

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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

May 3, 2023

SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL:

ssansom@easthartfordct.gov

Scott M. Sansom
Chief of Police
East Hartford Police Department
31 School St
East Hartford, CT 06108

Re: Chaplaincy Program

Dear Chief Sansom:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional violation occurring in the East Hartford Police Department. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including over 660 members in Connecticut. Our purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

A concerned East Hartford resident contacted us to report that on March 8, 2023, multiple Christian religious leaders were sworn in as official police chaplains for the East Hartford Police Department.¹

Police chaplain programs are unconstitutional. Government chaplains may only exist as an accommodation of a public employee's religious beliefs when the government makes it difficult or impossible to seek out private ministries. For instance, it may be difficult for military service members to find a place of worship while on mission in a foreign country or for an inmate in a prison to find a way to worship. Chaplains are meant to lighten a government-imposed "burden" on religious exercise.

In the case of police departments, there is no significant government burden on religious free exercise. Courts look to the Establishment Clause to determine if chaplaincies are legitimate. *See, e.g., Voswinkel v. City of Charlotte*, 495 F. Supp. 588 (W.D.N.C. 1980) (finding a police chaplain position unconstitutional). Law enforcement agencies acting in their official capacities may not proselytize or promote religion. *See Milwaukee Deputy Sheriff's Ass'n v. Clarke*, 588 F.3d 523 (7th Cir. 2009) (ruling that sheriff meetings with presentations by religious group were

¹ See attached.

unconstitutional). Paid or not, chaplains are sponsored by the Department. They are bound by the First Amendment like any other government employee, and your office is liable for their constitutional violations. Government and religion do not mix.

The Department is also vulnerable to a discrimination lawsuit. No doubt the chaplains intend, at least nominally, to assist people of all faiths. But the Department serves all East Hartford citizens regardless of their religious affiliation or lack thereof. Thirty-seven percent of Americans are non-Christians, including the nearly thirty percent who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.²

Community resources or licensed therapists who have certifications in counseling should be the first resort for vulnerable people, law enforcement, and their families, not members of the clergy who hope to be helpful. Your Department employs and serves people who are not Christians, and it employs and serves people who are not religious. They should not be encouraged to compromise their beliefs and to support religion. This program discriminates by providing chaplains who are only equipped to handle the needs of some employees and community members, alienating those who do not believe in the Gospel.

There is no reason to think a non believing employee or crime victim would be comfortable dealing with a person who provides comfort from a religious viewpoint. Chaplains cannot simply set aside their religion in order to assist a nonbeliever, and are often unwilling to attempt to do so. Chaplains view the world and its problems through the lens of religion and a god, a view inapposite to nonbelievers. Claims that someone is “in a better place” or that a god “works in mysterious ways” may be the bedrock of religious consolation, but are meaningless and even offensive trivialities to nonbelievers.

We ask that you discontinue the chaplaincy program. The best approach by the Department is to provide secular support services and to leave determinations on religious support to individuals. East Hartford is a diverse community with ample opportunities for people of various faiths to seek support. The Department must separate its mission from religion and respect the beliefs, including nonbelief, of all. Please inform us in writing of the steps you will take to address this concern so that we may notify our complainant.

Sincerely,



Kat D. Grant

Equal Justice Works Fellow (sponsored by the Wm. Collins Kohler Foundation)
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure

² Gregory A. Smith, *About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated*, Pew Research Center (Dec. 14, 2021), available at www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/.



Town of East Hartford, CT – Government

March 8 · 🌐

...

How do you remake a town into a community?

Well, you start by carefully adding four reverends and one pastor as East Hartford Police Department Chaplains, bringing the face of God to the community through prayer and religious devotion.

God and acceptance is universal, so we support all religions.

Please join me in congratulating the newest volunteer members of the EHPD!

Goodness knows we need their prayers!

The pictures include the printed program, their swearing in, and the EHPD Honor Guard as they entered the room!

