

Court: Jehovah's Witnesses need better access to homes

by [Adelle M. Banks](#)

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(RNS) A federal appeals court ruled Monday (Feb. 7) that a Puerto Rican law intended to keep neighborhoods safe from crime has been used unfairly to breach the free speech rights of Jehovah's Witnesses.

The law allows homeowners' associations to control pedestrian and vehicular traffic on residential streets. But Jehovah's Witnesses, who consider it a religious duty to conduct door-to-door proselytizing on foot, say they were denied access by security guards or could not enter unmanned, locked gates in the vast majority of neighborhoods.

"The record indicates that the regime as administered does bear unreasonably on Jehovah's Witnesses' access to public streets," the court ruled.

Calling the case "novel and difficult," the court sent the case back to a lower court and said "fine tuning" of the administration of the law is required.

The American Civil Liberties Union, which filed a brief opposing the law, hailed the decision.

"The Constitution surely protects the right of the Jehovah's Witnesses to proclaim their faith on public streets," said Daniel Mach,

director of the ACLU's Program on Freedom of Religion and Belief. "The government cannot impose sweeping restrictions on the fundamental rights to free worship and speech."