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Press Release

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IMMEDIATE

### Governor Cuomo Announces MTA Police Charge Man With Hate Crimes for Graffiti Incidents at Penn Station

***MTA Police Department Conduct Undercover Sting Operation; Serial Bias Graffiti Included Drawings of Swastikas; To Report Bias or Discrimination Complaint, Call Toll-Free Hotline at (888) 392-3644 or Text "HATE" to 81336***

Governor Cuomo today announced that a man suspected of multiple incidents of bias graffiti at Pennsylvania Station was arrested and charged for committing a series of hate crimes, reinforcing that New York has zero tolerance for bigotry or discrimination in any form. The arrest and charges highlight the aggressive actions the state is undertaking to combat the growth of hate crimes and anti-Semitism.

"This arrest sends a clear message that all hate crimes will be thoroughly investigated, and we will prosecute those found responsible for perpetrating these reprehensible actions," Governor Cuomo said. "We have zero tolerance for these acts of bigotry, which stand in direct contrast to the values that we New Yorkers represent. I applaud the MTA Police Department for their vigilance and actions in this investigation."

Yesterday, MTA Police Department detectives, who had been conducting a surveillance operation related to a pattern of hate-crime graffiti and vandalism of men's bathrooms at Pennsylvania Station, arrested a man for suspicion of vandalizing a bathroom stall. The suspect was identified as Pasquale Vargas, 65, of Brooklyn. Police believe Vargas is responsible for multiple instances of bias graffiti at Penn Station since February 18.

Vargas has been charged under New York State law with eight counts of Criminal Mischief in the Fourth Degree. Due to the nature and circumstances of the alleged offenses, they are being prosecuted as Hate Crimes (Class E Felony).

During an interview with police following his arrest, Vargas admitted to writing the graffiti and said that he wrote it "because Mexicans take jobs from Americans." Police suspect Vargas is also responsible for graffiti in Penn Station on multiple other occasions since February 18, including swastikas and other statements that read: "KKK" and "Mexican Go Home," among others, which were written in black marker in two different locations.

MTA Chief of Police Owen Monaghan said, "The MTA Police and our law enforcement partners across the state – including the State Police – vigorously investigate all hate crimes in order to bring those responsible to justice. No one should think they can get away with trying to intimidate the public in this way."

As part of a surveillance plan started last month, detectives stationed in a men's bathroom in Penn Station noticed graffiti in a bathroom stall that Vargas left. No graffiti was in the stall beforehand. Detectives stopped Vargas under suspicion of vandalism and searched his backpack, which contained a black Sharpie marker – the same type used to deface the stall.

#### State Actions to Combat Hate

Last November, Governor Cuomo directed the creation of the State Police Hate Crimes Unit to investigate and offer assistance to other law enforcement agencies investigating potential hate crimes.

The Governor also launched a toll-free hotline to report incidents of bias and discrimination across the state following an uptick in reports of discrimination, bias-motivated threats, harassment and violence. New Yorkers who have experienced bias or discrimination are encouraged to call the toll-free hotline at (888) 392-3644 from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday – Friday or text "HATE" to 81336. The state offers a \$5,000 reward to information leading to the arrest and conviction of a hate crime.

Governor Cuomo has also created a \$25 million grant program to boost safety and security at New York's schools and day care centers at risk of hate crimes or attacks because of their ideology, beliefs or mission. The grant program will provide funding for additional security equipment and training needs, and will be administered by the Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services.