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by ALADS Board of Directors

Amid all the tragic and frustrating news for law enforcement nationwide and here in California, one bright spot has emerged. That bright spot is legislation introduced by State Assemblyman Jay Obernolte. This legislation would make attacks on law enforcement a hate crime, which would allow for increased penalties for people convicted of these offenses.

Obernolte eloquently framed the challenges we face when he announced the legislation earlier this month. "Violence targeted specifically against public safety officers is a hate crime and should be treated as such," said Obernolte. "Our police officers put their lives on the line every day and it's deeply disturbing when they are intentionally targeted because of their profession. Given the outbreak of the recent attacks against police officers, this law is necessary to send a message to these criminals that their reprehensible behavior will not be tolerated."

The shrinking interest in law enforcement and decline in applications coincides with the rise of anti-law enforcement sentiment. Strong support of law enforcement, by both elected officials and the public, is one way to encourage more people to become interested in law enforcement as a career.

Assemblymember Obernolte's legislation is not only encouraging, it's timely. This past year has literally been an open season against peace officers throughout the country.

Critics of the bill point to existing law which punishes those who attack law enforcement as being sufficient additional punishment. Those penal code sections punish those who assault law enforcement officers in individual encounters. Those critics miss the point of this statute and hate crime laws.

The essence of a hate crime statute is to provide additional punishment for those who attempt to kill or injure another because of the victim's group status. 135 law enforcement officers died in the line of duty in 2016, which is the highest number of fatalities in five years. Whether in Dallas, Baton Rouge, Philadelphia or other incidents this year, officers have been targets of murder and attempted murder simply because they wear the uniform. These incidents are far different from a criminal who assaults law enforcement during a detention or arrest. When a criminal motivated by hate attacks a police officer solely based on the officer's membership in a group known as law enforcement, it is a hate crime and that criminal is deserving of additional punishment via a hate crime enhancement.

Classifying a crime as a hate crime is much more than a symbolic gesture. In California, hate crime convictions can tack an extra one to three years onto an

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offender's state prison sentence. These offenses currently include crimes committed because of someone's race, sexual orientation, religion or disability.

Obernolte's legislation is not without precedent. Earlier this year, Louisiana became the first state to give hate crime protections to law enforcement officers. Texas, New Jersey and Mississippi, as well as the U.S. Congress, are considering similar measures.

But Obernolte's bill likely faces an uphill battle in State Legislature. That's why it's critically important for all of us to write to our state representatives and urge them to back this important bill. And we need to encourage our friends and loved ones to do so as well.

It only take a few minutes to make a difference. You can find contact information for your state legislators here.

The Association for Los Angeles Deputy Sheriffs (ALADS) is the collective bargaining agent representing more than 7,900 deputy sheriffs and district attorney investigators working in Los Angeles County.

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