

Church-State Debate Surfaces in Hurricane Harvey's Wake

"Hurricane Harvey didn't cherry pick its victims, and FEMA shouldn't cherry pick who it helps," Washington, D.C. attorney Diana Verm **told the Houston Chronicle** this week.

In a post on the website of **Androvett Legal Media & Marketing**, Verm, who specializes in religious liberty cases, is representing three small Texas churches who recently sued the Federal Emergency Management Agency, alleging the government's disaster relief policy violates the Constitution by denying faith groups the right to apply for funds.

Texas nonprofits that sustained damage by the Category 4 hurricane have 30 days to apply for emergency cleanup grants. The Houston-area churches maintain they should be eligible since they have and continue to support victims of the devastating storm.

David Coale, a Dallas appellate attorney who specializes in constitutional cases, says the complaint by the Rockport First Assembly of God in Aransas County, Harvest Family Church in Harris County and Hi-Way Tabernacle in Liberty County goes a step farther than previous similar cases by moving beyond exterior structures and building repairs into providing personal services.

"On its face it's a reasonable request – it's a disaster and they need all the help they can get," Coale, a partner with **Lynn Pinker Cox Hurst**, told the newspaper. "On the other hand, we are talking about giving people money to offer a place to sleep. There is stuff up in the church about religion and there will be people in the church providing a little bit of ministry."

The Texas case comes three months after a U.S. Supreme Court

ruling that prohibited government discrimination against a Missouri church that had applied for funding for playground equipment.

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