

## MEMORANDUM

TO: Philadelphia Area School Leaders  
FROM: Abby Stamelman Hocky, Executive Director, Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia and  
Rue Landau, Esq., Executive Director, Philadelphia Commission on Human Relations  
DATE: April 7, 2015  
RE: Anti-Islamic Ads on SEPTA Buses

### **Understanding the Situation**

In September, a New Hampshire-based group known as “The American Freedom Defense Initiative” (AFDI) sought to purchase advertising space on SEPTA as part of a campaign that AFDI has pursued in transit systems in several major cities across the country, including New York City, Washington, and San Francisco. SEPTA declined, due to the derogatory and hurtful nature of the messages. On March 11, 2015 the courts ruled that SEPTA must accept the ads. The four-week ad run began on April 2 and will appear on 84 SEPTA buses.

### **Why does Free Speech Protect Hate Speech?**

The First Amendment protects outrageous and even offensive speech. The government (SEPTA is a public authority) may NOT reject political advertisements simply because it doesn’t condone the message, the ads are offensive, or even if they contain factual errors. “Core political speech” such as this receives some of the highest constitutional protection available. Although SEPTA provided the Court with a compelling government interest (public safety) to restrict the ads, the court ruled that SEPTA can use less restrictive means (such as including a disclaimer on the ad space instead of an outright ban) to dissociate themselves from the message.

### **Who Might Be Affected?**

- Muslims
- Jews
- Sikhs or other groups wearing head coverings, possibly mistaken for Muslims
- Individuals of Middle-Eastern, North African, or South Asian descent
- Individuals who are visibly religious or don religious garb

While these ads specifically target the Muslim faith their appearance on public transportation can well lead to intergroup tensions, conflict and have an overall deleterious impact upon the relations among all the people of our region. We know that none of us feel that it is acceptable for any faith to be singled out for denigration.

## What Should I Be Looking For?

The ad that will run will be the following:



As school leaders we have a shared responsibility to increase understanding among all of the people of our region. Throughout the world, we have seen too much hostility and violence based on real and perceived difference among people. Ads such as these only add to mistrust and pain.

We ask that you be aware of any name-calling, bullying, physical violence, or other forms of harassment directed at members of the aforementioned groups or even possibly by those members in reaction to these ads.

## Resources

The following link contains educational and training resources:

<http://www.interfaithcenterpa.org/adresponse/>

## Action Steps

- **Be alert and report any incidents**
- **Arrange for a teacher training workshop** in your school or community: Contact Rev. Nicole Diroff, Associate Executive Director, Interfaith Center of Greater Philadelphia, [ndd@interfaithcenterpa.org](mailto:ndd@interfaithcenterpa.org), 215-222-1012
- **Be a part of a positive, community-wide response on social media:**  
*#DareToUnderstand*  
<http://www.daretounderstand.org>
- **Sign and circulate the petition** launched by a broad coalition of Philadelphia Religious, Civic and Government leaders, opposing the messages and divisive intent of the anti-Islamic ad campaign.  
<http://www.thepetitionsite.com/800/825/876/stand-with-us-in-opposing-anti-muslim-ads-in-philadelphia/>
- **Enter your students in a region-wide “Dare to understand.” Poster/Photo Contest.**  
<http://www.interfaithcenterpa.org/wp-content/uploads/Dare-to-Understand-Poster-Photo-Contest.pdf>