Anti-Proselytizing Memo Sparks Conservative Outrage

By Janet Winikoff • TSW

A poorly written Walter Reed National Military Medical Center (WRNMMC) policy meant to prevent proselytizing sparked anger among religious and political conservatives across the nation.

The hospital's September 14 memo, entitled "Wounded, Ill and Injured Partners in Care Guidelines," was designed to provide guest policies.

The memo addressed a variety of rules, including scheduling visits from family members and visits from minors, celebrities, legislators, nonprofit representatives, and members of the media.

But some religious conservatives were angered by a section discussing non-family members, known as "Partners in Care."

> *The policy said: "No religious items (i.e. Bibles, reading material, and/or artifacts) are allowed to be given away or used during a visit."*

Across-the-Board Ban on Bibles?

Although positioned by some religious leaders and legislators as an across-the-board Bible ban, Walter Reed's rescinded policy did *not* prohibit family and friends from bringing religious materials.

Calling the memo "plenty bad," Iowa Representative Steve King criticized Walter Reed's policy on the House floor. He stated:

> *"[U.S. soldiers] have given their all for America …the people that come to visit them can't bring a religious artifact, they can't bring a Bible, they can't use them in the services, a priest can't walk in with the Eucharist and offer communion to a patient who might be on their death bed because it's prohibited in this memo."*

Interviewed by "Fox & Friends" co-host Steve Doocy, King said that he went "straight up in the air" after reading the notice.

Walter Reed officials said the guidelines were intended to protect patient privacy and religious choice, and the WRNMMC website notified visitors that the policy was being rewritten.

> *The statement affirmed that "Bibles and other religious materials have always been and will always remain available for patient use."*

The statement also described the hospital's long-standing policy of respecting multiple faiths.

Family Research Council

Walter Reed's controversy gained momentum after King and the Washington, D.C.-based Family Research Council (FRC) learned of the memo.

The FRC created an online petition urging Walter Reed officials "to permanently end the ban on Bibles and other religious materials at the hospital."

The FRC also announced plans to seek records related to the policy under the Freedom of Information Act.

A letter sent by FRC President Tony Perkins to Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Jonathan Greenert sought information related to the "origins and scope" of the policy, along with letters, notes, memos, emails, and text messages.

Actor Chuck Norris also criticized the policy in a column.

> *"It's one thing to watch 'Merry Christmas' be omitted from signs in your favorite department store, but quite another to see Bibles withheld from wounded warriors at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center," Norris wrote.*

Representatives King and Senator Chuck Grassley met with Walter Reed officials to express their concerns, and King's website said the lawmakers later accepted regrets from Walter Reed staffers.

King asked to review the hospital's revised policy before its official release and called for WRNMMC to identify the person responsible for writing the disputed language.

Walter Reed spokesperson Sandy Dean said that while the memo may have been imprecise, the hospital was working on a clarification.

> *"We don't want there to be any misrepresentation of what we're trying to say," Dean said, adding, "We appreciate Congressman King bringing this to our attention. We don't want our instructions to be ambiguous."*

Proselytizing: The Military's Pervasive Problem

While some evangelical groups criticized the U.S. military over religious tolerance, the military had also taken steps to rein in proselytizing at military bases, military academies, funerals, and hospitals.

The Military Religious Freedom Foundation reported that proselytizing was widespread.

Although rarely discussed, nonreligious soldiers as well as soldiers of different faiths said that evangelical messaging in the military was pervasive.

The Kansas-based Westboro Baptist Church was known for protesting at military funerals, while Unlimited Potential, Inc. provided religious "baseball camps" for military personnel.

In 2005, Jewish and Christian cadets at the Air Force Academy complained of being heavily proselytized by evangelical officers.

> *"As Walter Reed rewrites this policy, we humbly suggest that its drafters draw the distinction between supporting wounded warriors and imposing on them while at their most vulnerable," contributors to the military chaplain blog Chaplains Under Fire wrote.*

> *"The least we can do is give them control over how to practice their faiths - or not… Let the warrior ask for a Bible or a rosary or a Koran or… and in those cases where injuries prevent warriors from making their views known, check the records. This is basically the policy military chaplains are taught and, from what we saw, it works."*