



Office of Legislative Corrections Ombudsman

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Religious Beliefs and Practices of Prisoners

The following information is based on Michigan Department of Corrections Policy Directive 05.03.150 “Religious Beliefs and Practices of Prisoners”.

General Information:

1. Religious freedom is a constitutionally guaranteed right. All recognized religions enjoy equal status and protection, subject to limitations necessary to maintain the order and security of the facility, including health and safety of prisoners and staff.
2. Proselytizing to a prisoner, by another prisoner or employee is prohibited, without that prisoner’s consent.
3. Prisoners—not including SAI prisoners—may maintain head and facial hair in accordance with religious beliefs, as long as proper hygiene is maintained and ID cards are kept current.
4. Prisoners may contribute funds to external religious organizations in accordance with PD 04.02.105 “Prisoner Funds.”
5. Chaplain Advisory Council (CAC): The CAC consists of representatives from various faiths and denominations and advises the MDOC regarding religious policy and programming. The CAC may assist in evaluating religious programming and the screening and selection of chaplains.
6. All prisoners will have access to an institutional chaplain. The MDOC must attempt to fill chaplaincy vacancies so as many religions may be represented as possible when facilities are within close proximity to one another.

MDOC Recognized Religious Groups:

1. Only those religions recognized by the MDOC may be allowed to conduct group religious services, attend group religious activities, and possess religious material other than reading materials.
2. Recognized groups include: Al-Islam (Muslim), Asatru/Odinism, Baha’i, Buddhism, The Church of Christ Scientist, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormonism), Church of Scientology, Hare Krishna, Institute of Divine Metaphysical Research, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Judaism, Moorish Science Temple of America, Nation of Islam, Native American, Orthodox Christian, Protestant Christianity, Roman Catholic, Seventh Day Adventist, and Wicca.

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3. A "Handbook on Religious Groups" is to be maintained by the Correctional Facilities Administration (CFA) Special Activities Director, which includes information on the beliefs, practices, and customs of each religious group. This handbook is available to all CFA institutions.
4. A prisoner or group of prisoners who belong to a religious group not currently recognized by the MDOC may submit a written request to have the religion recognized to the Warden, Field Operations Administration (FOA) Regional Administrator, or designee, as appropriate.
5. The Deputy Director will make the final decision on whether or not a religious group will be recognized by the MDOC and what religious property will be allowed.

Solicitation/Receipt of Funds:

1. Only those prisoners of a recognized religious group may solicit and collect funds for their group.
2. Recognized religious groups and their members are prohibited from charging or receiving donations or anything else of value from any prisoner.
3. Recognized religious groups may receive funds from the Prisoner Benefit Fund (PBF), in accordance with PD 04.02.110 "Prisoner Benefit Fund."
4. Funds from the PBF may be spent on the following, pursuant to approval from the Warden:
 - a. For special entertainment available to all general population prisoners.
 - b. To sponsor competitive events available to general population prisoners.
 - c. To contribute to a charitable organization.
 - d. To purchase items benefiting the religious group.
 - e. Other expenditures approved by the Warden (the purchasing of personal property, computer equipment, or food related items, is forbidden).
5. All funds collected by the religious group must be deposited directly into an institutional account created for each specific group.

Religious Services and Activities:

1. A prisoner cannot be restricted from joining and attending the services of a religious group based on their race, color, or nationality.
2. Information on religious activities is made available to each prisoner on a continual basis, as well as during orientation.
3. A prisoner may only belong to and participate in the religious services and/or activities of one religious group.
4. A Warden or FOA Regional Administrator may prohibit a religious activity or practice if it is a threat to custody and security.
5. Prisoners, regardless of qualifications, may never serve as clergy or religious leaders.
6. Special provisions for the observance of religious holidays or holy days will only be permitted as authorized and specifically provided for by MDOC policy.
7. Group services are offered at all CFA facilities for prisoners belonging to a recognized religious group if resources permit.
 - a. Services are not required if there are less than five prisoners within the same security level who actively participate in such services.

- b. Major faith groups within the same security level may be required to hold joint services i.e. one service for Christians, one for Muslims, etc.
 - c. All recognized religious groups will be allowed some opportunity for group services, although those religious groups with larger numbers may be granted more hours for such activities.
8. There will be at least one suitable area designated for conducting group religious services and activities within each CFA institution. Staff are allowed to supervise all activities, although they must be as respectful of religious practices as possible.
9. In level IV and V, religious activities and services must have continuous in-room staff supervision. Level I and level II activities and services will have random in-room supervision.
10. During services, prisoners may only engage in conduct appropriate to the practice of the religion.
 - a. Militaristic behavior (e.g., saluting or marching) is not permitted.
 - b. Prisoners cannot guard or control the entrances to the religious activities and services.
11. Prisoners may be released from work or school to attend group religious services and approved holy day observances, but will not be released to attend other religious activities.
12. The Warden, FOA Regional Administrator, or designee may restrict the size of the group attending the religious service.

Additional CFA Requirements:

1. Religious services and activities for prisoners in segregation is outlined in PD 04.05.120 "Segregation Standards".
2. The Warden may suspend religious services and activities if holding the service or activity would constitute a threat to the order and security of the institution.

Religious Materials:

1. Prisoners are allowed to receive religious reading material through the mail and from the chaplain, regardless of whether or not the material is from a recognized group.
2. Prisoners may possess religious reading and property in accordance with PD 04.07.112 "Prisoner Personal Property".
3. The CFA Deputy Director decides whether a religious item will be allowed, based on its relevance to the religion and potential security risk.
4. Prisoners may only purchase religious property from vendors authorized by the Warden.

Religious Menus/Meals:

1. Prisoners are allowed to abstain from food items that violate their religious tenets.
2. Department offers religious menu to meet religious dietary needs of prisoners.

3. A Vegan menu will be offered to meet religious dietary needs of prisoners and will comply with Kosher and Halal religious tenets.
4. A prisoner must obtain the approval of the CFA Special Activities Coordinator before eating from the Vegan menu.
5. A prisoner must notify the Warden if he/she no longer wants to eat from the religious menu.
6. A prisoner may be removed from a religious diet if s/he is found to have eaten an item that is prohibited by their religion or if they possess such an item.
7. Prisoners shall be allowed to participate in religious fasting if approved by the CFA Special Activities Coordinator.

Clergy and Religious Volunteers:

1. All prisoners have access to members of the clergy, even if those clergy are from a religious group that is unrecognized by the CFA.
2. Clergy and outreach volunteers shall be allowed to visit prisoners in accordance with PD 05.03.140 "Prisoner Visiting."
3. Clergy may bring up to 2 ounces of wine into the facility for liturgical use, although prisoners may not consume the wine.

Prisoner Marriages:

1. Prisoners may marry in accordance with State law.
2. CFA prisoners make their own marriage arrangements through clergy or an outside person who is legally authorized to perform marriage ceremonies.
3. Institutional chaplains may perform prisoner marriages or assist a prisoner in making arrangements.
4. Marriage ceremonies are subject to time and place limitations as directed by the Warden or appropriate FOA Manager.
5. Marriages of prisoners in level V or segregation may not exceed 10 minutes in length.
6. The attendance of a marriage may be limited as directed by the Warden or appropriate FOA manager.