

# FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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July 6, 2023

SENT VIA EMAIL AND U.S. MAIL: [alan.sleeter@co.oconto.wi.us](mailto:alan.sleeter@co.oconto.wi.us)

The Honorable Chair Alan Sleeter  
Oconto County Board of Supervisors  
301 Washington Street  
Oconto, WI 54153

Re: Religiously divisive language in resolution

Dear Chairman Sleeter:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding inappropriate and divisive language in a resolution recently passed by the Oconto County Board of Supervisors (the Board). FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including over 1,700 members and our national headquarters in Wisconsin. 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 community member reported that at the Board's May 18, 2023 meeting, the Board approved a Resolution to Declare Oconto County's Support of the People's Second Amendment Right to Bear Arms, While Supporting Advancements in Education on Firearm Safety.<sup>1</sup> It is our understanding that this resolution contains inappropriate and divisive language implying that a lack of religion leads to a rise in violence:

WHEREAS, this revelation of vulnerability has created a call for action. This Oconto County Board of Supervisors join the Sheriff and feel now is the time to discuss violence in its totality, not simply as an issue of gun violence. **Violence is a result of a breakdown on many fronts. The lack of faith**, the eroding of family values, the involvement in gangs, sex trafficking, the abuse and sale of illegal drugs, the lack of proper mental health treatment, the lack of education and guidance within our educational system as relates to safe firearms use, storage and handling. The discussions must continue in our community from all disciplines who are dedicated to addressing the complex issues related to our safety[.]<sup>2</sup>

While it is certainly laudable that the Board wishes to address the important and complex issues of community violence and firearm safety, it is needlessly divisive and inappropriate for the Board to officially claim that violence is in any way a result of "lack of faith" among community members.

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<sup>1</sup> *Oconto County Board of Supervisors May 18, 2023 Meeting Minutes*,  
[https://www.co.oconto.wi.us/AgendaCenter/ViewFile/Minutes/\\_05182023-207](https://www.co.oconto.wi.us/AgendaCenter/ViewFile/Minutes/_05182023-207).

<sup>2</sup> Emphasis added.

We write to request that the Board rescind this resolution or, at the very least, amend the resolution to remove “lack of faith” from the list of societal issues that cause violence.

The Establishment Clause of the First Amendment prohibits government favoritism towards religion. The Supreme Court has said time and again that the First Amendment requires “government neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.” *McCreary Cty., Ky. v. Am. Civil Liberties Union of Ky.*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005); *see also Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985); *Epperson v. Ark.*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15–16 (1947). The Board’s resolution that a “lack of faith” is a contributing factor in the rise of violence in the community impermissibly sends the message that the Board favors community members who are religious over those who are nonreligious.

As elected officials, the Board represents a diverse population that consists of not only religious community members, but also atheists, agnostics, and those who are simply religiously unaffiliated. This resolution needlessly blames and alienates Oconto County citizens who are part of the nearly one in three Americans who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.<sup>3</sup> Further, there is no reputable peer-reviewed evidence that supports the notion that a lack of faith among citizens correlates with a rise in violence, whether that violence is firearm-related or otherwise. A resolution stating that nonreligious community members are partially to blame for violence in their community is not only offensive but also a factually unsupported claim.

We ask that the Board respect the First Amendment rights and diversity of the Oconto County community and amend the resolution to remove “lack of faith” from the list of societal issues that cause violence. Please respond in writing with the steps the Board is taking to address this situation so that we may inform our complainant. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Samantha F. Lawrence". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'S'.

Samantha F. Lawrence  
*Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow*  
*Freedom From Religion Foundation*

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<sup>3</sup> 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/](http://www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/).