

HCS HB 1959 -- MISSOURI RELIGIOUS FREEDOM PROTECTION ACT

SPONSOR: Riley

COMMITTEE ACTION: Voted "Do Pass with HCS" by the Special Committee on Government Accountability by a vote of 9 to 6. Voted "Do Pass" by the Standing Committee on Rules- Legislative Oversight by a vote of 7 to 1.

This bill establishes the "Missouri Religious Freedom Protection Act". The bill provides that no public official may issue an order that has the effect of limiting or prohibiting a religious group or place of worship from holding religious services or meetings. This prohibition does not apply to religious groups using places of worship to intentionally commit or plan acts of violence. This prohibition also does not apply to emergency evacuation orders involving imminent danger from flooding, fires, tornadoes, earthquakes, terrorists threats, civil unrest, or hazardous materials incidents. Once the imminent danger has passed, religious services shall be allowed to resume. This prohibition is not be interpreted to exempt places of worship from complying with applicable building and fire codes.

The following is a summary of the public testimony from the committee hearing. The testimony was based on the introduced version of the bill.

PROPONENTS: Supporters say that five years ago, the need to address infringements on religious freedom wasn't apparent. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lock downs led to government entities closing places of worship. This action violates people's rights to worship as they choose. In Missouri, it's crucial to prioritize citizens' rights to assemble and worship freely. While there may be exemptions for security reasons, places of worship offer unique services such as food pantries and aid for the homeless. Government shutdowns of these establishments are highly inappropriate, particularly considering the mental health benefits associated with attending religious services.

Testifying in person for the bill was Representative Riley.

OPPONENTS: Those who oppose the bill say that religious organizations should not receive exemptions from regulations applicable to other entities. The virus remains indifferent to whether one is worshiping or engaging in recreational activities. Numerous instances have shown churches serving as hubs for virus transmission. Therefore, Sections 6 and 7 of the proposed bill underscore the necessity of public health regulations to safeguard the lives and rights of all individuals.

Testifying in person against the bill were Americans United for Separation of Church and State; Brian Kaylor, Word & Way; Armorvine; Abortion Action Missouri (Formerly Pro Choice Missouri); and the American Civil Liberties Union of Missouri.

This bill is the same as HB 293 (2023).

Written testimony has been submitted for this bill. The full written testimony and witnesses testifying online can be found under Testimony on the bill page on the House website.