



## News Release

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## **Pennsylvania VA Chaplain Sanctioned for Chapel Message, Faces Sermon Censorship by Supervisor**

*Law firms send letter to new Secretary of Veterans Affairs Collins seeking action.*

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**Harrisburg, PA**—Today, First Liberty Institute and the Independence Law Center sent a letter on behalf of Rusty Trubey, a veteran chaplain at the Coatesville VA Medical Center, asking U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Doug Collins to take immediate action to eliminate a speech code being imposed by the VA and ensure that Chaplain Trubey and his colleagues may preach according to the dictates of their conscience.

You can read the letter [here](#).

“The government has no business censoring anyone’s sermon, including military chaplains,” said Erin Smith, Associate Counsel at First Liberty Institute. “This is just the kind of woke policy that we anticipate Secretary Collins wants to purge from the VA.”

Randall Wenger of the Independence Law Center added, “Chaplains do not give up their First Amendment rights in order to serve. Censoring the content of a chaplain’s sermon is an unconstitutional violation of their God-given rights to religious freedom and free speech.”

An Army Reserve Chaplain, veteran, and former missionary, Russell (Rusty) Trubey has been a chaplain at the Coatesville (PA) VA Medical Center for nearly ten years. In June 2024, as part of his normal duties, Chaplain Trubey conducted a worship service in the chapel and preached a sermon from the first chapter of Romans. When Chaplain Trubey was cleaning up the chapel after the service ended, an onsite VA police officer approached him, alleging complaints made about his sermon from that day. Chaplain Trubey informed his supervisor, Chaplain Brynn White, that the police had been called after his sermon. After that, Chaplain Trubey was removed from his duties as chaplain, investigated for several months, and threatened with a mark on his permanent record. While the Coatesville facility rescinded this proposed reprimand, his supervisor has implemented an unconstitutional sermon review process and is attempting to change the Chaplain SOP and Performance Plan to limit the topics on which chaplains can preach. If put into effect, this plan would punish chaplains for preaching according to their faith tradition and religious convictions.

In the letter to Secretary Collins, the attorneys explain, “What’s more, the changes to the SOP allow Chaplain White and other supervisors to continue to discriminate against chaplains on the basis of their religious viewpoints simply because they find the viewpoint ‘divisive, cultural, or political.’ ‘If there is a bedrock principle underlying the First Amendment, it is that the Government may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because society finds the idea itself offensive or disagreeable.’ *United States v. Eichman*, 496 U.S. 310, 319 (1990). Indeed, the Bible and other religious texts comment extensively on what some people could deem ‘divisive, cultural, or political,’ and chaplains would be hard-pressed to preach a sermon avoiding these topics and giving the viewpoint espoused by their religious text. This opens the door for supervisors to punish chaplains simply for preaching a viewpoint they find offensive.”

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### **About First Liberty Institute**

[First Liberty Institute](#) is a non-profit public interest law firm and the largest legal organization in the nation dedicated exclusively to defending religious freedom for all Americans.

To arrange an interview, contact John Manning at [media@firstliberty.org](mailto:media@firstliberty.org) or by calling 972-941-4453.

### **About Independence Law Center**

The [Independence Law Center](#) is a public-interest civil rights law firm affiliated with the Pennsylvania Family Institute, a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization funded through tax-deductible contributions that works to preserve religious liberty, promote marriage and the family, protect human life, and improve education and policy for our clients.

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