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SOCCER ATHLETES FILE FEDERAL CIVIL RIGHTS LAWSUIT AGAINST WESTERN MICHIGAN UNIVERSITY

Lansing, Michigan – The Great Lakes Justice Center (GLJC), on behalf of four top WMU soccer athletes, filed a federal civil rights lawsuit in Grand Rapids today against Western Michigan University (WMU). The suit challenges WMU’s unlawful denial of their request for religious freedom from the college’s vaccine mandate to participate in sports. All four athletes are on scholarship and include two team captains. WMU recently instituted a requirement for all its athletes in all sports to take the Covid-19 vaccine or forfeit their right to play intercollegiate sports. No similar vaccine requirement exists for any other students at WMU. Other universities, including MSU and U of M, are granting religious accommodations to athletes.

The students were provided the opportunity to request religious accommodations on August 24, 2021, and they immediately filed their requests. WMU denied all requests. Their requests to appeal the exemption denials were rebuffed by WMU on August 26, 2021. WMU stated that the student athletes must be vaccinated by August 31, 2021. All four students agreed to wear masks and to be regularly tested for the virus. That was not acceptable to WMU. If the students are not vaccinated by August 31st, they will be kicked off the soccer team. The students are requesting injunctive relief to allow them to remain on their team while litigation is pending. The Complaint alleges:

- 1. Violation of Plaintiffs’ Constitutional Right to Free Exercise of Religion.**
- 2. Violation of Plaintiffs’ Constitutional Right to Privacy, Bodily Integrity, and to make Personal Medical Decisions.**
- 3. Violation of Plaintiffs’ Federal & State Statutory Right to be free of Religious Discrimination.**

The student athletes will specifically allege:

- The Constitution does not allow WMU to deny their First Amendment rights and force them to accept an invasive medical injection against their sincerely held religious beliefs. The Constitution does not become irrelevant or inapplicable during a pandemic.
- They have a right to privacy, bodily integrity, and personal autonomy. The government should honor a decision made according to sincerely held religious beliefs, especially when the students have agreed to other protective measures like weekly testing and masking. Every person has a right to refuse medical treatment.
- Violation of their statutory right to be free from religious discrimination under both Federal law and Michigan’s Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act.

David A. Kallman, Senior Counsel with GLJC, stated, “WMU should acknowledge and support our clients’ sincere religious beliefs and personal medical decisions. The science and data does not support this action or treating the unvaccinated as second class citizens.” Professor William Wagner, President of GLJC said, “The abuse of power by government authorities at WMU stops at the Constitution...and it stops today.” The Complaint is posted at the Great Lakes website at www.greatlakesjc.org/cases/dahl_v_wmu/.

The Great Lakes Justice Center is a non-profit organization dealing with First Amendment liberties and other civil rights issues. The attorneys at the center have spent countless hours to protect its client’s constitutional freedoms and are grateful to minister to such important causes. To support the Great Lakes Justice Center’s important work to protect our nation’s first freedoms, please visit them at www.greatlakesjc.org.