

**National Council of Jewish Women Testimony
House Select Subcommittee on the Coronavirus Pandemic
“Churches vs. Casinos: The Constitution is not Suspended in Times of Crisis”
June 21, 2023**

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National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW) is a grassroots organization of 210,000 volunteers and advocates who turn progressive ideals into action. Inspired by Jewish values, NCJW strives for social justice by improving the quality of life for women, children, and families and by safeguarding individual rights and freedoms. We are driven by our Jewish values: *b'tzelem Elohim*, we are all created in G-d's image; *kavod ha bri'ot*, respect and dignity for all; and *tzedek tirdof*, the pursuit of justice. These values inform our work and inspire our efforts.

NCJW believes religious liberty and the separation of religion and state are key constitutional principles that protect our rights in a democratic society. The United States was founded on the principle of freedom of religion, as well as freedom from religion; many came to this country fleeing religious persecution, and religion has flourished in the US — particularly minority religions like ours — precisely because of the wall separating religion and state.

Thus, we found the proliferation of state efforts seeking exemptions for houses of worship and religious gatherings from the reach of regulations and emergency orders related to the COVID-19 pandemic misguided and concerning. As a faith-based organization, we appreciate the desire to protect our right to worship and gather for religious activities. However, exercising our religious values does not supersede the health mandates of public officials who are working to cultivate evidence-based, scientific responses to unforeseen circumstances, such as pandemics, natural disasters, and other emergencies. Indeed, NCJW advocates for health services based on full and unbiased medically accurate information supported by inclusionary and scientific research. Exempting religious groups from future emergency orders not only violates our work but could negatively impact religious communities, an acute public health situation, and the greater public good. Faith communities should be part of the solution, not the problem.

Religious communities found creative ways to provide opportunities for worship during the pandemic. We must continue to listen to medical and public health professionals and acknowledge the importance of social distancing measures and regulated gatherings in protecting public health. NCJW looks forward to working with the Committee, religious and secular communities, and medical officials to balance religions-state separation concerns while taking proactive steps to keep ourselves, and the broader community, safe. Thank you.