



News Release

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DC First Responders Argue in DC Circuit Court to Secure Their Religious Freedom

Attorneys defend DC First Responders' right to wear a beard as an expression of their faith after unlawful policy prohibits them from doing so.

Washington, D.C. — Today, the DC Circuit Court of Appeals heard oral arguments in the case of several longtime DC paramedics and firefighters seeking to hold DC Fire and Emergency Management Services (FEMS) in contempt of court for violating a 2007 injunction protecting their religious freedom to wear a beard. The Muslim and Jewish first responders are represented by First Liberty Institute and the law firm Covington & Burling.

“Over a decade ago, the court ordered the District of Columbia to protect the religious liberty rights of paramedics and firefighters, specifically, to allow our clients to continue to wear their beards while working in the field,” said Becky Dummermuth, counsel to First Liberty Institute. “Even in the face of a global pandemic, DC could not simply disregard a court injunction or suspend religious freedom. Such egregious disregard of our client’s hard-fought rights and a clear court order should not be casually overlooked.”

Lucas Moench, Associate with Covington and Burling, said, “Federal court orders are powerful instruments for protecting civil rights, including religious liberty. They are not optional guidelines. By openly flouting a clear, longstanding court order, FEMS has trampled on both our clients’ religious liberty and the authority of the federal court system.”

In 2007, Calvert Potter, Steven Chasin, Hassan Umrani, and Jasper Sterling won a permanent injunction under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act against a DC FEMS policy requiring that they be clean shaven and ordering that they be returned to field duty. Then, in 2020, DC reinstated the facial hair policy and moved them to administrative positions when they refused to shave their beards. After decades of faithful service to the city and many years of fighting for FEMS to recognize the religious rights of bearded fire fighters, DC’s violation of the injunction erased what the clients thought was a legacy they would leave for religious freedom. While DC claims that its actions were justified by COVID-19, it failed to ask the court to modify the injunction and did not consider alternatives for complying with it.

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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 Natalie Konstans at media@firstliberty.org or by calling 972-941-4453.