

RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS IN HOLIDAY DISPLAYS IN VA FACILITIES

- 1. REASON FOR ISSUE:** This Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Directive establishes authority and policy for including religious symbols in holiday displays at VA facilities. This will ensure that holiday displays in public areas of VA facilities do not favor one religious faith group over another and do not appear to be an official endorsement of religion. This will also ensure that displays are made with knowledge of and sensitivity to our nation's diverse religious traditions.
- 2. SUMMARY OF CONTENTS/MAJOR CHANGES:** This Directive defines the policy for including religious symbols in holiday displays at VA facilities.
- 3. RELATED HANDBOOK:** None.
- 4. RESPONSIBLE OFFICE:** The Office of the Director, Chaplain Service (110C) is responsible for the contents of this Directive.
- 5. RESCISSIONS:** None.

Signed by
Anthony J. Principi
SECRETARY OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

CERTIFIED BY:

Signed by
John A. Gauss
Assistant Secretary for
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1. PURPOSE: This Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Directive establishes policies and procedures for including religious symbols in holiday displays at VA facilities.

2. POLICY: It is VA policy to recognize the cultural and spiritual importance of displaying symbols in public areas of VA facilities to celebrate holidays; and to include religious symbols in a holiday display in a public area of a VA facility, if the display does not favor one religion over another, and conveys a primarily secular message. **NOTE:** *This policy does not govern displays for religious services in VA chapels or in employees' workspaces that are not generally accessible to the public.*

3. RESPONSIBILITIES

a. Under Secretaries, Assistant Secretaries, Deputy Assistant Secretaries, and Other Key Officials. Under Secretaries, Assistant Secretaries, Deputy Assistant Secretaries, and Other Key Officials are responsible for ensuring that holiday displays within their immediate offices are in accordance with this policy.

b. General Counsel. The General Counsel, or designee, is responsible for advising VA officials and managers, upon request, about the interpretation of and applicability of court decisions and legal issues pertaining to placement of religious symbols in public areas of government facilities.

c. Director, Chaplain Service, Veterans Health Administration (VHA). The Director, Chaplain Service, VHA, is responsible for advising VA officials and managers, upon request, about the religious significance of particular symbols and the practices of various faith groups.

d. Directors of VA Medical Centers, Regional Offices, Cemeteries, and other Free-Standing Facilities

(1) Directors of VA facilities must ensure that holiday displays under their supervision comply with this policy. Holiday displays may be placed in public areas of VA medical centers, outpatient clinics, veterans' centers, regional offices, cemeteries, and other VA facilities. Such displays may include symbols of Christmas, Chanukah, and other religious observances.

(2) Public areas of VA facilities include: lobbies, public entrances, security desks, grounds, nursing stations and other places where the general public may see a display. Religious symbols may be included in a holiday display in a public area of a VA facility if the display does not favor one religion over another, and conveys a primarily secular message. By placing diverse holiday symbols together in the public places of its facilities, VA gives no preference to one holiday above another. Prominently displaying

a sign or banner containing a secular message such as "Happy Holidays" or "Seasons Greetings" assists in achieving a primarily secular message.

(3) Directors of VA facilities are encouraged to form local committees representing diverse faith traditions that may include veterans, employees, representatives of veterans' service organizations, other interested stakeholders, and, in VHA facilities, must include chaplains. These committees may meet to implement holiday displays in a manner consistent with this policy that will accommodate local needs. Questions or concerns may be referred to the local committee for resolution. The VA Regional Counsel and the Director, Chaplain Service, need to be consulted if a question or concern arises at any VA facility.

4. REFERENCES: The President's Guidelines on Religious Exercise and Religious Expression in the Federal Workplace, dated August 14, 1997.
http://oeeo.psc.gov/oeeo/l2r_1.html