

PUBLIC COMMENTS

HB 525

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON STATE AFFAIRS

Hearing Date: March 25, 2021 8:00 AM

Slip Hansen

Humans citizens in America

Dallas, TX

Freedom of religion please!

TERRY TODD, MS.

SELF- PRECINCT CHAIR 109.

OVILLA, TX

RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS SHOULD BE PROTECTED BY THE FIRST AMENDMENT OF THE CONSTITUTION.

Regina Callender

Self/retired

Henderson, TX

Please vote yes as all our religious rights are covered by the constitution

Donna Mckinnerney

N/A

Camp Wood, TX

We should be able to protect our religious freedom and for this we will stand and fight leave our religious freedom and our gun freedom alone This is a free country men have fought and died for it we the people will not stand and tolerate this

Frank Pomeroy

myself as a concerned citizen

Seguin, TX

As a pastor and concerned citizen I am here today in support of HB 525 .

Martin Luther the father of Protestantism wrote a pamphlet during the Plague of 1527 of the duties of a church and what his role was during the Plague. He ended up loosing his own daughter to the plague but yet stood true to what he knew his people needed in leadership. He knew that he was needed to help bring peace to a horrible situation. One of his quotes resonates with truth and stands true still today.

He said, ""We die at our posts. Christian doctors cannot abandon their hospitals, Christian governors cannot flee their districts, Christian pastors cannot abandon their congregations. The plague does not dissolve our duties: It turns them to crosses, on which we must be prepared to die." ~Martin Luther, 1527

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During times of trials and crisis the number one place that needs to be open is the place where people can find peace and solace. The place where their friends and family can gather in prayer and strengthen one another, and I believe that Spiritual strength that is needed to battle the adversity is found in their places of worship.

We saw in the last pandemic that liquor stores and casinos were considered essential while churches were being closed down and police were called to block doors and drive around drive through services to arrest those that did not fulfill the governments mandates on worship.

Though our constitution protects the rights of Americans to gather and worship we saw those rights swept away across the country. We need to pass this bill so that the citizens of Texas can have legal backing to stand and fight with when the government tries again to overreach and close down the one place that truly needs to stay open in times of calamity, the Church.

Debra Yarbrough

Self

Rockwall, TX

Please protect our religious freedom

Janice Pomeroy

Self Artist

Maxwell, TX

Please protect our religious freedom and our right to worship. Please vote to protect our religious freedom. Thank you

Sammi Hammers

self

LaPorte, TX

It's really sad that we must pass laws to enforce other laws – especially ones that are so clearly defined. It's also very sad that we must pass laws to further protect the rights that have been guaranteed to us by our Creator.

US Constitution:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;

Texas Constitution:

Sec. 6. FREEDOM OF WORSHIP. All men have a natural and indefeasible right to worship Almighty God according to the dictates of their own consciences. No man shall be compelled to attend, erect or support any place of worship, or to maintain any ministry against his consent. No human authority ought, in any case whatever, to control or interfere with the rights of conscience in matters of religion, and no preference shall ever be given by law to any religious society or mode of worship. But it shall be the duty of the Legislature to pass such laws as may be necessary to protect equally every religious denomination in the peaceable enjoyment of its own mode of public worship.

Please consider passing this - and other legislation that narrows the powers of government to abuse our freedom

Thank you

Jorge Gonzales, Mr

self

Houston, TX

HB 525 is a blatant attempt by religion to assert itself into government. Places of worship are by NO MEANS essential services when conducting religious functions. During the pandemic, many church's hosted food drives, out of human kindness, however

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that does not qualify purely religious activities as essential services. Because religion demands blind devotion, the dangers posed by a religion requiring attendance is extremely dangerous in times of emergency. Those who feel compelled or obligated to attend to their religious rituals will endanger their own lives, and possibly public health in general (as we saw during the pandemic). Several church's that refused to allow their patrons the option of home-worship became super spreaders. The job of government is not to bow to religion, but to serve the public. This bill is a danger to public health and well being and an example of unconstitutional influence of church on state. There is no reason religious rituals can't be observed in the safety of one's home in case of emergency.

Frances Karlsrud

self retired

Spring, TX

Do not allow the power of the state in interfere with the freedom of the church.

