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## U.S. House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

ONE HUNDRED THIRTEENTH CONGRESS

335 CANNON HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING

WASHINGTON, DC 20515

<http://veterans.house.gov>

January 3, 2014

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Ave. NW  
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki,

I am writing regarding media reports that VA personnel recently took steps to curtail the celebration of Christmas at a number of VA facilities around the country. Among the allegations:

- VA officials in Iowa City, Iowa, told American Legion representatives they could not hand out gifts to veterans if the wrapping paper included the words "Merry Christmas"
- The Augusta, Ga., VA Medical Center has banned carolers from singing Christmas songs containing religious references in public patient areas, but approved caroling from a list of "government approved" secular songs
- Dallas VA Medical Center leaders prevented the delivery of handwritten Christmas cards from local school children to veterans because the cards contained phrases such as "Merry Christmas" and "God Bless You"
- VA personnel at the Montgomery, Ala., VA Medical Center prevented gift bags from being delivered to veterans because they included the words "Merry Christmas"

In defending these incidents, VA officials have cited the need to "be respectful of our veterans' religious beliefs." But there is nothing disrespectful about celebrating Christmas. Furthermore, it is not up to the department to decide whether or not it's appropriate for certain government entities, such as VA, to allow the recognition of Christmas. That decision was made in the 1800s when our government formally declared Christmas a federal holiday. To this day, the federal government honors and celebrates Christmas in a variety of very public ways, including providing paid time off to many federal employees and events such as the lighting of the National Christmas Tree.

Even though we are a nation of many faiths, our government's recognition of Christmas – a religious holiday by nature – is not devoid of religious references. In fact, at the Dec. 6, 2013, National Christmas Tree lighting ceremony, President Obama said that "through a life of humility and the ultimate sacrifice, a life guided by faith and kindness towards others, Christ assumed a mighty voice, teaching us lessons of compassion and charity that have lasted more

than two millennia,” and later described Jesus’ message as “timeless and universal -- no matter what God you pray to, or if you pray to none at all.” The President’s well-chosen words correctly recognize those lessons but do not proselytize or seek to impose them on anyone.

Because Christmas is a federal holiday and VA is a federal entity, VA patients, volunteers and veterans service organizations should be free to respectfully honor it without obstruction or censorship from VA. Unfortunately, it appears some VA officials seem to disagree with this concept. In taking it upon themselves to restrict Christmas cards, carols and gifts in certain locations, VA officials clearly ignored longstanding federal government traditions, basic common sense and possibly a 2011 federal consent decree that ordered VA not to ban religious speech.

Please provide to this committee no later than Jan. 20, 2014, an overview of the steps you are taking to correct this problem, including copies of all policy guidance to the field on this issue. Additionally, please describe what has been done to hold those VA employees responsible for the aforementioned incidents in Iowa City, Augusta, Dallas, Montgomery or any other locations accountable for what I believe may be violations of basic constitutional and/or civil rights.

Thank you again for your dedication to our nation’s veterans. If you have any questions please contact Jon Towers, Staff Director of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs at 202-225-3527.

Sincerely,



**Jeff Miller**  
Chairman  
House Veterans’ Affairs Committee

JM/cc