

While fighting coronavirus, NJ pleads with people not to target Asian, Orthodox communities

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As New Jersey grapples with the coronavirus pandemic, state officials are pleading with the public to not target Jewish Orthodox and Asian American communities, whom some are blaming for the virus' spread.

But incidents in Lakewood this week, where police broke up a pair of now-banned large gatherings, have exacerbated fears and led some on social media to aim their vitriol toward the township's burgeoning Orthodox community.

Authorities are being careful to balance public health concerns about the easily spread coronavirus with the individuals' right to worship, New Jersey Attorney General Gurbir Grewal said in a Thursday interview. Most religious leaders have acquiesced. Those who don't will be held accountable, he said.

"It doesn't matter if it's in Lakewood or Camden or wherever," Grewal said. "We've got to send the message that this is not OK. It puts our cops at risk, and the limited [personal protective equipment] they have shouldn't be wasted disrupting and stopping these types of social gatherings that shouldn't be happening in the first place."

On Thursday, Gov. Phil Murphy warned residents not to scapegoat Jewish Orthodox people, especially on social media. And he urged people not to target Asians, especially in New Jersey's growing Korean community.

"Our diversity of cultures and religions is one of our hallmarks of our state - we take enormous pride in that," Murphy said at a news conference. "So I take great offense, as do the overwhelming amount of our residents, when a small group of people do things like going on social media to scapegoat others who worship differently, or look differently from them for what we're experiencing right now."

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The controversies come as the number of coronavirus cases surges throughout the state. [As of Thursday, there were 6,876 cases in New Jersey \(/story/news/coronavirus/2020/03/26/nj-coronavirus-update-latest-news-cases-deaths-restrictions/5083222002/\)](https://www.northjersey.com/story/news/coronavirus/2020/03/26/nj-coronavirus-update-latest-news-cases-deaths-restrictions/5083222002/), nearly 2,500 of which were new. It's the largest single-day jump since the first case was reported March 4.

There have also been 81 deaths, officials said.

Issued Saturday, Murphy's order looks to break the rising tide by limiting groups of any number, including parties, weddings and religious ceremonies. But people can still go to the grocery store, seek medical care, exercise outside or visit close friends and relatives. Exceptions were also made for several jobs, including construction workers and home health aides.

The penalties for violators can be stiff â€" though the exact charge depends on the crime, a disorderly persons offense is punishable by a prison term of up to six months, a fine of up to \$1,000 or both, Grewal's office has said.

Few have tested the state's commitment. New Jersey State Police Superintendent Pat Callahan said that as of Thursday, there had been 13 total incidents spread over 10 counties. Police issued six disorderly persons offenses, three of which are indictable, he added.

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Two of those were issued in Lakewood, where on Tuesday police broke up a wedding held in a tent outside a home, Grewal said. The police tried to disperse the crowd but the homeowner, Meir T. Gruskin, 37, kept going. Authorities gave him a summons for violating the emergency order and shuttered the event.

The same day, authorities charged 48-year-old Abraham Bursztyn with maintaining a nuisance after finding a group of about two dozen men at the school on Main Street.

Grewal declined to give further details about either incident.

The attorney general also announced Wednesday that police had charged Jacquon Jones, a 37-year-old Penns Grove man, with a disorderly persons offense for throwing a party Saturday night.

When authorities arrived, they found more than 30 people at the house, Grewal said. Some were recording the festivities and posting the videos on YouTube.

Steve Janoski covers law enforcement for NorthJersey.com. For unlimited access to the most important news about those who safeguard your local community, please subscribe or activate your digital account today (<https://offers.northjersey.com/specialoffer>).

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Staff writer Ashley Balcerzak contributed to this report.

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