

LAWMAKERS URGE TOUGHER HATE CRIME BILL

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Three weeks after white supremacist Benjamin Smith's deadly shooting rampage, Illinois lawmakers and civil rights groups are taking new actions against hate crimes.

A group of Democrats in the Illinois House today was expected to propose new laws designed to make it easier for government to prosecute hate crimes against minorities.

Under current law, prosecutors must prove that a victim's minority status was the sole factor in a perpetrator's decision to commit an offense. The lawmakers want to broaden the statute so that prosecutors would have to prove only that the victim's minority status was a single factor in committing a crime.

"Our proposed clarification would allow prosecutors to charge someone with a hate crime if that person, in any way, displayed minority-based hate toward their victim during the commission of a crime," said Rep. Sara Feigenholtz (D-Chicago).

The lawmakers were scheduled to unveil their measure during a news conference this afternoon at the James R. Thompson Center in Chicago.

Meanwhile, a coalition of civil rights groups is planning a protest caravan Thursday through Saturday that will retrace the shooting spree of Smith, who killed two people and wounded nine during a rampage through Illinois and Indiana during the July 4th weekend.

Organizers said the protest would begin Thursday in Evanston, not far from the Skokie Street where Northwestern University basketball coach Ricky Byrdsong was gunned down. Later in the day, the protesters will drive to East Peoria and gather outside the home of Matthew Hale, leader of a white-power group to which Smith once belonged.

"We're not going to say anything to him," said Devon Burghart, a spokesman for the Hate Crimes Awareness Initiative. "It's going to be a silent vigil to let the community know it opposes him, but we will not engage him."

Hale is leader of the World Church of the Creator, a white supremacist organization that is being investigated by state and federal authorities in the wake of Smith's shooting rampage. The U.S. Justice Department is investigating whether Hale or anyone else in the church knew of Smith's plans, and Illinois Atty. Gen. Jim Ryan is investigating the group's status as a charitable organization.

Burghart said the caravan would hold demonstrations Friday in Decatur and Urbana, where Smith shot and wounded several people. On Saturday, the caravan will end with an event in Bloomington, Ind., where Smith fatally shot a Korean student who attended Indiana University.

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