Michael McCloskey

Self, Sales

CEDAR PARK, TX

Religious Activity is essential and it would violate U.S. Constitution First Amendment rights to assembly and worship to prohibit it.

Rachel Bresner, ADL Jean & Jerry Moore Southwest Civil Rights Counsel

ADL (Anti-Defamation League)

Houston, TX

On behalf of ADL, we write to express our opposition to HB 1691, relating to the protection of religious freedoms and religious institutions during a declared state of disaster and opposition to HB 1239, relating to prohibited suspension of laws protecting religious freedom and prohibited closure of places of worship, opposition to HB 525, relating to the protection of religious organizations, and opposition to HB 1487, relating to the protection of religious organizations. These bills would restrict the ability of the Governor and other state and local officials to issue emergency orders that limit in-person religious services, even if the orders were treating religious services the same as all other gatherings and regardless of how dire the danger to public health and safety.

ADL is a strongly pro-religion, national anti-hate and civil rights organization which supports faith, fairness and freedom. For over a century, we have been an ardent advocate for religious freedom for all Americans-- whether in the majority or minority. HB 1691, HB 1239 and HB 525 are overbroad and likely unconstitutional and would have serious, detrimental consequences for all Texans. It is an essential responsibility of the government to protect the public during an emergency, including a public health emergency like the COVID-19 pandemic. HB 1691, HB 1239 and HB 525 dangerously limit the ability of the government to respond to threats to the public by the COVID-19 pandemic and future pandemics. What is even more troubling is that they go even further by tying the hands of the Governor in non-pandemic emergencies as well, including but not limited to during fires, floods, explosions and hurricanes.

These bills are incredibly broad and would put the public health at risk. State and local officials must be able to issue emergency orders to protect public health under emergency circumstances. Tying the hands of government officials and forbidding or otherwise restricting them from limiting in-person religious gatherings regardless of the public health dangers or disaster or emergency situation will put lives at risk.

It applies to a wide category of religious organizations and prohibits the governor from placing limitations on any of their operations related to a declared state of disaster. These bills do not put religious organizations on equal footing with secular institutions. Instead, it targets them for vastly more favorable treatment, putting them out of reach of any regulation during an emergency even if that regulation applies equally to secular organizations.

Governors would have a harder time controlling the spread of COVID-19 because they would be unable to limit attendance at superspreader events. These bills would also limit the governor's ability to respond to all emergencies, not just COVID-19. For example, a governor might not be able to require a mandatory evacuation in preparation for a hurricane if it would close houses of worship or limit their hours

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Robert Santini
Republican Party of TX
San Antonio, TX

I support this bill. Please bring it up for a vote in committee and ask committee members to vote to pass it out of committee.

Debra Wolgemuth
Self Employed
Waco, TX

I quit attending my Waco, Texas church due to the excessive church lockdowns from Abbott's Executive Overreach. Abbott's actions paralyzed many Texas congregations who chose to live in fear and timidity. I was determined to walk by faith, not choose fear and to fight for my constitutional liberties. I started following a California church, Calvary Chapel Chino Hills/Pastor Jack Hibbs, who provided wisdom and clarity during this past year. Amazingly a California church reopened before my Central Texas church. I am a widow who did not need to be cutoff and alone in my home. A special legislative session was NEVER called to give me representation regarding Abbott's dictator actions. I felt like I was living in back in California and my rights were stolen again. Please, never allow this to happen again in Texas. (Hebrews 10:25)

CHARLES HUTYRA
Retired ATT AND US AIR FORCE
WEST, TX

I support the religious freedom bill. God bless you all.

Mark McCaig
Texas Republican Initiative
Houston, TX

Texas Republican Initiative strongly supports HB 525. Churches and other religious institutions are most needed during times of crisis and distress. This bill ensures that government officials cannot close down houses of worship during times when they are needed most in our communities. We thank Rep. Shaheen for his leadership on this important issue.

Susan Cornett
Self
Leakey, TX

The rights and privileges of our religious freedoms should NEVER be on the chopping block at the discretion of those who question the our constitutional rights in Texas or our USA. Please protect our religious RIGHTS from right to meet to display of our documents.

