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CONTACT: Leonard Presberg, secularofficials@gmail.com

NON-RELIGIOUS PUBLIC OFFICIALS ORGANIZE FOR SUPPORT, DIALOGUE

A new group will provide support, information and a sounding board for non-religious elected officials at a time when a growing number of people choose not to affiliate with a religion, organizers say.

“By openly serving as secular elected officials, our members help dispel the prejudice against the non-religious community, encourage other members of this community to run for office, and make our democracy stronger,” the Association of Secular Elected Officials said in a statement.

The group, a non-profit Georgia corporation, began organizing last year and had its first board of directors meeting in December. It was founded and is headed by Leonard Presberg, a lawyer and a member of the Fayette County, Georgia, School Board for the past decade. Danny Choriki, a Billings, Montana, City Councilman, is Treasurer. Charlene Komar Storey, a former borough Councilwoman at Large and Council President in Roselle Park, New Jersey, is secretary.

The percentage of Americans who describe themselves as unaffiliated with religion is increasing, while the percentage who say they are members of a religion is declining, according to surveys by the Pew Research Center, a non-partisan “fact tank” in Washington.

The trend is strongest among younger people. Only 49 percent of millennial-generation survey respondents – those born from 1981 to 1996 -- describe themselves as Christians. Forty percent are “nones,” saying they have no religious affiliation, and 10 percent say they have non-Christian faiths. By comparison, 76 percent of Baby Boomers – born from 1946 to 1964 – describe themselves as Christians.

Yet the non-religious are seriously underrepresented in public office. Only one member of Congress publicly identifies with our community, and of the nearly 8,000 state legislators there are only 62 who identify with our community, due to prejudice and misunderstanding of what the non-religious bring to the table.

“For too long the non-religious have been excluded from being open about their constitutional right to be non-religious,” Presberg said. “As the need for science-based policy is paramount, we have a vocal minority pushing for special rights for their religious beliefs. Now, more than ever, we need to support and educate our non-theistic elected colleagues as they work to make our country and their community better for everyone.”

The organization also has a goal of presenting an alternative to the political power of white Christian nationalists. “We are determined to bring their anti-democratic, bigoted, anti-science, racist, misogynists, xenophobic, and homophobic crusade to an end,” Presberg said.

Non-religious people may choose to call themselves atheists, humanists, agnostics, skeptics, nonreligious, freethinkers, nonbelievers, religiously unaffiliated, and/or “spiritual but not religious,” among other terms. The association uses the word “secular” as shorthand for the wide variety of nonreligious identifiers its members choose, organizers said.