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July 11, 2014

The Honorable Sloan Gibson
Acting Secretary
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Acting Secretary Gibson:

The Department of Veterans Affairs maintains a national policy in its VHA Handbook 1111.02 requiring that chapels located within VA medical centers remain "religiously neutral, reflecting no particular faith tradition" when not in use for a religious or spiritual service by one of its patrons. The purported rationale for this policy is to facilitate efforts within the VA to uphold and protect the religious freedom rights of all individuals seeking to use its chapels for worship, meditation, or reflection.

We have recently received reports that there are renewed efforts underway to certify compliance with this "religious neutrality" policy in VA chapels. In light of this development, we write today to inquire about the origin and implementation of this policy and respectfully request your response to the following questions:

1. When did the neutrality policy first appear in VHA Handbook 1111.02?
2. Has the VA developed uniform standards on what constitutes religious neutrality in its medical center chapels? If so, have those standards been published for public consumption?
3. How does the presence of religious symbols or furnishings in a VA chapel when not in use by a patron affirmatively violate religious neutrality?
4. Does the presence of a religious symbol or furnishing foreclose the accessibility and availability of the VA chapel to an individual seeking to meditate or practice their faith in a formal service who does not identify with the symbol represented? If so, please explain why.
5. Has the religious neutrality policy been consistently interpreted by VA administrators and uniformly enforced in all VA medical centers across the country? If there is a variation in the policy's implementation, please provide an explanation for this discrepancy and specify what is being done to address any inconsistencies.
6. Does the VA have policies in place to ensure that its administrators are taking the necessary precautions to safeguard religious freedom and expression, and free speech in complying with the religious neutrality policy and the law to avoid the potential

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disenfranchisement or discrimination against a particular faith or religious belief? If so, please outline those procedures.

VA chapels have been specifically designated for meditation and worship, and represent a place where many individuals go in search of solace and comfort. They should unquestionably be places that are open and accessible to all religious beliefs and faiths, and patrons should be able to attend without infringement on their fundamental rights.

We urge the Department of Veterans Affairs to ensure that its medical center chapels are open and accommodating to all those seeking to exercise their religious freedoms. We appreciate your attention to this matter and look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Robert E. Latta
Member of Congress

J. Randy Forbes
Member of Congress

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