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Rehab center wins \$1M over Metro zoning change

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An attorney for a youth rehabilitation center that won a nearly \$1 million judgment against Metro Nashville said the ruling shows cities can't discriminate against religious organizations or those that house people with disabilities.

A federal jury on Wednesday ordered Metro to pay \$967,995 to Teen Challenge, which wanted to build a drug and alcohol rehab center on 13 acres in Goodlettsville. After the Christian organization bought the property, the Metro Council changed its zoning laws in February 2007 to eliminate rehabilitation services as a permitted use in agricultural and low-density residential districts

Under the federal Fair Housing Act, Teen Challenge's 18-and-older clients are considered disabled because they're addicted to drugs or alcohol.

"You have to reasonably accommodate them," said Larry Crain, an attorney for Teen Challenge at the American Center for Law & Justice. "(Metro) did just the opposite. They went out of their way to make sure they weren't accommodated."

Teen Challenge filed suit in June 2007. The council reversed itself earlier this year on the advice of city attorneys.

"As a government, we need to treat these issues seriously," Metro Law Director Sue Cain said in a statement. "We are pleased that the Council reversed the zoning change. The Department of Law will review the judgment in the coming days and determine whether it is in the best interests of the Metropolitan Government to take further legal action."

Metro Councilman Rip Ryman, who represents Goodlettsville, said he wasn't surprised by the verdict. But he said he didn't regret taking action to keep Teen Challenge out of his district as he was seeking re-election last year.

"I thought it was the right thing to do," Ryman said. "It was what everybody out here wanted. When you're running for office, you've got to listen to your constituents."

Teen Challenge initially sought \$500,000 in damages. Three other plaintiffs, identified as Jessica A., Nikki C. and Ben C., each sought \$50,000 in damages; Nikki C.'s complaint was dismissed, but Crain said he hopes it will be reinstated.

Crain said the damages increased by more than 90 percent to account for "the loss of future revenue" and other losses the nonprofit sustained from having to auction the Goodlettsville property and rent properties it had previously sold.

