

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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February 2, 2024

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: sheriffbradcoe@co.kinney.tx.us

Sheriff Brad Coe
Kinney County Sheriff's Office
109 North Street
Brackettville, TX 78832

Re: Unconstitutional religious promotion

Dear Sheriff Coe:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding a constitutional concern occurring at the Kinney County Sheriff's Office. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 40,000 members across the country, including over 1,700 members and a chapter in Texas. 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 local resident informed us that the County recently began including bible quote decals on official law enforcement vehicles. Local reporting confirms this account.¹ We understand that this was the idea of a County employee who customizes each bible verse for the officers.² On his official County vehicle, one officer has Ephesians 6:11: "Put on the armor of God so that you may be able to stand firm against the tactics of the devil." That same officer went on to say that "God is our one true leader" and that he hopes people will Google the bible verses when they see them so that they can "change[] their life." Other bible quotes include Mark 12:30, which commands people to "love the Lord your God," and Isaiah 6:8, which implies that officers are sent by "the Lord."

Lastly, it is noted in local reporting that funding for the decals came from Texas's Operation Lone Star,³ which was designed to help border counties—like Kinney County—respond to illicit border activity.⁴ According to local media, your secretary asked if Operation Lone Star funds could be used for bible decals. You approved that use of funding.⁵ The secretary justifies the program by saying that "[w]e need more Jesus and more of the Lord."

We write to request that the County remove the bible quotes from its official vehicles and refrain from further promotion of employees' personal religious beliefs in order to respect the diverse views of the residents of Kinney County and County employees.

It is inappropriate for the County to display bible verses on government property, and to issue public statements about how your constituents should be Christians. Public officials should not use their

¹ Bethany Blankley, *Message of hope from border county inundated by crime*, The Center Square, Jan. 8, 2024, https://www.thecentersquare.com/texas/article_033dc308-ae2d-11ee-b3f6-431769cbc565.html.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ Texas Indigent Defense Commission, *Operation Lone Star*, <https://www.tidc.texas.gov/operation-lone-star/> (last accessed Jan. 25, 2024).

⁵ *Id.*

government position and government property to promote religious belief. The County serves all residents of Kinney County, including non-Christians.

The Supreme Court has long held that the Establishment Clause requires “government neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.” *McCreary Cnty., Ky. v. ACLU 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 addition of bible quotes to the County’s official law enforcement vehicles conveys a message to nonreligious citizens that they are not welcome or accepted in Kinney County, and to nonreligious officers that their government employer assumes they are Christian and find the bible meaningful.

People interact with and rely on law enforcement during some of the most urgent times of their lives. They should not be made to feel alienated, excluded, and like political outsiders because the local sheriff’s office they support with their taxes oversteps its power by prominently displaying a religious statement on its property. We hope you will agree that Kinney County law enforcement must be even-handed and avoid any appearance of bias toward some citizens, and hostility toward others.

The bible quotes send an overtly sectarian message, which is compounded by officials from your office making statements that the people you serve “need Jesus.” This has the effect of isolating the non-Christians from the Christians and the religious from the non-religious. Thirty-seven percent of the American population is non-Christian, including the almost 30 percent⁶ who are nonreligious. Having bible quotes on official law enforcement vehicles also puts non-religious officers in a difficult position. They must either refuse—in line with their sincerely held religious beliefs—or conform, abandoning those sincerely held beliefs. This ultimatum is one that the Establishment Clause guards all citizens against—including your employees. *See Milwaukee Deputy Sheriff’s Ass’n v. Clarke*, 588 F.3d 523, 525–26 (7th Cir. 2009) (holding religious speech by a sheriff, bible readings, and distribution of Christian literature during mandatory employee meetings unconstitutional under the Establishment Clause).

In recognition of the County’s constitutional obligation to remain neutral towards religion, and out of respect for the diversity and First Amendment rights of Kinney County’s residents, we ask that the Sheriff’s Office remove the bible quotes from its vehicles. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Samantha F. Lawrence". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

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

SFL:hmj

⁶ Gregory A. Smith, *About Three-in-Ten U.S. Adults Are Now Religiously Unaffiliated*, Pew Research Center, Dec. 14, 2021, www.pewforum.org/2021/12/14/about-three-in-ten-u-s-adults-are-now-religiously-unaffiliated/.