

HOLOCAUST MUSEUM: New genocide commission becomes law

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When it came time for Gov. Pat Quinn to sign legislation creating a new statewide commission on genocide, he knew just where he wanted to make the law official.

Quinn Thursday came to the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center in Skokie, flanked by several state legislators as well as genocide survivors and activists as signed the law. In the open upstairs room of the Skokie facility, an invited crowd broke into applause at the signing.

Officials said that Illinois continues to lead the way when it comes to Holocaust and genocide education.

"We must remember the tragedy of the Holocaust and other genocides that have occurred throughout history," Quinn said. "The Illinois Holocaust and Genocide Commission will remind everyone in Illinois of the horrors of genocide and ethnic cleansing, and will work towards ensuring tolerance among future generations."

The commission, which will include 15 appointed members, will provide oversight and guidance regarding education, memorials and events that address the Holocaust and other genocides. The panel is likely to work closely with Skokie's facility in fulfilling the purpose of the act, officials said.

In addition to the appointed members, commissioners will include the superintendent of the State Board of Education; the executive director of the Illinois Board of Higher Education; and the director of Veterans' Affairs. Members will not be paid and will serve four-year terms.

The governor Thursday was vague about specifics as he had to be since the commission has not yet been formed. But following the ceremony, he said that members will soon be appointed and they will likely include survivors of genocide.

The governor's office reported that the commission will assist institutions such as Skokie's Holocaust Museum in education and awareness efforts. It will compile a list of Holocaust and other genocide survivors, liberators and other volunteers to share knowledge and experiences.

The commission is also assigned to coordinate events to memorialize the Holocaust and other genocides on International Holocaust Remembrance Day on Jan. 27. The new legislation takes effect in 2011.

Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center Executive Director Rick Hirschhaut noted that it was 20 years ago when Illinois enacted "groundbreaking legislation," the first state to mandate that the Holocaust be taught in public schools. Five years ago the mandate was expanded to include other genocides.

"A generation of young people came of age with a deeper understanding of this tragic period of human history," Hirschhaut said about the original act. "Today, with the creation of the Illinois Genocide and Holocaust Commission we complete the circle of commemoration, education, and prevention which lies at the heart of the original mandate."

During his comments preceding the signing, Quinn mentioned slain Chicago police officer Thor Soderberg whose funeral he had just left. He told how Soderberg once eased the fears of a Holocaust survivor who initially was understandably untrusting of police by showing kindness and compassion.

That sentiment is what lies at the heart of the new legislation, he said.

State Rep. Lou Lang, D-16th, acknowledged that the Illinois General Assembly is not always regarded in the best light.

“But when it comes to these kinds of things — understanding human rights, understanding the Holocaust, understanding the need to move forward and teach people about genocide — the members of the Illinois General Assembly work together,” Lang said.

House Bill 6059 creating the The Illinois Holocaust and Genocide Commission was unanimously passed by the General Assembly and co-sponsored by State Sen. Ira Silverstein, D-8th, and State Rep. Sara Feigenholtz, D-12th.

An emotional Feigenholtz Thursday said she has family affected by the Holocaust and remembers barely being able to walk after her first visit to Yad Vashem, Israel's Holocaust museum.

The governor, she said, had performed a “big mitzvah” by coming Thursday to Skokie to sign the bill into law.

“We always say, ‘never forget,’” Silverstein said. “The key in my vision has always been education. That’s the whole purpose of this bill.”

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