



Secretary Brooke L. Rollins

**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
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SECRETARY'S MEMORANDUM 1078-019

**USDA GUIDANCE ON FEDERALLY PROTECTED RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION AND
ACCOMMODATION RIGHTS**

1. OVERVIEW

Federal employees have broad constitutional and statutory rights to religious expression in the workplace. This guide helps USDA employees and supervisors understand these rights while maintaining a respectful, inclusive work environment across all mission areas, from field inspections and laboratory research to headquarters operations.

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) issued guidance on July 28, 2025, explaining the robust legal protections for religious expression among federal employees. OPM encouraged all Federal agencies to align its internal policies with the guidance to ensure that the rights of Federal employees to private religious expression are protected in the workplace, including while on duty at USDA. I recently affirmed USDA's commitment to upholding religious liberties in employee engagements with members of the public.

In my statement, I expressed that First Amendment protection of religious freedom "reflect the understanding that religious freedom protects not only the right to worship in private or with other religious adherents, but also that Americans are free to live out their faith in the public square." This means the right to publicly express their faith without government retaliation, the ability to participate fully in society in accordance with conscience, and the freedom from government coerced religious or secular dogma. These rights apply to all USDA employees in the workplace regardless of their role or duty location.

2. LEGAL FOUNDATION

Your religious expression rights are protected by multiple legal sources:

- **First Amendment** to the U.S. Constitution (Free Exercise Clause/Free Speech Clause)
- **Title VII** of the Civil Rights Act of 1964
- **Supreme Court precedents** including *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*, 597 U.S. 507 (2022) and *Groff v. DeJoy*, 143 S. Ct. 2279 (2023)
- **Executive Order 14202** "Eradicating Anti-Christian Bias" (2025); **Executive Order 14291** "Establishment of the Religious Liberty Commission."

3. KEY PRINCIPLE:

USDA must accommodate your religious expression "to the greatest extent possible" unless it would impose an undue hardship on operations. Employees are permitted to engage in private religious expression in the workplace to the same extent as they may engage in private nonreligious expression. Supervisors and managers must take care not to limit private expression of a religious character if similar forms of expression are not restricted when the character of the expression is not religious.

Illustrative Examples of Protected Religious Expression in the Workplace: The following list is not intended to be comprehensive. Rather, it is meant, without limitation, to illustrate the many different forms and means of religious expression by USDA employees that are constitutionally protected in the workplace.

Personal Religious Items and Displays

You may:

- Keep religious books (Bible, Quran, Torah, etc.) on your desk
- Display religious artwork, crosses, Stars of David, crescents, and other religious symbols in your workspace
- Wear religious jewelry, clothing, or symbols
- Post religious messages following standard workplace posting policies
- Use prayer beads, prayer rugs, or other religious items during breaks

USDA Examples:

- Food inspector keeping a Bible at an inspection facility workstation
- Agricultural researcher displaying a religious calendar in their laboratory
- Forestry technician wearing religious jewelry during field work

Group Religious Activities

You may:

- Form prayer groups or scripture study groups during non-official time.
- Use available conference rooms for religious gatherings when not in official use.
- Organize religious discussions during lunch breaks or outside official time.
- Invite work colleagues to religious services or events

USDA Examples:

- FSIS inspectors gathering for prayer during shift changes
- Research center employees meeting for weekly Bible study in the break room
- Field office staff organizing interfaith discussion groups

Religious Conversations

You may:

- Discuss your religious beliefs with interested colleagues
- Share why your faith is meaningful to you

- Politely invite coworkers to religious services or events
- Express religious viewpoints during appropriate conversations

Important Boundaries:

- Must stop if a colleague asks you to stop
- Cannot create a hostile work environment through persistent unwelcome advances
- Cannot use official authority to pressure subordinates

Public-Facing Religious Expression

You may:

- Express your religious beliefs when interacting with the public in your personal capacity
- Join members of the public in prayer or religious observance
- Display religious items in public-facing work areas

USDA Examples:

- Park ranger joining a tour group in saying grace before a meal
- County extension agent wearing religious symbols while meeting with farmers
- Inspection facility employee displaying religious items at their workstation

4. RELIGIOUS ACCOMMODATIONS

Types of Accommodations Available

You may request accommodations for:

Scheduling

- Weekly sabbath observance
- Daily prayers
- Religious holidays beyond federal holidays

Dietary Requirements

- Special meal needs during work travel or events
- Fasting period considerations

Dress and Grooming

- Religious clothing requirements
- Grooming practices mandated by faith

Workspace Modifications

- Space for prayer or religious observance
- Religious item displays

USDA-Specific Accommodation Examples

- Flexible scheduling during harvest seasons to observe religious holidays

- Modified work assignments during fasting periods like Ramadan
- Alternative protective equipment that accommodates religious dress requirements
- Schedule adjustments for Friday prayers or Saturday sabbath observance

5. EMPLOYEE GUIDELINES

Exercising Your Rights

1. Know Your Protections

- Review this guidance and the full OPM memorandum (available at <https://www.chcoc.gov/content/protecting-religious-expression-federal-workplace>)
- Understand that broad religious expression is protected
- Be aware of appropriate limits (official time, harassment prevention, operational needs, no coercion)

2. Express Respectfully

- Be mindful of your audience and setting
- Respect colleagues who don't share your beliefs
- Stop religious conversations if asked
- Follow general workplace policies (safety, appearance, etc.)

