

Riverside Nurses Challenge Blanket Denial Of Conscience Exemptions From Vaccine Mandate In New Lawsuit

October 15 2021 10:14 AM



KANKAKEE — Six nurses employed by Riverside Healthcare in Kankakee are fighting for their jobs after being told they would be fired for not receiving the COVID-19 vaccine. The healthcare system recently announced a blanket rejection of any and all exemption requests, in violation of the Illinois Health Care Right of Conscience Act and

Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker's executive order. The nurses filed a lawsuit in Circuit Court for the Twenty-First Circuit in Kankakee County, Illinois, with help from attorneys at the Liberty Justice Center, a national nonprofit law firm.

"These nurses worked throughout the pandemic, putting their lives and their families' lives on the line. They were celebrated as 'essential workers' and 'heroes' for their courage – and rightly so. And now, 20 months into the pandemic, Riverside Healthcare is showing them the door unless they violate their religious beliefs and their conscience," said Daniel Suhr, managing attorney at the Liberty Justice Center. "This is a ruthless overreach aimed at coercing front-line workers to do something they sincerely believe is wrong. These nurses know the virus better than anyone and are making a deeply personal, individual choice that should be respected. Not only is that the right thing to do, but it's Illinois law."

The Liberty Justice Center is representing Neelie Panozzo, a nurse practitioner who has been serving patients for over 24 years, and four other nurses at Riverside who have been told they will be terminated on October 31 for their conscientious refusal to receive the COVID-19 vaccine. LJC also represents Amy Memenga, a nurse and employee of Riverside for over 25 years who was fired in September. Riverside recently announced it would deny all religious and conscience exemptions.

"I have dedicated my life to living out my faith by serving my patients," said Neelie Panozzo, a nurse practitioner. "I believe I am called to love and serve my patients, especially those who are frail and vulnerable. I am also following my faith's teachings when I say I cannot accept this vaccine. I am ashamed that Riverside will not respect my sincere beliefs and instead insists on firing all of its employees who sought conscience protections."

The Illinois Health Care Rights of Conscience Act was first adopted in 1977 to protect physicians, pharmacists, and other health care providers who could be asked to compromise their conscience in the course of practicing their professions.

Panozzo v. Riverside Healthcare was filed October 13, 2021, in Circuit Court for the Twenty-First Circuit in Kankakee County, Illinois. Case filings are available here: <https://libertyjusticecenter.org/media/illinois-religious-exemption>

The Liberty Justice Center is a nonprofit, public-interest litigation center that fights to protect school choice and fundamental constitutional rights. The Liberty Justice Center is best known for its 2018 U.S. Supreme Court victory in Janus v. AFSCME. Learn more about the Liberty Justice Center at LibertyJusticeCenter.org.