Adrian Metzger
self
Luling, TX

I am in favor of the passage of this bill. Religious freedoms are under attack, and if the Federal Government will not protect the Constitution and the rights granted by it, then the States must.

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Beverly Roberts, Mrs.
Concerned Women for America
Houston, TX

I am asking that all members of this committee vote YES on HB 525, which protects religious organizations from discrimination, especially during a crisis. The government regularly relies on churches and other faith-based groups to help people in need. Closing these entities in a crisis puts vulnerable people at risk for hunger, loss of shelter and lack of adequate clothing. Our national motto, "In God we Trust", is most surely expressed during an emergency.
Partial text of the bill: Sec. 2401.002. ESSENTIAL BUSINESS; PROHIBITED RESTRICTIONS. (a) Notwithstanding any other law, a religious organization is an essential business at all times in this state, including during a declared state of disaster, and the organization's religious and other related activities are essential activities even if the activities are not listed as essential in an order issued during the disaster.

Elizabeth Anderson, Mrs.
self
Spring, TX

Keeping churches open during an emergency is vital and NO GOVERNMENT entity shall abridge that right.

WILMA JOY PUTNAM, MRS.
SELF
GEORGETOWN, TX

I support HB 525 in that it prohibits officials from restricting churches' ability to hold services and forces these officials to comply with our First Amendment rights.

Myra Anders
self
San Antonio, TX

Religious organizations need protection. Please pass.

Don Huffines, Senator
Self
Dallas, TX

To The Committee on State Affairs,

I urge the Committee to report HB 525 favorably out of committee and to work to keep the bill strong as it moves through the process. It's well past time to protect one of Texans' most essential rights- the right to worship freely- from the type of government overreach that we saw over the course of this past year. Never again should Texans be shut out of their places of worship.

God Bless Texas,

The Honorable Don Huffines

Michael Sweeney

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Central Texas Tea Party

Georgetown, TX

I support HB-525 and ask the committee to pass this legitimization to stop government overreach infringing on our Constitutional Rights as provided under the 1st Amendment to gather freely in the exercise of our religious freedoms without interference or control.

Kristin Cobb

Self

Spring, TX

Keeping churches open during an emergency is vital to every community and community member and no government entity shall abridge that right.

Julie Dahlberg

Self

LA VERNIA, TX

IN SUPPORT OF
TEXAS HOUSE BILLS: HB525, HB1239, HB1487, HB1691, HJR72
PROTECTING RELIGIOUS LIBERTY
87th LEGISLATURE OF TEXAS

As a member of our church's safety response ministry, I would like to bring the committee's attention to the importance of protecting our religious liberty from a different vantage point.

Our safety response ministry upholds a mission of ensuring an environment of comfort, refuge, learning and worship to all members and visitors who come through our doors. We take that mission very seriously and have a zero-tolerance policy on interruption of services, in order to maintain that safe and secure environment for our church family. If ever there has been the need for comfort and refuge for people who are hurting in these uncertain times of trials and fear, this last year has been it.

Due to the Governor's unchecked mandates regarding which businesses and activities are essential or not; the confusing and unclear expectations in enforcement of pandemic-related mandates against gatherings; and an inconsistent understanding by state and local authorities, our First Amendment protections have been threatened.

When we all saw instances across the state and nation where law enforcement officers were locking church doors and threatening church family and church leadership with citations and arrest for simply attempting to exercise their right to worship, church protectors like me are forced to envision a scenario where we could potentially have to become the last barrier between law enforcement officers – who have sworn an oath to protect our Constitutional right to freely worship – and our church family trying to exercise that right. And, forced to decide between our great respect for our law enforcement officers and protecting the right of our church family to worship without interruption. A scenario like that should never be imaginable in a free America and certainly not in the great State of Texas.

This overreach has placed church leadership at odds with law enforcement and local leaders – relationships that generally would be one of strength and collaboration in support and protection of the church family's free expression of their faith.

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Even though I find it unbelievable that we even need to be having this conversation, the pandemic response has clearly shown that without this additional protection in our state law, the constitutional guarantees for Texas citizens are open to interpretation by those in authority who may not respect those protections. We cannot allow this to continue, unchecked. Passing HB525, HB1239, HB1487, HB1691, HJR72. would ensure in Texas law, that the appropriate 'hands off' language is made perfectly clear as it applies to religious liberty.

