

NOW LEGAL SPEECH IN MICHIGAN: “COLD AND HUNGRY, GOD BLESS”

On July 4 of last year, Grand Rapids cops arrested Air Force veteran Ernest Sims for asking a passerby “Can you spare a little change?” Two days earlier, James Speet was also arrested, for holding a sign that read, “Need Job, God Bless.” Seven months earlier, Speet was arrested and jailed for holding a sign that read, “Cold and Hungry, God Bless.”

On Friday, a Grand Rapids judge, Robert Jonker, ruled those arrests—and the MI law on which they were based—unconstitutional.

While I’m grateful that it is now legal to hold a sign in MI asking for work, I’m still appalled that a judge had to point out the problem with this logic to MI’s Attorney General, Bill Schuette.

The State of Michigan and the City of Grand Rapids (collectively, the “government”) assert that Michigan’s statutory ban on public begging is constitutional on its face, and they emphasize that the statute serves several desirable purposes. According to the government, the ban helps businesses, because the presence of people begging in or near business establishments may deter others from patronizing those businesses. The government also emphasizes that the ban on begging helps prevent fraud, because beggars may not use the contributions for the purposes donors intend. Indeed, the government observes, some beggars may use such contributions for alcohol and illegal drugs. The government also points out that begging can be intimidating or annoying to others and that the ban helps protect the public

from harassment.

Because God forbid a man hurt someone's business by holding a sign asking for work.