

## ECCLESIASTICAL ENDORSING ORGANIZATIONS

- 1. REASON FOR ISSUE.** This is a recertification of VHA Handbook 1111.1, dated September 8, 2005.
- 2. SUMMARY OF MAJOR CHANGES.** This Handbook makes no changes in policy. References to other VHA policy have been updated.
- 3. RELATED DIRECTIVE.** VHA Directive 1111 and VHA Handbook 1111.02.
- 4. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE.** The Office of Patient Care Services (11), Specialty Care Services (111) is responsible for the contents of this VHA Handbook. Questions may be referred to Chaplain Services at 757-728-7062.
- 5. RESCISSIONS.** VHA Handbook 1111.1, dated September 8, 2005, is rescinded.
- 6. RECERTIFICATION.** This VHA Handbook is scheduled for recertification on or before the last working day of May 2016.

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## ECCLESIASTICAL ENDORSING ORGANIZATIONS

### 1. PURPOSE

This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Handbook defines the administrative procedures and requirements that religious faith groups must meet to provide ecclesiastical endorsements of individuals for Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Chaplaincy.

### 2. BACKGROUND

VA's qualification standard for Chaplains (see VA Handbook 5005, Part II, Appendix F1) requires ecclesiastical endorsement "by the official national endorsing body of the faith group or denomination, certifying that the applicant is in good standing with the applicant's group or denomination; and stating that the individual is, in the opinion of the endorsing body, qualified to perform the full range of ministry required in the VA pluralistic setting."

### 3. DEFINITIONS

a. **Ecclesiastical Endorsing Organization.** Ecclesiastical endorsing organization means a religious faith group that meets the requirements of paragraph 6 and has properly designated an endorsing agent in accordance with paragraph 7 of this Handbook.

b. **Ecclesiastical Endorsement.** Ecclesiastical endorsement is a signed statement, by the official national endorsing agent of an ecclesiastical endorsing organization, certifying that an individual is in good standing with that religious faith group, and stating that the individual is, in the opinion of the endorsing agent, qualified to conduct all functions, sacraments, ordinances, ceremonies, rites, and/or observances required to meet the needs of patients.

c. **Official National Endorsing Agent.** Official national endorsing agent means the individual designated by an ecclesiastical endorsing organization to issue official ecclesiastical endorsements to VA of individuals within the particular religious faith group.

### 4. SCOPE

a. A religious organization wishing to endorse applicants for VA Chaplaincy must meet the requirements specified in paragraph 6 and provide documents to the National VA Chaplain Center as specified in paragraph 7. Endorsements must be signed by the properly-designated endorsing agent of a religious organization in order to meet the endorsement requirements of the VA chaplain qualification standard.

b. Acceptance of an ecclesiastical endorsement by VA does not imply any approval by VA of the theology or practices of a religious organization, nor does it obligate VA to employ the endorsed individual or any other members of the organization.

c. VA's mission to provide health care to Veterans is always paramount. VA reserves the right to restrict or prohibit within its facilities any practices that it deems detrimental to the health or safety of patients.

## **5. AUTHORITY**

a. The Director, Chaplain Service, VA National Chaplain Center, determines acceptability of ecclesiastical endorsements in accordance with the requirements in paragraphs 6 and 7.

b. The Director, Chaplain Service may refuse to accept ecclesiastical endorsements from a religious organization that no longer meets the requirements of paragraph 6.

(1) Before taking such action, the Director must give the organization written notice, stating the reasons, and giving the religious organization a reasonable opportunity to provide a written reply that must be carefully considered in making a final decision.

(2) If the final decision is that the religious organization no longer meets the requirements to provide ecclesiastical endorsements, the Director must inform the religious organization, and all VA chaplains endorsed by the religious organization, in writing.

(3) Religious organizations informed that they may no longer endorse individuals for VA Chaplaincy due to lack of administrative compliance with VHA procedures in this Handbook may resubmit the required documents.

