



U.S. Department of Justice

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1 Courthouse Way
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Boston, Massachusetts 02210

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Re: The Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act

Dear Massachusetts State, County, and Municipal Officials:

I am writing to you today to highlight the obligation of public officials to comply with the various provisions of the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act (RLUIPA), and to inform you about documents previously issued by the Department of Justice (Department) that may be of assistance to you in understanding and applying this important Federal civil rights law.

The freedom to practice religion according to the dictates of one's conscience is among our most fundamental rights, written into our Constitution and protected by our laws. In our increasingly diverse nation, the Department of Justice and the United States Attorney's Office continue to steadfastly defend this basic freedom and ensure that all people may live according to their beliefs, free of discrimination, harassment, or persecution.

Over the years Congress has passed a number of laws that protect the religious liberties of those who live in America, including the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the 1996 Church Arson Prevention Act. In 2000 Congress, by unanimous consent, and with the support of a broad range of civil rights and religious organizations, enacted the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act. 42 U.S.C. § 2000cc, et seq. In enacting RLUIPA, Congress determined that there was a need for Federal legislation to protect religious individuals and institutions from unduly burdensome, unreasonable or discriminatory zoning, landmarking, and other land use regulations.¹ Congress heard testimony that houses of worship, particularly those of minority religions and start-up churches, were disproportionately affected, and in fact often were actively discriminated against, by local land use decisions. Congress also found that, as a whole, religious institutions were treated worse than secular places of assembly like community centers, fraternal organizations, and movie theaters, and that zoning authorities frequently violated the United States Constitution by placing excessive burdens on the ability of congregations to exercise their faiths.

¹ RLUIPA also contains provisions that prohibit regulations that impose a "substantial burden" on the religious exercise of persons residing or confined in an "institution," unless the government can show that the regulation serves a "compelling government interest" and is the least restrictive way for the government to further that interest. 42 U.S.C § 2000cc-1.

