

VETERANS AFFAIRS

HEALTH CARE CHAPLAINCY



“Keeping the promise to those who served”

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To be a hospital patient is to be in crisis. The threats of a crisis are clear: mental and emotional balances are upset; familiar routines are disturbed; the sense of being in control is removed; new ways of thinking and coping must be shaped. Crises bring about a collision between our craving for control, stability and permanence and the reality that life includes chaos, disequilibrium and upheaval. Loss of control and an accompanying sense of helplessness force us to face again the fragility of life and the myth of our personal invincibility. Hospitalization can clearly be a time of emotional and spiritual crisis, as well as a time for dealing with physical problems that create a medical crisis.

Hospitalization is a time of emotional and spiritual crisis.

A sound medical program is concerned for the health of the whole person. It touches the body and mind, the psychosocial being and the spiritual self. Suffering, both physical and emotional, is experienced not just by bodies, but by whole persons. Care must not focus solely on disease or injury, but on every part of the self, the wholeness of which is threatened. Medical treatment enables healing, but healing must come out of the self. The resources of faith open the life of the patient to stretch beyond immediate pain and fear to the deeper mysteries of the mind, the emotions, the will and the soul where the power of healing resides. Thus, **any holistic approach to medical care must take into account the spiritual aspects of patients.** It is at this point that spiritual leaders enter into the life and treatment of patients. In a Veterans Affairs (VA) health care setting, these spiritual leaders are endorsed clergy who are employed as chaplains to minister to patients, patient families, and hospital personnel.

What is the role of pastoral care in a health care environment? The task of pastoral care is to join the sufferer, to enter the pain, to engage the absurdity, to descend into the patient's individual hell, not to minimize or mitigate the suffering, but to help the sufferer put the suffering into perspective. A primary role is careful active listening, seeking to engage the patient and, when the patient's personal needs or fears can be dis-

cerned, responding in helping ways. The task is to help persons accept the reality of their situation, to explore the deeper meaning of suffering for their lives and realize their personal spiritual resources. Other roles include that of comforter, sacramentalist, faith witness, and personal resource to patients, patient families, medical staff and administrators. The VA chaplain is a caring, non-demanding, non-manipulative presence; the visible evidence of the Holy and the embodiment of Love.

The VA chaplain is a visible evidence of the Holy.

Why have chaplains in Veterans Affairs hospitals? Can't local parish clergy located near hospitals provide spiritual care for patients? In a word - No. First, parish clergy are employed by specific congregations to meet the needs of their employing community. The work week of the average clergy person is sixty hours. This leaves little time or opportunity for structured volunteer work outside their parish.

Of greater significance, the role of a health care chaplain differs radically from that of a parish clergy person. Hospital chaplaincy is a unique ministry setting, the nature of which requires clergy who are properly prepared by education, training and commitment. Those parish clergy who have time for volunteer service in VA hospitals are apt not to have the specialized education and training required and are more prone to do so out of missionary zeal with a narrow denominational focus. It is quite possible for clergy without proper training to do more harm than good to patients.

The role of a VA health care chaplain differs radically from that of a parish clergy person.

A VA health care chaplain must be willing and able to serve as a fully functioning member of the healing team. To be effective in this role chaplains must be professionally qualified in their specialty as are the other members of the healing team. They must be comfortable in a high stress environment and must not be intimidated when called to minister as a part of crisis

intervention. They must be completely comfortable working with all persons without reference to issues of race, age, social class, gender, national origin and personal religious faith or lack of any faith. They must be committed to continuing education that will make them valuable members of any committee working on ethical issues related to the practice of medicine. Finally, they must provide by their presence a continual witness to the healing mandate of their particular faith community.

VA chaplains are religious leaders who represent a specific faith tradition while seeking to enable ministry to persons of all faith communities.

Today, Veterans Affairs chaplains can be found in such diverse settings as general hospitals, acute care hospitals, cancer, dialysis, transplant or spinal cord injury centers, post traumatic stress disorder clinics, sub-acute care facilities, nursing homes, drug care and mental health facilities and hospices. Wherever they serve, VA chaplains are committed to the spiritual well-being of every person within their institution. Chaplains are never asked to violate their own religious convictions nor do they pressure patients, patient families, or staff to violate their spiritual convictions and faith traditions, but rather seek to reach people where they are in their faith journey. They are committed to the *Code of Ethics* which their respective religious bodies in collegiality have prepared and affirm. Basic to a VA chaplain's ability to serve in a health care setting is the chaplain's willingness to work as an equal with representatives of other faith traditions and to work with all persons in their institutions at the individual's point of need.

