

**SPIRITUAL AND PASTORAL CARE IN THE VETERANS HEALTH
ADMINISTRATION**

- 1. REASON FOR ISSUE.** This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Directive establishes authority and policy for VHA spiritual and pastoral care.
- 2. SUMMARY OF MAJOR CHANGES.** This Directive defines the policy for making available and providing spiritual and pastoral care to meet the needs of veteran patients, their families, or their significant others.
- 3. RELATED ISSUES.** VHA Handbook 1111.1, VHA Handbook 1111.02, and VHA Directive 4721.
- 4. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE.** The Office of the Director, Chaplain Service (111C) is responsible for the contents of this VHA Directive. Questions may be addressed to 757-728-3180.
- 5. RESCISSIONS.** None.
- 6. RECERTIFICATION.** This VHA Directive is scheduled for recertification on or before the last working day of May 2013.

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SPIRITUAL AND PASTORAL CARE IN THE VETERANS HEALTH ADMINISTRATION

1. PURPOSE

This Veterans Health Administration (VHA) Directive issues policies applicable to providing spiritual and pastoral care in VHA.

2. BACKGROUND

a. Title 38 United States Code, as amended, indicates that spiritual and pastoral care must be available to veterans as part of the health care provided at medical centers, clinics, domiciliaries, and other Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) facilities. The type and extent of spiritual and pastoral care provided must be commensurate with the needs, desires, and voluntary consent of the individual veteran. Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN) Directors and facility Directors are responsible for ensuring that patients' health care needs are met. Clinical chaplains, as the subject matter experts in spiritual and pastoral care, must be employed at each medical center to develop and implement a program which:

(1) Ensures every patient's constitutional right to free exercise of religion;

(2) Provides opportunities for religious worship, sacramental ministry, pastoral care and counseling; and

(3) Protects all veterans from proselytization (the imposition of religious beliefs or activities) from any source while in VHA facilities.

b. Each veteran's needs and desires, or lack thereof, for spiritual and pastoral care must be screened as part of a complete evaluation of the individual's health care needs. When a more in-depth spiritual assessment is indicated, a clinical chaplain is the subject matter expert authorized to conduct the spiritual assessment and provide appropriate spiritual and pastoral care as desired by the patient. Chaplains collaborate with health care providers in providing of holistic care throughout a full spectrum of interventions and services as appropriate to an individual's needs and desires, including:

(1) Conducting worship services,

(2) Providing pastoral care for individual patients,

(3) Providing pastoral counseling with individuals and immediate family members in crisis situations,

(4) Facilitating spirituality and therapeutic groups,

(5) Conducting funerals and memorial services as authorized, and

(6) Coordinating spiritual care for VA patients in all inpatient and outpatient treatment settings.

3. POLICY: It is VHA policy that spiritual and pastoral care must be integrated into the comprehensive health care package made available to veterans. VHA prohibits proselytization and does not promote, favor, or prefer any particular religion or faith group, nor does it promote, favor, or prefer religion over non-religion.

4. RESPONSIBILITIES

a. **Health Care Facility Directors.** Health care facility Directors, or their designees, are responsible for ensuring that:

(1) Spiritual and pastoral care commensurate with the needs, desires, and voluntary consent of the veteran patient is provided as part of VHA health care.

(2) Veterans in VHA facilities are provided with opportunities for religious worship, in accordance with their needs and desires, in appropriate settings.

(3) Chaplains are employed as the designated subject matter experts for spiritual and pastoral care.

(4) Chaplains are included as members of the professional interdisciplinary teams available to provide holistic care to veteran patients.

b. **Director, Chaplain Service.** The Director, Chaplain Service is responsible for:

(1) Developing policies for the provision of spiritual and pastoral care.

(2) Advising the Chief Patient Care Services Officer and field officials regarding policies and procedures for the provision of spiritual and pastoral care.

(3) Ensuring there is appropriate training and career development opportunities for VHA chaplains and other health care providers pertaining to the provision of spiritual and pastoral care.

(4) Ensuring there is on-going evaluation of the effectiveness of spiritual and pastoral care in VHA facilities using site visits and other means.

(5) Recruiting and evaluating applicants for VA Chaplaincies to promote a diverse, high-quality workforce.

(6) Maintaining liaisons with religious organizations, professional organizations, the Department of Defense, and other stakeholders to develop and support spiritual and pastoral therapeutic relationships that contribute to accomplishing VHA's mission.

5. DEFINITIONS

a. **Spiritual and Pastoral Care.** VHA spiritual and pastoral care is a total program of assessment and care, administered and overseen by chaplains utilizing the full spectrum of interventions, which:

- (1) Identifies patients' religious and spiritual needs and desires,
- (2) Addresses spiritual injuries, and
- (3) Enhances patient's spiritual health.

b. **Patient.** A patient is an individual who is eligible for VHA care.

c. **Chaplain.** A VA chaplain is an individual meeting the qualification requirements of VA Handbook 5005, Part II, appendix F1, who provides spiritual and pastoral care and counseling in VA.

d. **Clinical Chaplain.** A clinical chaplain is an individual who meets all VA qualification requirements for Chaplain, and whose spiritual and pastoral care and counseling is characterized by:

- (1) In-depth assessment, evaluation, and treatment of patients;
- (2) A high degree of integration into the total care and treatment program of a health care facility; and
- (3) Close working relationships with staff members of other professional health care disciplines.

e. **Religion.** Religion refers to all types of worship, sacrament, ceremonies, prayer, meditation, traditional observances, etc., by which individuals carry out their religious beliefs or through which they maintain or enhance their relationship with the focus of their religion. This includes wearing religiously significant clothing or jewelry, dietary customs, carrying or displaying religious artifacts, symbols, pictures, or scripture.

f. **Spiritual.** "Spiritual" has to do with that which is related to the "Spirit of Life." Spirituality may be used in a general sense to refer to that which gives meaning and purpose in life, or the term may be used more specifically to refer to the practice of a philosophy, religion, or way of living. The word "Spiritual" is derived from the old Latin word "spiritus." The English words "inspire," meaning to breathe in, and "expire" meaning to breathe out, come from the same Latin root. The concept of breathing captures the meaning of the word "spiritual" in relation to that which is or is not "life giving;" therefore, spirituality may positively or negatively affect one's overall health and quality of life.

g. **Pastoral.** The term “Pastoral” is an adjective derived from the image of the shepherd and is used to describe a relationship characterized by expressions of compassionate care, including spiritual counseling, guidance, consolation, empathetic listening, and encouragement. Describing care as pastoral may refer to the motivation or attitude of the caregiver. In VA, pastoral care refers to care provided by a chaplain, professionally educated and endorsed by a particular faith tradition to provide such care.

h. **Holistic Care.** "Holistic care" is whole-person care tailored for the individual patient's needs and requests; it emphasizes the balance of the physical, environmental, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual aspects of human experience.