I urge each of you to publicly support and vote for HB525, HB1239, HB1487, HB1691, HJR72 to protect religious liberty in Texas. Thank you for your time and your service.

Norma Walker

Myself

Boerne, TX

Please vote for protection of religious organizations. Please keep the democrats from denying our religious and Christian beliefs and our freedom given to us to worship together and at home

Mike Krueger

Self / semi retired pharmacist

Odessa, TX

Please support and vote for protection of religious organizations. Vote for those. Thanks!

Tanya Robertson, SREC SD 11 Committeewoman

Republican Party of Texas

Seabrook, TX

Speaking in FAVOR

Religious freedom is paramount to Americans, & Texans, pertaining to our established basic foundation.

The Republican Party of Texas's Legislative Priorities Committee has identified HB525 as aligning with our Religious Freedom Legislative Priority that was forwarded to us by thousands of grassroots Republican convention delegates.

Republican Primary voters also believe this issue is of utmost importance. In 2018, that particular primary ballot proposition garnered 88.61% of millions of voter's approval!

We're respectfully asking Chairman Paddie to call a vote on this bill & for committee members to favorably pass it out of committee.

Thank you for time & attention!

Carolyn Lux

Self

Fredericksburg, TX

I am in favor of protecting the individual's right to practice his faith with no intrusion of any governmental entity, federal, state or city. Thank you for allowing me to comment on this important bill.

Alison Gardner, RN PhD

Concerned Women for America

Houston, TX

the psychological trauma to the draconian shutdown orders for Covid have been horrible on school and college students and

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other businesses and churches are essential for our mental and spiritual health during this stressful time; it is against the constitution to prevent us from our civil liberties of going to church and all the damage it caused to patients in the hospital not having family members there and cancelling important cancer screening and surgeries; never should we have a shutdown like this again

Karen Page

Retired

San Angelo, TX

Would this Bill include organizations that hold meetings, events, etc. in Church's? Whether it be free or rented space.

Anne Grinols

self - retired

Waco, TX

Only the arrogant would say that our connection to our Creator is non-essential, or deny believers the ability to fully practice their religion. To deprive believers of the ability to gather to worship, to learn, to fellowship with one another, to learn how to bear each other's burdens and help those who need help is to deprive these individuals of their essence. Government entities must be prevented from taking such actions. Churches, synagogues, etc. must be allowed to stay open and their members must not be prevented from gathering there. Religious freedom is our right under the First Amendment. No crisis, disease, war, or other situation should affect it.

Please pass this bill without delay.

Gene Robinson

American Liberty Forum

Dallas, TX

Very little 2020 election fraud was investigated and prosecuted. Some are intentionally denying the facts of electronic vote manipulation. Why?

We are fed up with "business as usual" state politics. We demand stronger statewide oversight, fraud reporting, training and standards for all officers, observers, poll workers or volunteers involved in elections. We must have real-time transparency of all voters and audits, increased security and preservation of records, deterrents and reduced opportunity for fraud; much more severe penalties for violators and more prosecutions. Only lawful Texas resident citizens with current picture state ID should participate in any aspect of our elections. We demand 100% transparency and auditability of all: ballots, records, systems, logs, hardware and software, to include contractors, all persons at polling stations, service providers and manufacturers; no judicial or executive waivers ever, including SOS!

100% Transparency and Auditability: Real-time accountability for open audit of voting records, and active security deterrents with much higher penalties for voter fraud, and the highest mandatory penalty for election fraud (over 20 ballots). Increase ID standards; instant fraud detection; real-time reporting of dead, duplicate or ineligible voters.

Early & Absentee Voting: Early voting must be eliminated or limited to no more than 2 days. End the gap between early voting and election day or early release of data; Sunday and Monday before an election day only. Voting Absentee should only be allowed for: (A) in-state residents with a severe physical disability, verified by a doctor within 90 days, and identity-checked by a notary, and (B) Texas resident active duty or activated military reserves outside the State on election day. Allowing anyone to vote absentee has opened the door to blatant and rampant fraud.

