

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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July 3, 2025

SENT VIA EMAIL & U.S. MAIL: david.j.smith152.civ@mail.mil

Dr. David J. Smith
Acting Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs
Acting Director, Defense Health Agency
7700 Arlington Blvd., Suite 5101
Falls Church, VA 22042-5101

Re: Unconstitutional religious preference and coercive prayer practices

Dear Dr. Smith:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) regarding constitutional violations occurring at Walter Reed Hospital in Bethesda, Maryland. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 42,000 members across the country, including over 800 members in Maryland. 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 Walter Reed employee informed us that during the week of March 17, 2025, an email went out to all Walter Reed Hospital staff inviting them to a recurring “Soul Care Bible Study.” The event “is a spiritual readiness program that supports the DHA Director’s spiritual pillar of readiness.” The invitation asserts that the “Department of Defense recognizes that Spiritual Fitness is an *essential* area that requires some training and development for DoD personnel to be healthy, fit and resilient.” The invitation describes “Spiritual Fitness” as “one of the major components of the Total Force Fitness Framework first established by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.” We understand that chaplains encourage staff members to wash their hands with Holy Water. Please see an attached copy of the invitation.

We write to request that Walter Reed administrators, DHA personnel, and DoD policy refrain from sponsoring coercive religious programming and activities.

The overtly religious practices taking place at Walter Reed are unnecessarily divisive and coercive. The Supreme Court has held that the First Amendment requires “governmental neutrality between religions, and between religion and nonreligion.” *McCreary Cnty. v. ACLU*, 545 U.S. 844, 860 (2005); *see also Wallace v. Jaffree*, 472 U.S. 38, 53 (1985); *Epperson v. Arkansas*, 393 U.S. 97, 104 (1968); *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15–16 (1947). By offering bible study, Walter Reed and the DoD show that Christians (especially those who subscribe to their selected bible version) have preferential status in the Nation’s armed services. Blatant endorsement of Christian beliefs disrespects our proud military community—especially those who do not share DoD’s belief.

As the Supreme Court has made clear, “sponsorship of a religious message is impermissible because it sends the ancillary message to . . . nonadherents ‘that they are outsiders, not full members of the political community, and an accompanying message to adherents that they are insiders, favored members of the political community.’” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 309–10 (2000) (quoting *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. at 668 (O’Connor, J., concurring)). About thirty percent of individuals in the armed forces identify with a

religious belief other than Christianity—including no religious belief at all.¹ Endorsement of particular religious practices is unnecessarily divisive and threatens to undermine the military mission. As Secretary of Defense Hegseth made clear in his January 25, 2025 “Message to the Force”: “The strength of our military is our unity and our shared purpose.”² The Supreme Court has similarly acknowledged that the military mission requires “unity, commitment, and esprit de corps.” *Goldman v. Weinberger*, 475 U.S. 503, 508 (1986). Government endorsement of religion undermines that.

Moreover, government-sponsored prayer “has the improper effect of coercing those present to participate in an act of religious worship.” *Santa Fe Indep. Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290, 312 (2000). At DOD, the coercive effect is amplified, because “within the military community there is simply not the same [individual] autonomy as there is in the larger civilian community.” *Parker v. Levy*, 417 U.S. 733, 751 (1973). The military induces “the habit of immediate compliance with military procedures and orders” as “virtually a reflex with no time for debate and reflection.” *Chappell v. Wallace*, 462 U.S. 296, 300 (1983). Even if the bible studies are billed as voluntary, the conformist nature of the military will amplify the coercive nature of state-sponsored religion and mandate de facto conformity.

Discussing religion risks dividing the armed forces community among different sects, and between believers and non believers. It can disrupt unit cohesion and distract from the “shared purpose” of protecting American interests and freedoms. Military policy “encourage[s] the subordination of personal preferences and identities in favor of the overall group mission” *Id.* at 508. The Department of Defense cannot express religious favoritism or sponsor religious activity. It cannot contort the mission of the armed forces to support religious beliefs that align with that of its leaders. DoD and DHA policy should focus on universal, secular directives and their shared purpose of constitutional freedom.

Religion by compulsion defies the ideals that our armed forces community stands by and defends. DHA signals that to reach full “readiness” and military excellence, individuals must pass faith-based standards. In essence, the DHA policy denotes that good soldiers are Christian soldiers; fitness for duty requires fitness of faith. Such mandated orthodoxy is plainly un-American and unconstitutional. DHA’s sponsorship of religious activity would require of its employees more than is necessary and more than the Constitution allows.

We ask that DHA respect and honor the Constitution, as well as respect the religious diversity of the nation and its military community by refraining from sponsoring bible studies. Please inform us in writing of the steps being taken to honor your constitutional obligations to respect the rights of conscience of all. Thank you for your time and attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Kyle Steinberg
Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow
Freedom From Religion Foundation

Enclosure

¹ See MAAF Department of Defense Religious Preference and Chaplain Support Study (Nov. 2019), www.militaryatheists.org/news/2019/11/chaplain-endorsements-continue-to-diverge-from-military-personnel/.

² Press Release, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, Message to the Force (Jan. 25, 2020), <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/4040940/secretary-hegseths-message-to-the-force/>.

12 PM Soul Care Bible Study Group
DHA NCR Admin & Mgmt (J-1) DDL DHA ALL (dha.ncr.admin-mgmt-j-1.ddl.dha-all@health.mil)
DHA NCR Man Mgt Mailbox Religious Affairs

1 PM

5. WHY:

- 1) Soul Care Bible Study is a spiritual readiness program that supports the DHA Director's spiritual pillar of readiness.
- 2) Soul Care Bible Study supports all DHA employees to include service members, DOD Civilians, and work force for enhancing their readiness, spiritual well-being, resilience, morale, and cohesiveness.
- 3) The Department of Defense recognizes that Spiritual Fitness is an essential area that requires training and development for DoD personnel to be healthy, fit, and resilient. The DoD has included Spiritual Fitness as one of the major components of the Total Force Fitness Framework first established by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction (CJCSI) 3405.01. This DoD instruction applies to all members of the DoD, to include all military services. Therefore, all (service members and civilians) are welcome to attend these optional spiritual fitness events. Spiritual Readiness develops the personal qualities, a person needs in times of stress, hardship, and tragedy. Understanding the general spiritual readiness enables leaders to encourage personal spiritual readiness in a climate where mutual respect and dignity encourage dialogue, foster team cohesion, and enable healthy free exercise of religion. This approach enables and supports collective and individual readiness as DHA employees endure challenging and stressful conditions in training or operational environments.