Syed said he is grateful for the support of local officials participating in the new effort.

Alderman Jetlir Kulla, another member of the task force, is an ethnic Albanian. Like most of thousands of ethnic-Albanians in and around the city, Kulla is a white Muslim who dresses in western



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clothing. He hasn't experienced any religious or ethnic-based intimidation. But that doesn't mean it doesn't happen, Kulla said.

"The idea of the committee is to engage the community and see if there's anything that's occurring, whether it's with religion or race," Kulla said. "Basically, to give people a voice."

Pernerewski called together the task force under his authority.

Additional members of the task force include: Mayoral Aide Monroe Webster, Assistant Deputy Police Chief Edward Appicella, Board of Education member Felix M. Rodriguez, Board of Education President Elizabeth C. Brown, Waterbury schools security chief John Herman, schools interim Administrator of Pupil Personnel Services Wendy Owens, Naugatuck Valley Project Vice President Bonnie Odiome and Yitz Rabinowitz from the city's Orthodox Jewish community.

"My sense right now is there is not a widespread problem in the community," Brown said. "But I think what the interfaith group is saying is we just want to know that people are prepared — if these things happen there is a plan or protocol in place."