VA chaplains serve to improve the healing environment.

Respect for persons and commitment to the moving of persons through the healing process, whatever the nature of their problems, determines the way chaplains relate to persons in the health care environment. Towards that end, VA chaplains provide services of worship, sacramental administration, a variety of religious literature, counseling, small group programs on issues of patient interest, emergency ministrations and simple ministry of presence. Many chaplains serve on special institutional organizations such as ethics com-

mittees and review boards as well as numerous other committees and task forces which aim to improve the healing environment for all persons involved in the institution's life and work.

Where do Veterans Affairs chaplains come from? VA chaplains represent the wide variety of faith communities and diversity of persons that are part of the American culture. Many of them come to this ministry after having served as a military chaplain bringing with them valuable experience in ministry to their unique patient population and provide continuity which can be an asset to their VA ministry. Others come from civilian hospital settings and still others from parish ministry. Regardless of their source, all come having the endorsement of their own faith community. The faith communities of America have clear standards for determining the suitability of their clergy to serve in health care settings. Service as a chaplain in the Department of Veterans Affairs requires the endorsement of the religious body with which the clergyperson is affiliated and one that is recognized by the Department of Defense. Normally, this means the person must have clergy status in the faith community, possess the requisite educational qualifications and demonstrate competence for hospital ministry. Of particular importance is the spiritual maturity and cooperative spirit necessary to work effectively in a high stress and emotionally demanding interfaith environment.

Veterans Affairs chaplains are prepared by education, training, commitment and are endorsed by a recognized faith community.

In summary, Veterans Affairs health care chaplaincy is a unique ministry requiring endorsed clergypersons who are properly prepared by calling, education, training and commitment to minister in a medical environment. These clergy must have a genuine love of people and be dedicated to serving all persons within the institution without reference to title or position. They must be in good standing with their faith community and maintain a close relationship with their ecclesiastical superiors. Finally, they must be committed to an ongoing process of personal, spiritual and professional growth.

VA chaplains are a central part of the caring and healing community which enables *America to keep its promise to those who served.*

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Endorsers Conference for Veterans Affairs Chaplaincy (ECVAC)

and constituents of the following religious organizations:

African Methodist Episcopal Church	Independent Catholic Church International
African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church	International Council of Community Churches
American Association of Lutheran Churches, The	Islamic Society of North America
American Baptist Association	Jewish Welfare Board Jewish Chaplains Council
American Baptist Churches in the USA	Korean American Presbyterian Church
Assemblies of God	Lutheran Church in America, Evangelical
Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, The	Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod
Associated Gospel Churches	National Missionary Baptist Convention
Baptist General Conference	National Association of Evangelicals
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Bible Presbyterian Church	National Baptist Convention, USA
Buddhist Churches of America	Old Holy Catholic Church
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Charismatic Episcopal Church of North America	Orthodox Church in America
Christ-Immanuel Ministerial Association	Orthodox Presbyterian Church
Christian and Missionary Alliance	Pentecostal Holiness Church, International
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	Presbyterian & Reformed Joint Commission on Chaplains
Christian Churches and Churches of Christ	Presbyterian Church (USA)
Christian Reformed Church of North America	Presbyterian Church in America
Church of Christ	Presbyterian Council for Chaplains & Military Personnel
Church of God (Cleveland, TN)	Progressive National Baptist Convention
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints	Reformed Church in America
Church of the Nazarene	Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America
Congregational Christian Churches	Regular Baptist Churches
Conservative Baptist Association of America	Rhema Bible Church
Continental Baptist Churches	Roman Catholic Church
Cumberland Presbyterian Church in America	Seventh-day Adventists, U. S. General Conference of
Episcopal Church	Southern Baptist Convention
Episcopal Missionary Church	Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops
Evangelical Covenant Church	United Church of Christ
Evangelical Presbyterian Church	United Methodist Church
Free Methodist Church of North America	United Pentecostal Church of Christ
Full Gospel Churches International	Unity Churches, Association of
Full Gospel Fellowship of Churches and Ministers International	Wesleyan Church
Grace Brethren Churches	World Council of Independent Christian Churches

The Endorsers Conference for Veterans Affairs Chaplaincy (ECVAC) is a unique body of representatives from a wide variety of religious organizations in the United States. (There are currently 70 federally recognized religious organizations which are participants.) The common bond is to endorse and support chaplains in the Department of Veterans Affairs who represent their own faith communities. Endorser/participants of ECVAC serve as a point of contact between religious organizations and the Department of Veterans Affairs on chaplaincy and faith issues of significance to religious communities. ECVAC is a nonprofit organization supported by the above religious bodies and voluntary contributions.

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