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Congress of the United States
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January 21, 2015

MCoE Deputy Commander John F. King
1 Karker Street, McGinnis-Wickam Hall
Suite W-141
Fort Benning, GA 31905

Dear Brigadier General King:

As you know, Chaplain (CPT) Joe Lawhorn of the 5th Ranger Training Battalion received a Letter of Concern based off personal testimony he related during a November 20th, 2014 Army suicide awareness and prevention briefing. He spoke of his personal battle with depression as it relates to suicide prevention and discussed how his faith got him through that period. Importantly, however, he also provided secular information and resources at this briefing, took questions, and asked for feedback.

In response to the Letter of Concern, The Liberty Institute, on behalf of Chaplain Lawhorn, submitted a request for accommodation to Colonel Fivecoat on December 17, 2014. As of this letter, COL Fivecoat has yet to act on the request for accommodation. The "Requests for Accommodation" section of Army Regulation 600-20, explicitly states that requests for religious accommodation must be responded to within ten working days of receipt. As such, I am hopeful that you can provide some clarity on the rationale behind COL Fivecoat's failure to take action in response to the inquiry by the Liberty Institute in the specified time frame.

My own service as a military chaplain taught me the importance of offering honest guidance and serving as a resource to those in need. I believe that military chaplains continue to play an important role as religious and spiritual leaders to our men and women in uniform and their families. Whether they are at military installations in the United States and around the world, on the front lines with combat troops, in military hospitals or elsewhere, chaplains serve as teachers, counselors, spiritual guides, and more. In short, chaplains serve those who serve.

According to the Army's "The Chief of Chaplains Strategic Roadmap", "every Chaplain is called upon to be a religious leader and a Soldier. The aspiration is to be 100% Soldier and 100% religious leader." They are meant to provide support and are committed to serving their country and their fellow Soldiers. Chaplain Lawhorn demonstrated this commitment when he shared, during the course of suicide prevention training, his own struggle with depression and how his faith helped guide him through a difficult time.

In sharing his story, Chaplain Lawhorn acted in accordance with DOD Instruction 1300.17, paragraph 4b, which states that "unless it could have an adverse impact on military readiness,

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unit cohesion, and good order and discipline, the Military Departments will accommodate individual expressions of sincerely held beliefs.” Despite this, and despite the fact that the Battalion’s Equal Opportunity (EO) Advisor reviewed Chaplain Lawhorn’s presentation and found it consistent with AR 600-20 policy, Chaplain Lawhorn received a Letter of Concern. Even though the Chaplain did not violate Army EO Policy, COL Fivecoat issued the letter—in disregard of Army regulations and the EO Advisor’s findings. I would like to know the justification behind keeping the letter on file, and under whose direction that action was taken.

I fear that the issuance of a Letter of Concern to Chaplain Lawhorn, whose presentation was consistent with Army regulations and well within the scope of previously stated policies, will send the wrong message to other military chaplains and service members. Chaplain Lawhorn drew upon his personal experience and faith to offer potentially life-saving suggestions to colleagues in need. I believe that this could have a chilling effect on the candid religious, spiritual, and secular advice other chaplains might wish to offer.

I understand that the letter was a local, non-permanent filing, however, I believe that the letter should have been completely withdrawn from Chaplain Lawhorn’s file. The Letter of Concern runs contrary to the right to the free exercise of religion—a right that Army Chaplains are supposedly tasked with defending.

Thank you for your prompt attention to this matter. I look forward to your response, and I ask that it be delivered by February 9, 2015.

Sincerely,



Doug Collins
Member of Congress

cc: Colonel Patrick J. Donahoe
MCoE Chief of Staff