

Religious Freedom Center plans relocation, expanded programming

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [January 15, 2020](#) issue



The Newseum in Washington closed on December 31, 2019. (Photo by Maria Bryk/Newseum)

With the closing of the Newseum on December 31, the nation’s capital has one less museum, but the Religious Freedom Center that was housed there will continue operations.

Gene Policinski, chief operating officer of the Freedom Forum Institute, which includes the center among its projects, said the building has not been the core of his institute’s operations, which occur more in other locations and online.

“We’re headquartered here; obviously, it’s a marvelous asset, and we use the meeting rooms and the conference center,” he said of the building the institute shared with the Newseum, its partner. “But when we relocate our administrative

offices later in 2020, those programs simply move to where we now will be.”

The institute’s religious liberty programming—long led by recently retired scholar Charles Haynes—dates to the 1990s, when the Newseum was housed across the Potomac River in Rosslyn, Virginia. It moved to the Pennsylvania Avenue location in 2008 when the Newseum moved.

The Newseum, a seven-level museum about the free press and the First Amendment, announced it was closing earlier this year and has said “remaining in the current location has proved to be financially unsustainable.” Newseum spokeswoman Sonya Gavankar said the museum hopes to find a new location, “but that process will take time.”

The offices of the institute, including the Religious Freedom Center, will move less than a mile from the building on Pennsylvania Avenue with a terrace view of the US Capitol. Its leaders have secured a two-year lease at 300 New Jersey Avenue NW.

The institute includes the First Amendment Center and initiatives related to education, diversity, and workplace integrity training, such as the Power Shift Project which helps the media industry address issues of sexual harassment.

As they head to a new temporary location, Religious Freedom Center staffers will be working to expand some of its newer initiatives. In January 2020, it will host a weeklong intensive course on religious freedom for students from African American theological institutions at local churches and seminaries. A portion of the first offering of the course for black seminarians was held at the Newseum in January 2019.

Policinski said the center is making plans to expand a training program for business executives that will include webinars and in-person sessions; the program was piloted at firms such as Accenture, a professional services company, and Schreiber Foods, a Wisconsin dairy company. He said he hopes the center can help businesses navigate issues of health care and family planning services and address religious objections that could arise over transgender bathrooms.

“We feel very strongly that another area, unfortunately, of contention will be, as we increase in diversity and awareness of diversity of religion in the workplace, issues around religious holidays and religious observance in the workplace itself,” he said.

Richard Foltin, a senior scholar at the center and a member of the board of the Inter Jewish Muslim Alliance, said there are additional plans for interreligious gatherings as well as others.

“One of the important things the Religious Freedom Center does is convene a Committee on Religious Liberty that brings together advocates and experts on church-state relations from a broad range of religious communities, from a broad range of political perspectives,” he said. “That work is going to continue as well.”
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