

WORKPLACE ISSUES

EEOC FOCUSES ON RELIGIOUS ACCOMMODATIONS, BIAS

THE U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has stepped up enforcement actions tied to religious rights in the workplace, reflecting a broader federal focus on preventing religious bias and ensuring accommodations for workers of faith.

This year, the EEOC has issued appellate decisions, filed lawsuits and settled cases that highlight employers' obligations under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. The law bars religious discrimination and requires reasonable accommodation for religious practices unless doing so would create undue hardship.

At the same time, the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) has issued memos on religious accommodations and religious expression in federal workplaces. This could be a precursor to the EEOC adopting similar guidance for private employers.

Here's a look at the rapid-fire changes and how employers need to tread carefully to ensure proper treatment of this protected class.

Growing enforcement actions

A number of new cases highlight the EEOC's stance that employers must engage in a good-faith dialogue with workers requesting accommodation. The agency recently publicized two appellate decisions:

Augustine V. v. Department of Veterans Affairs – The agency found that a Muslim physician should have been allowed time off to attend weekly prayers.

Andy B. v. Federal Reserve Board of Governors – The EEOC concluded that the Federal Reserve should have granted a Christian law enforcement officer's request for a religious exemption after requiring staff to get inoculated with the COVID-19 vaccine to continue working.

Other cases show the range of issues arising in workplaces:

- A Washington staffing firm agreed to pay \$217,500 after declining to hire a Muslim applicant who asked about attending Friday prayer.
- A North Carolina dental practice settled for \$61,000 after refusing to allow an employee to wear a skirt over her pants, in line with her beliefs.
- The EEOC sued a hotel for religious discrimination and retaliation, alleging that when an employee requested scheduling accommodation due to his religious beliefs, the hotel denied the request and reduced his working hours.

Federal workplace rules could spill into private sector

In July 2025, the OPM sent out a memo instructing federal agencies to take a "generous approach" to approving religious accommodations, citing examples such as flexible schedules, prayer breaks, telework and dress-code adjustments.

A follow-up memo emphasized that employees must be allowed to engage in private religious expression in the workplace — including prayer groups, religious conversations during breaks and displaying religious materials — unless those activities interfere with business operations.



While these memos apply only to federal agencies, attorneys note they may foreshadow future EEOC guidance for private employers.

What employers should do

Employment attorneys caution that employers who mishandle accommodation requests face a growing risk of EEOC action or private lawsuits. Here are steps employers can take:

- **Take requests seriously.** Requests should trigger a documented, interactive process.
- **Review policies.** Ensure handbooks and procedures include clear language on religious accommodations and anti-discrimination protections.
- **Train managers and supervisors.** Understand your obligations under Title VII and know how to recognize when religious accommodation may be required.
- **Apply the "substantial burden" standard.** Do not deny accommodation unless you can demonstrate a substantial burden, supported by evidence of significant cost or operational impact.
- **Avoid retaliation.** Ensure workers who request accommodation are not penalized.
- **Purchase employment practices liability insurance.** This coverage can help pay for discrimination or accommodation lawsuits, including attorneys' fees, court costs, settlements and judgments.

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