



PO Box 151353
Alexandria, VA 22315
www.chaplainalliance.org
(571) 293-2427

CHAPLAIN ALLIANCE FOR RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

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Contact CHAPLAIN ENDORSERS at info@chaplainalliance.org, or call 571-293-2427

Congress demands answers from Army over chaplain disciplined for doing his job

WASHINGTON — Twenty-four senators and U.S. representatives have written a [letter](#) to Army Secretary John McHugh about a chaplain [disciplined for giving spiritual guidance](#) as part of a suicide prevention briefing to Army Rangers while stationed at Fort Benning.

The members of Congress are demanding answers regarding the action taken against Chaplain (Capt.) Joseph “Joe” Lawhorn and are seeking to ensure the situation does not become another dangerous precedent for gagging military chaplains.

“No chaplain should be disciplined simply for doing his job,” said Ron Crews, executive director of the Chaplain Alliance for Religious Liberty. “Army health experts and the American Association of Suicidology recognize spiritual health as an important part of battling depression and suicide. The Army’s own ‘Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine’ resource manual and Army Pamphlet 600-24, which concerns unit suicide prevention task forces, both reference spiritual health as part of suicide prevention briefings, specifically noting the chaplain’s integral role. Disciplining Chaplain Lawhorn for doing what he was supposed to do is not only a disservice to this honorable officer, but to the soldiers he serves.”

On Nov. 24, 2014, Lawhorn conducted a mandatory suicide awareness and prevention briefing for the 5th Ranger Training Battalion at Fort Benning. In a handout provided to the soldiers, he provided additional resources—both secular and religious—for those needing help with depression and possibly suicidal thoughts.

Shortly afterwards, Col. David Fivecoat issued a [Letter of Concern](#) reprimanding Lawhorn for the spiritual references. Fivecoat took this formal disciplinary action without any formal Equal Opportunity complaint within the chain of command.

“We believe this administrative action sets a dangerous precedent for Army suicide prevention initiatives, the role of Army chaplains, and most importantly, the ability for service members to exercise and express religious beliefs, as protected under the First Amendment and reinforced by current law and DoD regulations,” the letter from Congress states.

“We commend these members of Congress for demanding answers from Secretary McHugh for this unacceptable action,” said Crews. “Regrettably, military chaplains have been increasingly under fire simply for fulfilling their important and time-honored role in supporting our service members. This is just one more incident that sets a bad precedent, effectively gagging chaplains and keeping service members from getting the support they need.”

The Chaplain Alliance for Religious Liberty is an organization of chaplain endorsers, the faith groups that provide chaplains for the U.S. military and other agencies needing chaplains. The endorsers in the Chaplain Alliance speak for more than 2,600 chaplains serving the armed forces.

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