



## OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR

### NEWS RELEASE

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### **Governor Propose Legislation to Establish New Jersey Religious Freedom Restoration Act**

Gov. Christie Whitman today underscored her support for the preservation of religious freedom for all New Jerseyans and announced her intention to propose legislation to establish a New Jersey Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA). The Governor announced that the administration will be crafting this legislation with Assembly Member Joel Weingarten and Assembly Speaker Jack Collins, who will serve as prime and co-prime sponsors of the legislation. Assembly Member Kevin O'Toole will also serve as a sponsor of the bill.

"Freedom of expression is a basic right in this country. State government should not have the power to substantially burden a person's right to exercise his or her religion," said Gov. Whitman. "The enactment of a law protecting religious freedom in the State of New Jersey is essential to preserving the cultural and religious practices that are so cherished by this state's residents."

In June, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled unconstitutional the federal version of RFRA, ruling that Congress does not have the power to restrict state and local laws. The decision left states with the option to adopt their own version of the law.

The Governor today announced that her administration plans to submit draft legislation to the Legislature that would establish a RFRA in New Jersey. The legislation will guarantee that state and local laws and ordinances will not substantially burden the free exercise of religion without compelling justification. The Governor will propose two exceptions: that the law not enable the use of dangerous controlled substances for religious purposes and not be extended to prison inmates.

The Governor made the announcement in response to concerns raised by a number of diverse religious groups from throughout the state. Religious leaders expressed concerns that the rights of their practicing members might be unfairly restricted following the federal ruling. For example, the Jewish community has expressed concern

that its members serving in the military might be restricted from wearing yarmulkes (skull caps), which hold significance in their religion.

The Governor asked that, upon submission of this bill, the Legislature support the bill to help ensure more immediate protection for the religious rights of New Jersey's citizens.

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