



## LIBERTY JUSTICE CENTER

**PRESS RELEASE from the  
LIBERTY JUSTICE CENTER**

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### **Nonpartisan advocacy groups challenge Rhode Island disclosure laws for violating free speech, privacy rights**

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (Nov. 21, 2019) – Today two issue advocacy groups filed a federal lawsuit challenging Rhode Island’s stringent donor disclosure law which limits free speech and privacy rights, and puts at risk the individuals who support advocacy organizations.

Every American should feel free to speak out and support causes they believe in, without fear of retribution or retaliation. But in Rhode Island, speaking up comes at a price: your privacy.

State law requires anyone who donates more than \$1,000 to a nonpartisan, issue advocacy group to be reported to the government if the group engages in advocacy at certain times of the year. The supporter’s name, job title, employer, home address and donation amount are posted to a government website for public viewing. This makes someone who supports an unpopular or controversial idea susceptible to retaliation or harassment. The only way for individuals to avoid their donations and personal information being publicized is to not donate or to limit their financial support. When issue advocacy organizations publicize the issues they support, they must list the names of their top five financial supporters on any marketing or messages in the weeks leading up to an election or referenda – regardless of whether these individuals support that particular position or want their name to be publicized.

These are among the most stringent, invasive disclosure requirements in America – and they violate Americans’ rights to free speech and privacy. That’s why two 501(c)4 organizations, the Rhode Island-based The Gaspee Project and the Illinois Opportunity Project, have filed a lawsuit that seeks to strike down this unconstitutional law. The lawsuit is *The Gaspee Project et al. v. Mederos et al.* The organizations are represented by attorneys from the Liberty Justice Center, best known for its 2018 Supreme Court win in the case *Janus v. AFSCME*.

“The sole purpose of this law is to name and shame individuals who support different viewpoints – or worse, intimidate people into staying silent and not advocating for causes they believe in because they are too afraid of what could happen if they speak up,” said **Patrick Hughes, president and co-founder of the Liberty Justice Center**. “Our country was founded by people who banded together to speak out against powerful, entrenched political interests. But in supporting this law, today’s politicians seek to silence everyday Americans and stifle free speech. This law amounts to state-sanctioned bullying, and we will do everything we can to see it struck down.”

In such politically charged times, the First Amendment is an essential protection for the principle that it’s the ideas and issues themselves that matter, not the individuals who choose to financially support them. Illinois Opportunity Project plans to engage in issue advocacy in Rhode Island prior to the 2020 legislative election, but its speech will be unconstitutionally chilled if its supporters must disclose their donations.

“Freedom of speech has been a core value of our democracy since our country’s inception,” said **Matthew Besler, president of the Illinois Opportunity Project**. “All Americans have the right to privacy and should be free to support causes they believe in without the fear of possible harassment. We oppose any efforts to deter individuals from voicing their opinions and will continue to fight so individuals can participate in public discourse without fear of retaliation.”

*The Gaspee Project et al. v. Mederos et al.* was filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Rhode Island. The next step in the case is service of process, after which, the defendant members of the Elections Board have up to 60 days to respond to the lawsuit. The case is available here: <https://libertyjusticecenter.org/cases/gaspee-project-v-mederos>

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The Liberty Justice Center is a nonprofit, nonpartisan public-interest litigation center that was founded to fight against political privilege. The most notable example of the Liberty Justice Center's success in this arena is its 2018 U.S. Supreme Court victory in *Janus v. AFSCME*. Beyond its work in the *Janus* case, the Liberty Justice Center's team of talented, liberty-minded attorneys are also fighting to protect economic liberty, private property rights, free speech and other fundamental rights. The Liberty Justice Center pursues its goals through strategic, precedent-setting litigation to revitalize constitutional restraints on government power and protections for individual rights. Learn more about the Liberty Justice Center at [LibertyJusticeCenter.org](https://LibertyJusticeCenter.org).