



The ACLU of Florida: Who We Are, What We Do

What is the ACLU?

The American Civil Liberties Union is a nationwide nonprofit organization of about 400,000 members and supporters. There is a headquarters office in New York and a legislative office in Washington, DC.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Florida is the state affiliate of the national ACLU. We have nearly 26,000 members and supporters. The state office is in downtown Miami, and there are four other regional offices in Melbourne, Pensacola, Tallahassee and Tampa. The ACLU of Florida affiliate has 16 volunteer-run chapters in communities across the state, including a newly-formed chapter in the Florida Keys.

When did the ACLU begin?

The ACLU was founded in 1920 by people who believed that the Bill of Rights was only a piece of paper unless there was a citizen watchdog group seeking to have it enforced. The ACLU of Florida was founded in 1965 (and the Greater Miami Chapter of the ACLU was founded in 1955) in an effort to protect the constitutional rights of all Floridians.

What is the ACLU's purpose?

The ACLU seeks to defend and extend individual freedoms guaranteed by the Bill of Rights. These include:

- Freedom of speech, assembly and religion
- Separation of church and state
- Due process
- Equal protection under the law for all people
- Reproductive rights
- Freedom from unreasonable search and seizure
- Fair treatment by government

What does the ACLU do?

The ACLU pursues its work in three main areas:

- 1) **Litigation** - Filing lawsuits in federal and state courts. The ACLU of Florida has four full-time staff attorneys (including one legislative staff counsel). We also rely on the volunteer efforts of several hundred attorneys around the state.
- 2) **Legislative Work** - Mobilizing citizens to support pro-civil liberties laws – and oppose anti-civil liberties laws – in the state legislature and local governments. The ACLU of Florida has a full-time legislative staff counsel who serves as our lobbyist in Tallahassee. The ACLU is nonpartisan, though, and does not endorse political candidates. We do support ballot initiatives that support civil liberties.
- 3) **Public Education** - Providing information to the public about citizen rights and what the ACLU is doing to promote them. The ACLU issues press releases, has a speakers bureau, publishes a newsletter and numerous

pamphlets, and sponsors public forums and special events. The ACLU of Florida office has an extensive resource center available to the general public and students.

Where do ACLU policies come from?

The ACLU has developed policies on a myriad of issues. An 80-member national board of directors decides on many of the organizations policies. Policies for state ACLU's generally are the same as national's but occasionally differ; "Unity but not uniformity" is the watchword. The state board of directors sets policies for the ACLU of Florida. On a day-to-day basis, the staff takes the lead in implementing policies.

How does the ACLU decide to take legal cases?

Most cases come from citizens who contact the State Office in Miami where volunteers advise citizens who feel their rights have been violated. Some cases come from complaints presented to the Chapter Legal Panels, while other cases come from attorneys who approach the ACLU for assistance.

Potential cases are assigned to our staff attorneys or volunteer attorneys for research and legal analysis. A Legal Panel – either at the state or chapter level – comprised of volunteer ACLU attorneys decides which cases should be accepted, subject to ratification by the ACLU of Florida Board of Directors. Emergency authorization to sue may be given by the board president when time is limited.

Where does the ACLU get its money?

Almost totally from its members. The ACLU receives no government funding. We rely on membership dues, tax-deductible contributions and occasional fees from legal cases.

What is the ACLU doing these days?

The ACLU is usually involved in numerous issues, ranging from fighting for gay equality and defending reproductive freedom to combating police misconduct and opposing censorship of the arts. Our newsletter, *The Torch*, is the best source of news about our activities. The ACLU of Florida web site (www.aclufl.org) also has timely, up-to-date information on our most recent activities.

Does the ACLU use volunteers who are not lawyers?

Yes; in many ways – for help in the office, assisting at special events, participating in our legislative campaigns, as speakers for schools and community groups. Anyone wanting to help out should fill out a volunteer information sheet and send it to the state office.

How does one become an ACLU member?

Anyone can join, and member ship dues are only \$20 a year, \$30 dollars for couples. Simply fill out a membership form and mail a check to: ACLU-FL, 4500 Biscayne Blvd., Suite 340, Miami, FL 33137.

**ACLU of Florida
4500 Biscayne Blvd. • Suite 340 • Miami FL 33137**