

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

P.O. BOX 750 · MADISON, WI 53701 · (608) 256-8900 · WWW.FFRF.ORG

January 29, 2019

Ms. Kristin Pressly
Public Affairs Officer
VA Medical Center
718 Smyth Road
Manchester, NH 03104

Re: Religious display at Manchester VA Medical Center

Dear Ms. Pressly:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation within at the Manchester VA Medical Center. As you may recall from our June 2017 letter, FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with the purposes to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism. We currently have 31,000 members across the country, including over 7,000 members who are active duty military or veterans.

A concerned veteran contacted FFRF in November, 2018 to report that there was a bible included in a POW/MIA “Missing Man” table display in the medical center’s front entrance. A picture of the table display as it appeared in November is enclosed for your review. I apologize for the significant delay in reaching out to your office about this issue. While I am not certain that the display is still up, given Manchester VAMC’s history with religious displays, I wanted to ensure that the medical center will cease displaying a bible on its POW/MIA table and will not include one in the future.

I will not repeat the legal precedent included in our 2017 letter to you. All the same case law on religious displays applies equally to the medical center’s decision to include a bible in its POW/MIA display. Including the Christian holy book on a table meant to represent all POW/MIA service members sends the unfortunate message that the Manchester VAMC values Christian service members above minority religious and nonreligious ones.

The VA Medical Center in Buffalo, NY recently decided to remove the bible from its POW/MIA table after it learned that several of its clients objected to the book being part of the display. On July 18, 2018, F.E. Warren Air Force Base made a similar change.¹ The display, without inclusion of a bible, is a meaningful display for *all* military members. Numerous other VA centers have removed bibles placed on “Missing Man” tables in recognition that the bible creates division between Christian and non-Christian service members, where no rift need exist.

We ask that you remove the bible from the Manchester VAMC’s POW/MIA table, if that table is still on display. If the table is not currently up, we ask that the medical center commit to either removing the bible from any future POW/MIA table or replacing the bible

¹ See www.militaryreligiousfreedom.org/press-releases/2018/_Warren_Bible_Replaced_2018.html.

with a blank book that can represent whatever individuals viewing the display wish it to. The table should be a secular reminder of the sacrifice of all our military members, not just those in the Christian majority. Please inform of us of the steps you intend to take to remedy this violation and to respect the right of conscience of minority religious and nonreligious military members and their families, just as F.E. Warren Air Force Base, the VA Western New York Healthcare System, and numerous other military facilities have done. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Grover', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Sam Grover
Associate Council

Enclosure

