

AG Kaul: Joins letter calling on Facebook to take stronger steps to prevent use of its platforms to spread hate and disinformation

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MADISON, Wis. – Wisconsin Attorney General Josh Kaul today joined 19 Attorneys General from across the United States in calling on Facebook to take additional steps to prevent the popular social media website from being used to spread hate and disinformation. The Attorneys General also urged Facebook to provide stronger support for users who fall victim to online intimidation and harassment on its platforms.

“In this time of social distancing and increased isolation, finding ways to stay in contact with others—including through social media—is especially important,” said AG Kaul. “But social media platforms must ensure that they aren’t being used as forums for hate speech, disinformation, and cyberbullying. This bipartisan group of AGs is calling on Facebook to take additional steps to protect Facebook users.”

In a letter today to Facebook Chief Executive Officer Mark Zuckerberg and Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg, the Attorneys General assert that despite its stated commitment to working to keep its user community safe, Facebook has fallen short in keeping hate content off its platforms and protecting users from online harassment.

Today’s letter observes that the nation is presently in a moment of reckoning on issues of racial justice and civil rights. Against this backdrop, the letter states that “[p]rivate parties, organized groups and public officials continue to use Facebook to spread misinformation and project messages of hate against different groups of

Americans,” with many of those messages leading to the abuse of individual Facebook users.

The letter follows the release of a Civil Rights Audit of Facebook’s practices — commissioned by the company and completed in July—that faults Facebook for not doing more to prevent the use of Facebook as a vehicle for misinformation and discrimination, and to prevent users from being victimized by harassment and intimidation on its platforms.

Recent surveys suggest more than 40 percent of Americans have experienced some form of online harassment, and that of those victims, more than 75 percent have reported being harassed on Facebook. The letter urges Facebook to implement several reforms recommended in the Civil Rights Audit to “strengthen its commitment to civil rights and fighting disinformation and discrimination.” It further recommends steps designed to improve Facebook’s supportive services for victims.

According to today’s letter, much of the harassment reported by Facebook users focuses on characteristics protected by civil rights laws, including race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender and gender identity, and disability.

Such harassment can include conduct like cyberstalking, doxing (maliciously publishing someone’s personal information), and swatting (filing false police reports to prompt law enforcement response targeting the victim.) The letter contends that at present, “recourse is unavailable for too many of these victims,” due to limitations on the services that Facebook offers victims, as well as other factors.

The Attorneys General acknowledge that “Facebook has—on occasion—taken action to address violations of its terms of service in cases where we have helped elevate our constituents’ concerns.” But the letter adds that many Facebook users continue to find the redress process “slow, frustrating, and ineffective.”

The reforms recommended in today’s letter, many of which are highlighted in the recent Civil Rights Audit, include calls for Facebook to:

- Aggressively enforce its policies against hate speech and organized hate organizations;
- Allow public, third-party audits of hate content and enforcement;
- Commit to an ongoing, independent analysis of Facebook’s content population scheme and the prompt development of best practices guidance; and

- Expand policies limiting inflammatory advertisements that vilify minority groups;

The Attorneys General also recommends steps to enhance Facebook supportive services including:

- Offer live real-time assistance to victims of intimidation and harassment;
- Make information about unlawful harassment and intimidation more readily available; and
- Strengthen filtering, reporting, and blocking tools.

In addition to Wisconsin, Attorneys General representing the following jurisdictions are participating in today's letter: California, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Virginia, and Vermont.

<https://www.doj.state.wi.us/news-releases/ag-kaul-joins-letter-calling-facebook-take--stronger-steps-prevent-use-its-platforms>