



Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on July 5, 2011

Veterans Join Religious Discrimination Suit Against VA in Houston Cemetery Case

Several veterans groups in Houston, Texas, are joining an area pastor in suing the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for religious discrimination, charging that at least one VA official banned prayers and certain religious terms during funerals for veterans at the Houston National Cemetery (pictured). The latest charges follow a Memorial Day controversy in which the cemetery's director, Arleen Ocasio, censored a prayer that the Rev. Scott Rainey had planned to deliver during a service at the cemetery, removing the name of Jesus from the prayer. As reported by The New American, Rainey filed suit, and a federal judge granted a temporary restraining order against the VA, ruling that Rainey's prayer qualified as free speech protected under the First Amendment, and allowing him to proceed with his original prayer.



In the latest case, reported the [Houston Chronicle](#), three local veterans groups — the Veterans of Foreign Wars District 4, the American Legion Post 586, and the National Memorial Ladies — have joined Rainey's lawsuit, charging that VA officials have continued to violate the constitutional free-speech guarantees of visitors to the cemetery. According to the paper, "The VFW and the American Legion say that on at least four occasions in the last two months, VA officials told them that prayer and religious speech could no longer be included in burial rituals they take part in at the Houston cemetery" — without specific prayers and written speech being first approved by Ocasio.

One of the groups, the [National Memorial Ladies](#), accused Ocasio of telling its members that they could not use words such as "God" or "Jesus," or otherwise use religious speech to comfort the families of veterans they meet with at the cemetery. "The group also said it was told it had to remove the phrase 'God Bless' from condolence cards it gives to families at funerals," reported the *Chronicle*.

"We were told we could no longer say 'God bless you' and 'God bless your family,'" Marilyn Koepp, a volunteer with the National Memorial Ladies, told [Fox News](#). "How did I feel? I probably shouldn't say how I felt because it was absolutely appalling that this woman would come aboard and tell us we cannot say 'God bless you.' " She added that regardless of the restrictions, she had no intention of discontinuing the tradition of blessing the families of those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice for their country. "I am going to say 'God bless you' [and] I don't know what would make me ever stop it."

In addition to the restrictions on religious speech, the groups named in the suit charged that Ocasio and the VA had closed the cemetery's chapel, removing a cross and Bible that had been inside and turning the building into a storage facility.



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"The hostile and discriminatory actions by the Veterans Affairs officials in Houston are outrageous, unconstitutional, and must stop," said Jeff Mateer of the [Liberty Institute](#), a Texas-based legal advocacy group representing the veterans groups. "Government officials who engage in religious discrimination against citizens are breaking the law. Sadly, this seems to be a pattern of behavior at the Houston VA National Cemetery."

At a Liberty Institute press conference regarding the case, Vietnam veteran Nobleton Jones told of how for the past three years he has presented shell casings to family members of veterans being laid to rest following the customary 21-gun salute that is part of military honors. He recalled that earlier this year a VA official at the cemetery informed him he could no longer include the blessing he speaks over families as he hands over the mementos: "We ask that God grant you and your family grace, mercy, and peace." Said the 66-year-old vet, "That makes me feel smaller, even after I spent my time in the military, fighting so that people should be able to say that.... I did all this for my country and you are going to tell me what I can and can't say?"

Jimmie Foster, national commander for the American Legion, noted of the soldiers who have been buried at the cemetery: "These veterans laid their lives on the line in order to protect freedom of religion for everyone. It is ironic that, upon their own death, the very government that sent them to war is attempting, at least in this instance, to abridge the veteran's freedom of religion. This is carrying political correctness way too far."

Keith Ethridge, director of the VA National Chaplain Center, insisted that his agency "values and respects every veteran and their family's right to a burial service that honors their faith tradition." He pointed out that the VA has nearly one thousand chaplains who preside over thousands of religious burial services every year, "representing veterans of all faiths in VA national cemeteries across the country." Ethridge affirmed that prayer "is a very personal and sacred moment. To honor veterans as they are laid to rest, VA chaplains always pray and preside over religious services according to the veteran's faith tradition and the family's wishes."

U.S. Representative Ted Poe (R), who represents the Houston area in Congress, expressed his own outrage at the actions of Ocasio, accusing the Houston National Cemetery's director of acting with "authoritarian zeal in her quest to remove Christianity and religion from funeral services." Poe said that he had heard from veterans and their families from across the nation shocked at the actions of the VA. "One man in particular stood out to me who called my office in tears because his father (a World War II veteran) was days away from death, set to be buried in Houston National Cemetery," recalled Poe in a recent editorial. "His father does not want to be buried there anymore because he will not be able to have the funeral service that he wants and deserves." Concluded the Congressman: "The Houston National Cemetery is the final resting place for thousands of veterans who fought in places all over the world. The government's attack on the very freedoms that they lived and died for is a blatant violation of the freedom of speech and free exercise of religion promised to all Americans in the Constitution."

U.S. District Judge Lynn Hughes, who earlier ruled in the case involving the Rev. Scott Rainey's Memorial Day prayer, has given the VA until July 15 to respond to all the charges listed in the suit, and has scheduled the next hearing in the case for July 21.



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