

2014 SESSION (SB555)

GOVERNOR'S VETO

Pursuant to Article V, Section 6, of the Constitution of Virginia, I veto SB 555, which prohibits the censorship, by state agencies or officials, of the religious content of sermons offered by Virginia National Guard Chaplains, provided such content does not urge the disobedience of lawful orders.

I am of the view that this bill would seriously undermine the religious freedom of National Guard members by potentially exposing them to sectarian proselytizing.

Chaplains serve a very important role in the spiritual well-being of Virginia's Soldiers and Airmen in the Guard, as well as their families. The roles and responsibilities of chaplains are clearly set forth by Army Regulation **165-1**, and the distinctive faith requirements of each Chaplain. It is one of the roles of the Chaplain to "minister to the personnel of their unit and/or facilitate the free-exercise rights of all personnel, regardless of the religious affiliation of either the Chaplain or the unit member." (AR **165-1**, para. **3-2(b)(2)**) When practicable, Chaplains are currently required by law to "hold religious services for members of the command to which they are assigned." (AR **165-1**, para. **3-2(b)(1)**)

Our National Guard Chaplains currently conduct voluntary worship services and provide counseling for members of their own faith and may do so in whatever manner they see fit. Furthermore, their right to religious expression in a private and unofficial capacity is without limit.

Military Chaplains do not, however, have the right to use official, mandatory events as a platform to disseminate their own religious views. To the contrary, Guard members required to attend such events have a right not to be subjected to sectarian proselytizing. A member of the Guard should be free to worship, or not, as he or she chooses without fear of any discipline or stigma. SB 555 would actually allow for the censorship of Chaplains' sermons by allowing for official review to ensure that the sermons do not encourage disobedience. Such a review would violate the tenets of religious freedom available to Chaplains and all members of the Guard.

The institution of National Guard Chaplains exists to support and promote the free exercise rights of all of our National Guard members. SB 555 does the opposite.

Accordingly, I veto this bill.