



DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS
Under Secretary for Health
Washington DC 20420

October 3, 2014

The Honorable Robert E. Latta
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Latta:

Thank you for your cosigned letter to the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) regarding VA policy that chapels remain open and accommodating to all those seeking to exercise their religious freedoms. I am responding on behalf of the Department, and I regret the delay.

VA first established its religious neutrality guidance shortly after the Chaplain Service was established in 1945. Since then, VA has instituted a series of policy documents that have included religious neutrality within VA Chapels. The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Handbook 1111.02, Spiritual and Pastoral Care Procedures, first published in 2005 and reissued in 2008, is the current version of this guidance.

VA chapels vary greatly as do the religious beliefs and practices of the Veterans we serve. Local decisions about the use and display of religious items in chapels are made by chaplains based on their professional expertise and knowledge of their communities.

It is important for the chapel to be maintained with religious neutrality when not in use by a particular faith group, so that it is available at all times for persons of any faith group. It would be impractical to allow religious symbols and furnishings to be displayed and then have to remove or cover them each time an individual of a different faith group wishes to use the chapel.

Every Veteran, regardless of his or her faith tradition, must feel welcome to enter a VA chapel when it is not in use. The permanent presence of religious symbols or furnishings in the VA chapel would preclude its use by members of certain faith groups. For example, both Judaism and Islamic religions prohibit worshiping in a space that has symbols of any other religion. Furthermore, the presence of religious symbols of a particular faith group might discourage persons from using the chapel even if their particular faith orientation does not preclude them from doing so.

VHA Handbook 1111.02 recognizes that there are numerous VA chapels for specific faith groups that were built before 1945 when the VA Chaplain Service was established. VA recognizes the historic nature of these chapels and the context in which they were built; therefore, exceptions are available to VA medical centers (VAMC) whose chapels were built with permanent religious symbols in the walls or windows

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before establishment of the Chaplain Service in 1945. These exceptions are only permitted if the VAMC designates other worship space that is maintained in accordance with the policy so as to be welcoming to persons of all faiths.

To avoid inconsistencies in the implementation of chapel policies, the National Chaplain Center (NCC) instituted the following policies and actions:

- Monthly conference calls to Chief Chaplains nationwide;
- Orientation and training courses presented by the NCC Education Center;
- VA Chaplain Field Advisory Council provides liaison with field facilities;
- An annual report is required from each VAMC, signed by the VAMC Director, certifying compliance with VA policy, or providing an action plan to correct any deficiencies; and
- Associate Directors of the NCC provide consultation and site visits.

VA policy requires that every VAMC must employ at least one full-time permanent Clinical Chaplain to ensure that every facility has a local subject matter expert in these important issues.

If you have additional questions, please have a member of your staff contact Ms. Mandy Hartman, Congressional Relations Officer, at (202) 461-6416 or by e-mail at Mandy.Hartman@va.gov.

I appreciate your continued support of our mission. A similar letter has been sent to the cosigners of your letter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Carolyn M. Clancy MD'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a small 'MD' at the end.

Carolyn M. Clancy, MD
Interim Under Secretary for Health