

WHAT DOES THE LEGAL DEPARTMENT OF THE ACLU DO?

The ACLU Legal Department is not a legal aid services organization, like the Public Defender's Office or neighborhood legal services that provide legal service to low-income individuals. The central goal of our litigation program is to bring selected impact cases to defend and promote the fundamental guarantees of individual liberties protected by the federal and state constitutions. Our primary areas of involvement cover the broad range of First Amendment issues, as well as focusing on the guarantees of privacy, equal protection, and due process of law. Our priority areas include discrimination against racial and language minorities, lesbian and gay rights, AIDS, immigrants' rights, criminal justice, and student issues.

WHAT TYPES OF CASES DOES THE ACLU HANDLE?

The ACLU generally uses the following criteria for evaluating a complaint:

1. *Does the complaint involve a significant civil liberties or civil rights issue?* Civil liberties include freedom of speech, press, religion, and association; due process; equal protection; and privacy. Civil rights include voting rights, discrimination based on disability, race, sex, sexual orientation, religion or national origin, police reform language rights, racial justice, post 9/11 backlash, and worker's rights.
2. *Would the case be high impact?* High impact means would it effect more people than just the complainant. For example, we sometimes challenge a policy or practice that directly impacts many people. If we brought a lawsuit against the state for teaching religion in school as a portion of an abstinence-only program, it would affect thousands of school-aged children. Another way a case can affect many people is if a lawsuit establishes or expands legal protections. For example, a lawsuit recognizing a same-sex couple's right to adopt could set a precedent for thousands of would-be parents in the future.
3. *Do we have the necessary resources to take on the case or would the case involve serious factual disputes?* Because we do not have independent investigative resources, cases that require complex factual investigation in order to

clearly present civil liberties issues are generally disfavored.

WHAT REGION DOES THE ACLU OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA COVER?

Our office accepts complaints regarding incidents that occurred in Northern California only. This is the area that reaches north from Del Norte and Modoc counties and south from Monterey to Inyo Counties. (Alameda, Alpine, Amador, Butte, Calaveras, Colusa, Contra Costa, Del Norte, El Dorado, Fresno, Glenn, Humboldt, Inyo, Kings, Lake, Lassen, Madera, Marin, Mariposa, Mendocino, Merced, Modoc, Mono, Monterey, Napa, Nevada, Placer, Plumas, Sacramento, San Benito, San Francisco, San Joaquin, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, Shasta, Sierra, Siskiyou, Solano, Sonoma, Stanislaus, Sutter, Tehame, Trinity, Tulare, Tuolumne, Visalia, Yuba, and Yolo counties.)

If you live in Southern California (San Luis Obispo, Kern, Santa Barbara, Ventura, Los Angeles, San Bernadino, Orange or Riverside Counties) you should direct your complaint to the [ACLU of Southern California](#). If you live in San Diego or Imperial County, please contact [The ACLU of San Diego](#) and Imperial Counties.

If the incident you wish to file a complaint about occurred in a state other than California, please go to our [National website](#) at <http://aclu.org>, and find the appropriate State affiliate there.

HOW TO FILE A REQUEST WITH THE ACLU OF NORTHERN CALIFORNIA:

Intake Procedure:

1. You can call our civil liberties hotline. Volunteer counselors staff the ACLU civil liberties desk. They are not lawyers but are trained to pre-screen intakes. They cannot give legal advice to you, nor can they refer you to an individual private attorney. They can, however, bring your request to the attention of an attorney for review, or give you an appropriate referral to another agency. Callers can reach the civil liberties hotline at (415) 621-2488.

Monday 10am-12pm and 1pm-3pm
Tuesday 10am-12pm and 1pm-3pm

Wednesday 10am-12pm and 1pm-2pm
Thursday 10am-12pm and 1pm-3pm
Friday 10am-12pm and 1pm-3pm

2. You can write to us. The ACLU also accepts written letters as intakes. Please do not send documents, and try to limit letters to one page. If we need more information, we will contact you. The address is:

Intake
ACLU of Northern California
39 Drumm Street
San Francisco, CA 94111

Walk-ins are not seen; they are asked to call the complaint line or write to us.

We will let you know as soon as possible if we can assist you in your case. However, because of limited resources, there may be a delay in getting back to you (please review the section about deadlines below).

IF THE ACLU ACCEPTS MY CASE, WHAT WILL IT COST?

Attorneys represent ACLU clients free of charge. ACLU staff counsel litigates our cases. Our attorneys sometimes work together with attorneys in private practice who volunteer their time for ACLU cases.

WHY DOES THE ACLU TURN DOWN CASES THAT FALL WITHIN THE GUIDELINES?

Unfortunately, there are many cases that involve unfairness and injustice that the ACLU is simply unable to handle. We receive thousands of requests for help a year at this office alone. Therefore, we cannot accept each case that may fall within the guidelines discussed above. If we do not accept your case, that does not mean it does not have merit, and you may still want to consider pursuing it with a private attorney or another legal organization.

CAN THE ACLU ADVISE ME ABOUT MY CASE?

If we do not accept your case, the ACLU is generally unable to provide legal advice, answer legal questions, or to conduct legal research to assist you in your case. However, we may be able to refer you to an organization that will be better able to help you with your complaint.

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