

Under pressure, D.C. shelter ends church-service requirement

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WASHINGTON (RNS) Prompted by civil liberties groups, a taxpayer-supported homeless shelter in the nation's capital will no longer require its clients to attend religious services.

"We're pleased that the D.C. government will no longer be supporting such religious coercion," said Arthur Spitzer, legal director of the Washington, D.C., branch of the American Civil Liberties Union.

The ACLU filed suit after officials struck a \$12 million deal to support programs at Central Union Mission, which at that time required the homeless to attend Christian services as a condition of getting food and shelter.

The ACLU and Americans United for Separation of Church and State sued on behalf of several D.C. taxpayers, clergy and homeless men.

The deal was abandoned and now the mission will instead lease a school building from the district for \$1 a year.

The lease prohibits Central Union Mission from requiring any individual seeking its services to "participate in religious services or religious studies as a condition to receiving any service."

Because of these changes, the ACLU and AU dropped the lawsuit Thursday (Oct. 13).

Daniel Mach, the ACLU's program director for religious freedom, said the new agreement is "much better," but "the long-term lease continues to present constitutional concerns."

Alex J. Luchenitser, senior litigation counsel for AU, warned that the mission must not provide "favorable treatment" to homeless persons who volunteer for religious programming.

"If the mission does so," he said, "we could end up back in court in short order."