

**STATE OF ALASKA
THE LEGISLATURE**

2014

Source

HCS CSSJR 24(MLV)

**Legislative
Resolve No.**

40



Relating to certain holiday practices at federal Veterans Health Administration facilities.

BE IT RESOLVED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF ALASKA:

WHEREAS, in December 2013, federal Veterans Health Administration facilities in Texas, Georgia, Iowa, and Alabama violated the religious freedom rights of convalescing veterans in their care; and

WHEREAS a Veterans Health Administration hospital in Dallas, Texas, did not distribute to the veterans in its care holiday cards that used certain language, including "Merry Christmas" and "God bless you"; and

WHEREAS a Veterans Health Administration hospital in Augusta, Georgia, denied Christmas carolers from the local high school the opportunity to sing in public areas of the hospital; and

WHEREAS two other Veterans Health Administration facilities in Iowa and Alabama prohibited the distribution of Christmas gifts and Christmas gift bags; and

WHEREAS a Veterans Health Administration official cited the policy of the Veterans

Health Administration for the nondistribution of the holiday cards; and

WHEREAS the Veterans Health Administration official stated that, in order to respect veterans' religious beliefs, all donated holiday cards are reviewed by a multidisciplinary team of staff led by the chaplaincy services to determine whether the cards are appropriate and can be freely distributed to patients; and

WHEREAS the Veterans Health Administration official stated that the process for reviewing holiday cards was not fully explained to the particular group involved and apologized for any misunderstanding; and

WHEREAS the officials at the Veterans Health Administration facilities described in this resolution ignored the policies established by the United States Secretary of Veterans Affairs regarding holiday practices at the facilities; and

WHEREAS those holiday cards, gifts, and presentations came from caring citizens, including young children, who took the time to recognize the heroic actions of men and women who have sacrificed so much in the service of their country in times of both peace and war; and

WHEREAS, although Christmas Day has origins in religious beliefs, it is recognized as a civic holiday for federal employees; and

WHEREAS the Veterans Health Administration violates the right to religious freedom of the veterans in its care by not allowing them to receive certain holiday cards and gifts and to attend certain presentations;

BE IT RESOLVED that the Alaska State Legislature condemns the actions of the Veterans Health Administration officials that prohibited religious holiday messages, music, and gifts from being conveyed to veterans at Veterans Health Administration facilities and respectfully requests that the United States Secretary of Veterans Affairs ensure that the violations of veterans' rights described in this resolution do not occur again; and be it

FURTHER RESOLVED that the Alaska State Legislature respectfully requests that the United States Secretary of Veterans Affairs reconsider the policies on holiday practices at Veterans Health Administration facilities and rewrite those policies so that the violations of veterans' rights described in this resolution do not occur again; and be it

FURTHER RESOLVED that the Alaska State Legislature finds it very troubling that the established policies and procedures of the United States Secretary of Veterans Affairs on

holiday practices at the Veterans Health Administration facilities are apparently being ignored and respectfully requests that the United States Secretary of Veterans Affairs review the present established policies on holiday practices at Veterans Health Administration facilities and train personnel on those policies so that the apparent violations of veterans' rights described in this resolution do not occur again; and be it

FURTHER RESOLVED that the Alaska State Legislature respectfully requests that the United States Secretary of Veterans Affairs provide each member of the Alaska State Legislature with a written assurance that the actions of the Veterans Health Administration officials described in this resolution do not reflect the policies on holiday practices at Veterans Health Administration facilities.

COPIES of this resolution shall be sent to the Honorable Barack Obama, President of the United States; the Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr., Vice-President of the United States and President of the U.S. Senate; the Honorable John Boehner, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives; the Honorable Nancy Pelosi, Minority Leader of the U.S. House of Representatives; the Honorable Harry Reid, Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate; the Honorable Mitch McConnell, Minority Leader of the U.S. Senate; the Honorable Bernie Sanders, Chair, U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs; the Honorable Richard Burr, Ranking Member, U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs; the Honorable Eric K. Shinseki, United States Secretary of Veterans Affairs; Verdie Bowen, Director, Office of Veterans Affairs, Alaska Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs; Susan Yeager, Director, Alaska VA Healthcare System; the Honorable Lisa Murkowski and the Honorable Mark Begich, U.S. Senators, and the Honorable Don Young, U.S. Representative, members of the Alaska delegation in Congress; and all other members of the 113th United States Congress.