3. Request Accommodations Properly

- Submit requests to your supervisor or HR representative in writing
- Provide clear information about your religious need
- Suggest reasonable accommodation options
- Engage in good-faith interactive discussion

4. Seek Help When Needed

- Contact your mission area's religious accommodation coordinator
- Reach out to religiousfreedom@opm.gov for complex issues
- Use your agency's EEO complaint process if rights are violated

6. RESOURCES AND CONTACTS

USDA Religious Accommodation Coordinators

Visit the [Religious Accommodations Coordinators](#) webpage for a mission area-specific listing or reach out to your Civil Rights Director for guidance.

Additional Support

- **OPM Religious Freedom Questions:** religiousfreedom@opm.gov
- **General Accommodation Questions:** paypolicy@opm.gov
- **USDA EEO Office:** Contact your mission area EEO officer
- **Employee Assistance Program:** Available 24/7 for guidance and support

7. EFFECTIVE DATE

This Memorandum is effectively immediately.

Brooke L. Rollins
Secretary
U.S. Department of Agriculture

USDA Religious Expression Rights – FAQ

Quick Reference for Employees and Supervisors

Your Rights

Q: What religious expressions are allowed at work? **A:** USDA supervisors and managers should allow personal religious expression by employees to the greatest extent possible unless such expression would impose an undue hardship on business operations. Employees, among other forms of expression, can display religious items, wear religious symbols, participate in religious conversations during breaks, form prayer groups during non-official hours, and request religious accommodations.

Q: Can I be disciplined for religious expression? **A:** No, USDA cannot discipline or discharge employees for their religious observance and practice based on the religious character of your activity. As with other forms of expression (i.e., nonreligious expression) personal expression may not interfere with the workday, employee duties, or USDA operations. Managers and supervisors can take reasonable action, including discipline, when an employee's private expression (religious or secular) continues after being asked to stop, or creates a hostile work environment.

Q: Must I keep my religious beliefs private? **A:** No. You can express beliefs openly, share your faith with interested colleagues, and display religious items in your workspace.

Accommodations

Q: How do I request a religious accommodation? **A:** Submit a written request to your supervisor explaining your religious need and suggesting solutions. Your agency must work with you unless it creates undue hardship.

Q: What if religious observance conflicts with my schedule? **A:** USDA must provide reasonable scheduling accommodations for daily prayers, sabbath observance, and religious holidays unless it creates substantial operational burden.

Q: Can I use annual leave for religious observances? **A:** Yes, plus you may qualify for religious compensatory time, flexible scheduling, or other accommodations that don't require personal leave.

Q: What about dietary requirements during work travel? **A:** USDA should accommodate your dietary needs during official travel and work events. Discuss requirements when making travel arrangements.

Workplace Interactions

Q: What's the difference between expression and harassment? **A:** Expression becomes harassment when it continues after being asked to stop, creates a hostile environment, or involves persistent unwelcome advances.

Q: Can I talk about religion with coworkers? A: Yes, during breaks, lunch, or casual conversations. Stop if asked, be respectful of different beliefs, and avoid being persistent.

Q: What if someone complains about my religious expression? A: Complaints alone don't invalidate your rights. Supervisors should distinguish between harassment and simple discomfort with religious expression.

Q: Can I invite coworkers to religious events? A: Yes, polite invitations are protected. You can post on bulletin boards and extend verbal invitations, but don't be persistent if declined.

Supervisor Responsibilities

Q: What are my obligations as a supervisor? A: Allow religious expression, reasonably accommodate practices, don't discriminate based on religion, and create an inclusive environment. You also have your own expression rights.

Q: How do I handle religious conflicts between employees? A: Respect everyone's rights, address genuine harassment promptly, protect legitimate expression, and focus on behavior, not beliefs.

Q: Can I restrict religious expression? A: Only for legitimate operational needs with valid business justifications. Don't single out religious expression for harsher treatment. As stated in the OPM guidance, employees must be allowed to engage in private religious expression in work areas to the same extent that they may engage in nonreligious private expression.

Q: What constitutes "undue hardship"? A: Substantial increased costs or significant operational burden. Minor inconveniences, complaints, or administrative changes typically don't qualify.

USDA-Specific Situations

Q: Can I display religious items during inspections? A: Yes, in your workspace and as worn items, following the same policies as non-religious personal items.

Q: What about religious expression during field work? A: Your rights and responsibilities extend to all work environments.

Q: How do accommodations work with safety requirements? A: Work with supervisors and safety personnel to find creative solutions like alternative equipment or modified procedures.

Q: Can I form prayer groups at USDA facilities? A: Yes, during non-official hours using available rooms or common areas when not in official use.

Getting Help

Q: What if my rights are violated? A: Document violations, contact your mission area's religious accommodation coordinator, email religiousfreedom@opm.gov, or file an EEO complaint.

Q: Where can I get more guidance? A: Review the full OPM memorandum (July 28, 2025), contact mission area coordinators, or email religiousfreedom@omp.gov for complex questions.

Q: Are there employee resource groups for people of faith? A: Many USDA facilities have faith-based groups.