



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TO: Senator André Jacque, Chair
Members, Senate Committee on Natural Resources, Veteran and Military Affairs

FROM: David Earleywine, Associate Director for Education and Religious Liberty

DATE: January 28, 2026

RE: Support for SB 789, Religious Nonprofit Security Grants

The Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC), the public policy voice of the Catholic bishops of Wisconsin, appreciates the opportunity to offer testimony in support of Senate Bill 789, which provides safety and security grants to religious nonprofit organizations that show credible risks or threats posed against them.

Every individual deserves to be able to worship, attend religious events and activities, and practice their faith without fear. Protections for such religious activities are codified both in the Wisconsin Constitution and the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. These provisions help ensure that government aids in protecting an individual's right to practice their faith in public while not forcing its citizens to conform to one particular religion or any religion at all.

The Catholic Church, like the state and federal government, upholds the importance of religious liberty. In its 1965 Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis humanae*, the Catholic Church teaches: "The protection and promotion of the inviolable rights of man ranks among the essential duties of government. Therefore, government is to assume the safeguard of the religious freedom of all its citizens, in an effective manner, by just laws and by other appropriate means." The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* explains, "The duty to respect religious freedom requires that the political community guarantee the Church the space needed to carry out her mission" (424). In short, religious liberty is a fundamental human right.

Yet, across the country and state, violence against religious groups is on the rise. Nationwide, recent FBI hate crime reports show that religious-based hate incidents have continued to increase in recent years. From May 2020 to October 2024, over 360 incidents of arson, vandalism, or violence occurred at Catholic Churches around the country.¹ This isn't just a Catholic problem. The Jewish community in Wisconsin has seen more than a 450 percent increase in antisemitic incidents since 2015. Additionally, incidents such as the 2012 shooting at the Sikh temple in Oak Creek and the recent shootings at Abundant Life Christian School in Madison and at Annunciation Catholic School in Minneapolis highlight the need for these grants.

¹ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Arson, Vandalism, and Other Destruction at Catholic Churches in the United States*, https://www.usccb.org/resources/Attacks_on_Catholic_Churches_in_the_US-10-25-24.pdf.

SB 789 allows religious nonprofits to apply for up to \$500,000 per biennium to increase physical security, train or hire individuals, or enhance emergency protocols and systems. This bill is modeled off a similar federal program, the Nonprofit Security Grants Program (NSGP), created by Congress in 2005. In 2023, Governor Evers joined a coalition of other governors calling for increased funds to the federal program.² While the NSGP has served many groups nationwide, there is not enough supply to meet the demand for security funding as less than half the applicants received funds. Many religious nonprofits are already spending their own money to increase their security. But this bill promotes the government's role in protecting the First Amendment rights of religious groups to practice their faith without fear or intimidation.

The state-based grants created by this bill would protect people of all faiths. At a time of increasing antagonism and extremism towards faith groups, additional security is unfortunately becoming increasingly vital. While safety and security grant funding is only a first step to protecting all people, it is an important and necessary step that will help ensure that individuals are able to exercise their religious liberty and First Amendment rights free of fear, intimidation, and violence.

We urge you to support this bill. Thank you.

² AP News, *Governors Call for more funds to secure places of worship as threats toward Jews and Muslims rise*, (Nov. 8, 2023), <https://apnews.com/article/governors-letter-israel-hamas-war-hate-crimes-33c2502bc704ca8f85cf561d6eb481da>.