



Secretary Brooke L. Rollins
August 5, 2025

Statement on Upholding Religious Liberties in Public Engagements

Religious freedom is our Nation's first liberty. An enduring legacy gifted by our founding Fathers, the First Amendment no less than three times protects Americans from intrusion on their freedom to live out their chosen faith by preventing abridgments on speech, prohibitions against religious free exercise, and government establishment of religion. These three important protections 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.

Over the last several years, the Supreme Court of the United States has corrected erroneous interpretations of constitutional protections that conflicted with the original meaning of America's charter and resulted in suppression of religious liberty.¹ The Court recently reaffirmed the historic understanding of free exercise under the First Amendment declaring, "[t]he Clause protects not only the right to harbor religious beliefs inwardly and secretly. It does perhaps its most important work by protecting the ability of those who hold religious beliefs of all kinds to live out their faiths in daily life through the performance of (or abstention from) physical acts."² First Amendment protections are retained by Americans of faith when they participate in government programs whether as a recipient of federal benefits or a partner in providing services to the public.³

In issuing his Executive Order on Establishment of the Religious Liberty Commission President Trump set executive branch policy "to vigorously enforce the historic and robust protections for religious liberty enshrined in Federal law." The President explained, "[t]he Founders envisioned a Nation in which religious voices and views are integral to a vibrant public

¹ See e.g., *Carson v. Makin*, 596 U.S. 767 (2022); *Espinoza v. Montana Dep't of Revenue*, 591 U.S. 464 (2020); *Trinity Lutheran Church of Columbia, Inc. v. Comer*, 582 U.S. 449 (2017).

² *Kennedy v. Bremerton Sch. Dist.*, 597 U.S. 507, 524 (2022) (internal quotation marks and citation omitted).

³ See *Trinity Lutheran*, 582 U.S. at 462 ("To condition the availability of benefits . . . upon [a recipient's] willingness to . . . surrender[] his religiously impelled [status] effectively penalizes the free exercise of his constitutional liberties." (quoting *McDaniel v. Paty*, 435 U.S. 618, 626 (1978))).

square and human flourishing and in which religious people and institutions are free to practice their faith without fear of discrimination or hostility from the Government.”

USDA proudly serves the public, including individuals of various faiths and those with no religious devotion at all. The People’s Department must continue to provide these services in accordance with Administration policy and adherence to Federal law governing religious liberty – including the freedom of speech. Every USDA employee is expected to uphold the First Amendment rights of their fellow Americans. Therefore, as USDA goes about providing its numerous services like inspecting private businesses for compliance with laws and regulations, protecting recreational lands, evaluating applications for public benefits, or furnishing school lunches and other nutrition programs, our employees must serve with full recognition of the First Amendment rights of every American they serve.

To ensure that the execution of USDA programs upholds religious liberties in accordance with current law and constitutional interpretation, the USDA Center for Faith, led by Dr. Alveda King, will coordinate with the Office of General Counsel to conduct a review of all related guidance across the Department and recommend necessary changes. Equal treatment of people of faith across USDA programs is the imperative in this initiative.⁴ In the meantime, the following principles are designed to provide guidance for public engagement to our mission areas, agencies, and offices to align with religious liberties protections. All non-legally binding guidance to the contrary is superseded.

1. Employees and supervisors of private workplaces⁵ are permitted to engage in religious expression directed at fellow employees and supervisors and may attempt to persuade other employees and supervisors of the correctness of their views. Religious views should be treated the same as similar speech not involving religious content. Proselytizing by individuals in a private workplace is protected speech that cannot be restricted by USDA. Employees of USDA should be mindful of these principles especially when engaged in compliance, inspection, enforcement, or other official activities concerning outside entities like meat packing and animal exhibition facilities.

⁴ See *Trinity Lutheran*, 582 U.S. at 458 (“The Free Exercise Clause protects religious observers against unequal treatment and subjects to the strictest scrutiny laws that target the religious for special disabilities based on their religious status.” (cleaned up)).

⁵ This guidance concerns USDA’s engagement with outside entities to ensure its employees recognize the First Amendment rights of private individuals and organizations. The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) recently issued guidance, *Protecting Religious Expression in the Federal Workplace*, directed at the federal workforce. USDA is reviewing the OPM document and will provide further guidance concerning the protection of religious expression in the USDA workforce as necessary.

2. Individuals working in facilities that are visited by USDA for official business may wish to display religious icons, religious pamphlets, or faith-based messages in publicly available work areas or on public websites. Others may support employee religious organizations or otherwise openly express their religious beliefs or practices in the workplace. USDA employees must act to avoid limiting or chilling of protected speech. The Department can impose no sanctions against such persons or entities, including by withholding services, for engaging in lawful First Amendment expression.
3. Faith-based organizations (FBOs) may choose to participate in USDA programs, like food distribution and employment and training programs, on the same terms as secular organizations. FBOs may not be subjected to any special disability or requirement that is not equally applicable to secular organizations. USDA may not unduly burden religious exercise of FBOs when they participate in the Department's programs. For example:
 - a. An FBO may use its facilities to provide services and programs funded with federal assistance from USDA without concealing, altering, or removing religious art, icons, scriptures, or other religious symbols; retain religious terms in its organization's name; select its board members and otherwise govern itself on a religious basis; and include religious references in its mission statements and other governing documents.
 - b. FBOs cannot be required to provide information to recipients about alternative service providers without imposing a similar requirement for secular organizations to provide such information to recipients.
 - c. To the greatest extent consistent with law and regulation, FBOs cannot be required to separate federally funded services to a different time or location from their other activities if secular organizations are not required to maintain such separation from their other activities in a similar manner. Of course, organizations may not impose requirements on the provision of federally funded services other than those mandated by law. Non-governmental providers of federally funded benefits administered by USDA may not coerce individuals to adopt or express adherence to any ideology or dogma, based on religion or not, to receive such benefits.
 - d. FBOs cannot be prohibited from providing informational materials sponsored by the FBO when offering services such as food boxes distributed in a USDA funded program if secular organizations are not prohibited from providing their sponsored materials.
 - e. Individuals employed by FBOs maintain their First Amendment rights and may not be required to alter their speech or conduct to participate in USDA programs.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Brooke L. Rollins". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "B" and "R".

Brooke L. Rollins

Secretary

U.S. Department of Agriculture