

Police Take 'Constitution 101' Class After Wrongful Pro-Lifer Arrests

State police will no longer illegally arrest and silence pro-life advocates in Maryland. What's more, police will participate in training on constitutionally protected rights. It's all part of a settlement the state has reached with a group of pro-life advocates.

The Maryland Board of Public Works voted Wednesday to settle a lawsuit filed by Alliance Defense Fund (ADF) attorneys on behalf of **pro-life advocates** who had been censored and arrested for peacefully sharing their message on public property in Harford County in 2008.

"Pro-life advocates shouldn't be silenced and arrested for peacefully speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves," says ADF Senior Counsel Kevin Theriot. "The state is doing the right thing in agreeing to respect their constitutionally protected rights and to make sure officers fully understand these important freedoms. **Pro-life speech** cannot be censored through unwarranted arrests and illegal orders to disperse."

Most of the 18 people arrested were jailed overnight, and several teenage girls in the group were strip-searched by county detention officers. Harford County settled its part of the lawsuit in March of last year, agreeing to a policy change to ensure that peaceful protesters will be protected from undergoing such searches at the county detention center.

Under the terms of the settlement, Maryland State Police cannot issue countywide dispersal orders against peaceful pro-life speakers, cannot illegally arrest pro-life speakers who are exercising their constitutionally protected free speech

and assembly rights, must provide acceptable reasons for asking any speakers to move, must provide speakers with the opportunity to move before threatening anyone with arrest, cannot censor constitutionally protected messages and images on signs, and must participate in training on rights protected by the First and Fourth amendments to the U.S. Constitution. The settlement also requires the state to pay for the pro-life advocates' attorneys' fees.

The case began in 2008 when at least 12 state and municipal police officers handcuffed 18 participants in Defend Life's annual "Face the Truth" Pro-Life Tour. The participants started their peaceful event along a public road in Harford County. Later, however, the group relocated several miles away to public property in the town of Bel Air, near where they had been several times in past tours. They moved because state troopers ordered them to leave the county for not having a county permit to engage in free speech activities, even though the county does not have any such permit requirement. Despite that, the officers later arrested the participants in Bel Air for failing to obey the countywide order to disperse.