(4) If a religious organization is no longer able to endorse individuals for VA Chaplaincy in accordance with these procedures, all ecclesiastical endorsements issued by that religious organization are to be considered to be withdrawn.

## **6. REQUIREMENTS FOR ACCEPTANCE OF ECCLESIASTICAL ENDORSEMENTS FROM RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS**

a. To provide ecclesiastical endorsements to VA, a religious organization must meet the following seven requirements and must:

(1) Be organized and function exclusively or substantially to provide religious ministries to a lay constituency.

(2) Possess authority to both grant and withdraw initial and subsequent ecclesiastical endorsement.

(3) Be recognized by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) as a tax-exempt religious organization under section 501(c) (3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

(4) Agree to abide by all Federal, VA, and VHA laws, regulations, policies, and issuances on the qualification and endorsement of persons for service as VA chaplains, Federal employment, and Veterans health care.

(5) Agree to notify the VA National Chaplain Center of any withdrawal of an existing ecclesiastical endorsement.

(6) Provide to the VA National Chaplain Center the information and documents specified in paragraph 7 of this Handbook.

(7) Acknowledge that:

(a) Acceptance of an ecclesiastical endorsement by VA does not imply any approval by VA of the theology or practices of a religious organization, nor does it obligate VA to employ the endorsed individual or any other members of the organization;

(b) VA's mission to provide health care to Veterans is always paramount, and VA reserves the right to restrict or prohibit within its facilities any practices that it deems detrimental to the health or safety of patients;

(c) Individuals endorsed by the organization must function in a pluralistic environment and must support, directly and indirectly, the free exercise of religion by all Veteran patients, family members, and others authorized to receive VA health care.

b. All ecclesiastical endorsing organizations registered with VA under this Handbook as of March 1, 2011, are considered to meet all requirements of this paragraph.

## **7. PROCEDURE FOR DESIGNATING AN ECCLESIASTICAL ENDORSING AGENT**

a. A religious organization that wishes to endorse individuals for service as VA chaplains must submit a signed VA Form 10-0379, Ecclesiastical Endorsing Organization Request to Designate Ecclesiastical Endorsing Official, to the National VA Chaplain Center along with the following information and documents:

(1) An explanation of the structure of the organization (copies of by-laws, constitution, etc.).

(2) A copy of the membership requirements (if any) of the organization.

(3) A description of the qualifications and requirements that an individual must meet in order to conduct all the religious offices, functions, sacraments, ordinances, ceremonies, rites, and/or observances required to meet the needs of patients of the organization (including any of the following that apply: education, licensing and/or ordination, professional experience).

(4) A copy of the IRS document giving the group tax-exempt status as a religious organization under Internal Revenue Code, section 501(c)(3).

b. The Director, Chaplain Service, takes no action on an initial request to designate an ecclesiastical endorsing official, unless the religious organization presents an applicant for VA Chaplaincy who meets all qualification requirements (other than endorsement) of VA Handbook 5005, Part II, Appendix F1. Upon presentation of a qualified applicant, as determined by the Board of Excepted Service Examiners, and verification that an organization meets the

requirements of paragraph 6, the Director, Chaplain Service must notify the organization, in writing, that it has been designated an ecclesiastical endorsing organization.

c. Once an organization has been notified (see subparagraph 7b) that it has been designated an ecclesiastical endorsing organization, VA will accept ecclesiastical endorsements for 3 years from that organization without requiring any further documentation, unless VA has substantial evidence that an organization no longer meets the requirements of paragraph 6.

d. Every 3 years, each ecclesiastical endorsing organization must provide written verification to the VA National Chaplain Center that it continues to meet the requirements of paragraph 6.

e. By January 1<sup>st</sup> of each year, each religious organization must provide the National VA Chaplain Center with an alphabetical listing of individuals endorsed, by that religious organization, for VA Chaplaincy.