Restrain Computer Usage: Computer election fraud is real. We must return to paper ballots. Outlaw internet connection for all voting systems. Tabulation must be based only on the paper hand count (double-verified, certified by a supervisor with commissioned observers present, and mandatory state audits, all under severe penalties for fraud), no tabulation on computers except for real-time audit, ballot reconciliation, detection of fraud, dead voters, duplicate or repetitive voting, ineligible, or unregistered voters.

Federal & Tech Restraints: We demand a resolution that provides severe criminal penalties, fines, arrest or expulsion for any

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non-resident, to include any federal agency or social media entity, that advocates for or attempts: voter registration, vote-by-mail, application distribution, prison registration, ballot distribution or harvesting, computer intrusion, foreign or external intervention. We DEMAND that federal over reach into Texas elections is stopped. Texas Elections! There should be a constitutional amendment allowing only Texas tax payers to vote.

Maureen Riebel

Texan and USA citizen

Boerne, TX

Greetings,

I support protection of religious freedoms and religious organizations.

Darren Meyer

Association of American Physicians and Surgeons

McKinney, TX

I wish to register my support for HB 525. While the First Amendment to the United States Constitution already guarantees the essential elements of this bill, the recent abrogation of those guaranteed rights by the state of Texas necessitates the passage of this bill so that similar action in contravention to the Constitution will be prohibited.

Kristopher Bonilla

Self owner of Integrity Services

San Antonio, TX

I strongly support this bill. To remove God or prevent the worship of God from a public or private place or to target religious organizations to limit their freedoms under the constitution is to strip the American people of the freedoms, history, principals and values this nation was founded upon. A nation that turns it's back on God is a nation that will surely be destroyed.

Isabel Ray

self (communications)

Austin, TX

I oppose HB 525. While this bill is couched in language about "religious protection," what it's actually trying to do is gain special treatment for churches--treatment that, in the event of a pandemic such as COVID, puts all of Texas at risk. It is not "discrimination" for members of a church to follow the same public health guidelines as everyone else. When gathering in person is unsafe, churches have the same moral responsibility as everyone else to practice safer methods of communion, such as virtual meetings. Please do not endanger Texans' health by exempting religious organizations from doing the right thing during a pandemic. Thank you.

Julie Kellogg

self

Corpus Christi, TX

Vote yes. Our first amendment rights are restrictions on government, never on the citizens. Religious freedom must never be limited under any circumstance, or actual or perceived threat.

Tom Nobis

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Chairman Paddie and members of the committee

Thank you for the opportunity to provide my thoughts For HB525, HB1239, HB1487, HB1691, and HJR72.

Religious rights are fundamental. Per the 1st Amendment to the constitution, Congress shall make no law prohibiting the free exercise of religion. Over the past year, there have been occurrences where restrictions have been placed on the free exercise of religion and many of these bills rectify that situation to bring clarity to the law. These bills are supported by Planks 61 & 312 of the Texas Republican Party Platform.

61. The Rights of a Sovereign People: The Republican Party of Texas supports the historic concept, established by our nation's founders, of limited civil government jurisdiction under the natural laws of God, and we oppose the concept that the state is sovereign over the affairs of men, the family, and the church. We believe that government properly exists by the consent of the governed and must be restrained from intruding into the freedoms of its citizens. The function of government is not to grant rights, but to protect the unalienable, God-given rights of life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness of all, including the unborn.

312. Religious Freedom of Speech and Practice: As America is "one nation under God," founded on Judeo-Christian principles, we affirm the constitutional right of all individuals to worship as they choose. We strongly believe in Religious Freedom and Freedom of Speech. Therefore, we demand:

- a. The repeal of the Johnson Amendment, which assaults the free speech of pastors and religious organizations.
- b. Protection of the First Amendment rights of any citizen to practice their religion and exercise their right to free speech in the public square, as well as in religious organization affiliations.
- c. Elimination of Federal Internal Revenue Service (IRS) involvement with Church messaging.
- d. That Texas judges and legislators uphold and defend our First Amendment rights of religious liberty and freedom of speech, and we oppose any effort to intimidate and prevent Christians and other people of faith from exercising their rights.
- e. Acknowledgement that the Church is a God-ordained institution with a sphere of authority separate from that of civil government, and thus the Church is not to be regulated, controlled, or taxed by any level of civil government.