

Religious Freedom Restoration Acts: Real Consequences for All Americans

What Do These Laws Actually Do?

The freedom of religion is one of our most fundamental rights. It's enshrined in our Constitution and reflected in laws across the land—and it's not up for debate. In fact, it's one of the many freedoms that allow each and every American to live their lives to the fullest and advance the common good.

But more radical legislation is now appearing in state legislatures across the country, often described or defined as “Religious Freedom Restoration Act” (RFRA), which allow individuals to assert their religious beliefs as a way to discriminate against others, paving the way for challenges to virtually any law designed to protect **all of us** from various forms of discrimination. RFRA's undermine another important value we all cherish—treating others as we ourselves would like to be treated. These misnamed bills ultimately create unforeseen consequences and, unfortunately, there are already many examples of how they cause real problems for people, governments, and businesses.

Professional sports teams, various state chambers of commerce, religious leaders, and businesses of all sizes have spoken out against this type of legislation. Here's why:

RFRA Means Real Harm

RFRA allows individuals to ignore any law they deem to conflict with their religious beliefs. This has already happened in several states, causing problems related to:

- **Child Welfare**—In New Mexico, a local religious leader cited the state RFRA when he appealed a conviction for sexually abusing two teenagers.
- **Domestic Violence**—Domestic violence and women's rights organizations across the country have opposed such measures, because, as one advocate wrote, “Too often in our history, religion has been used as a justification for the abuse of women and children, often by family members.”
- **Public Safety**—In addition to issues relating to child welfare and domestic violence, a RFRA law could allow a police officer to refuse to even interact with certain members of the community, even while on duty. There has already been an example of this in Oklahoma, where an officer cited a RFRA law in defense of his refusal to even attend a community event hosted by a local Islamic Society.
- **Gay and Transgender People**—Gay and transgender Americans work hard to earn a decent living and provide for their families—just like everyone else. When a gay or transgender person walks into a business or government office, they shouldn't have to worry if they will be turned away simply because of who they are. No matter how you feel about marriage for gay and lesbian couples, treating all people with respect is something we can all agree on.

- **State & Local Government**—RFRA laws muddy the legal landscape and have already led to many costly lawsuits across the country, as local municipalities have been embroiled in lengthy litigation. In Arizona, it took one small town four years to settle a dispute where the plaintiff used RFRA as a basis for refusing to comply with an ordinance regulating sign postings. The National League of Cities and the National Association of Counties have both cautioned against such laws.

RFRA Threatens Business and the Economy

RFRA laws could fundamentally damage the economy and business environment in states. Increasingly, employers are looking to grow their organizations—small and large—in states with common-sense laws that make everyone feel protected and respected.

If a business chooses not to expand or to locate in a state with this type of harmful laws on the books, the local economy sustains multiple losses—the loss of the new jobs the business would have brought to the area, and also the loss of increased economic activity and innovation that comes from a thriving community full of employed, engaged people.

In Indiana, for example, a number of conventions and businesses declared their intentions to leave or significantly decrease activity in the state when a RFRA was passed in March 2015. The Center for American Progress estimates that as a result, the state stands to lose \$256.4 million over the course of six years.

That's why state Chambers of Commerce, professional sports teams, and businesses across America have spoken out against RFRA laws. We want our state to be a place that welcomes all people who want to work hard and help grow our economy.