

Elderly Blind Woman Ticketed, Threatened with Arrest by Park Authorities for Sharing Her Faith with Others

First Liberty Institute files charge of discrimination against park, library alleging disability and religious discrimination

Providence, RI—First Liberty Institute and William Wray Jr., an attorney at Adler Pollock & Sheehan P.C., today filed a charge of discrimination with the Rhode Island Commission for Human Rights against Westerly, Rhode Island’s Memorial and Library Association for banning a blind woman from Wilcox Park and Westerly Public Library in Westerly, Rhode Island. Park officials demanded that Gail Blair, who was 63-years old, at the time, and blind, stop having conversations with others in the public park about Jesus in which she would offer them a small copy of the Gospel of John. As a result, park officials banned Mrs. Blair from their park and library. Park officials then called on the local police to issue a formal “Trespass Warning” to Mrs. Blair, threatening to arrest her if she enters the park or library within a period of two years.

You can read the charge of discrimination [here](#).

“Banning a blind woman from entering a public park simply because she offers people she meets religious material is outrageous and discriminatory,” said Jeremy Dys, Special Counsel for Litigation and Communications at First Liberty Institute. “No government entity should ban anyone—let alone a gentle, blind woman— for simply carrying on conversations about her faith and giving them a copy of the Gospel of John in a public park.”

He added that, “Talking about your faith to people in a public park should never be a crime. Gail Blair simply wants the same rights as everyone else, to be free to talk to people about issues she cares about in a public park.”

On June 24, 2019, Association staff contacted law enforcement to report that Mrs. Blair was “stopping patrons and giving them religious pamphlets.” They claimed that Mrs. Blair had “accost[ed]” park and library patrons and that she gave out “pamphlets which patrons end up discarding in the park.” A short time later, after volunteering to assist her church’s Vacation Bible School event in the park, the Westerly Police Department informed her that she had trespassed, warning her that any future violations would result in her being placed under arrest.

As the charge of discrimination says, “The Police Department searched for all incidents that involved complaints or trespass notices issued to anyone for distributing information, pamphlets, soliciting, selling, hawking, etc., and found none apart from when the Association called the police to eject me from the park. My conduct did not violate the ‘Rules of Conduct’ posted by Westerly Library and Wilcox Park. Nor did it violate any of the Park’s Guidelines.”

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About First Liberty Institute

[First Liberty Institute](#) is a non-profit public interest law firm and the largest legal organization in the nation dedicated exclusively to defending religious freedom for all Americans.

To arrange an interview, contact Lacey McNeil at media@firstliberty.org or by calling 972-941-4453.