

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-0102

January 2, 2014

The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki
U.S. Department Of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20420-0001

Dear Secretary Shinseki,

I am deeply concerned about a recent incident in my district in which Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) personnel prevented a young woman from providing gift bags and holiday cards to veteran-patients solely on the basis that the gifts included the words "Merry Christmas." The incident occurred at the Central Alabama Veterans Health Care System Medical Center (VAMC) in Montgomery on the day before Christmas, a federally recognized holiday.

As described in the attached WSFA news article, 20-year old Jordan McLendon made more than 100 gift bags and handmade Christmas cards to deliver to veterans at the VAMC in Montgomery, Alabama. She did so to honor her late grandfather, a Vietnam veteran, and because she feared that many older patients at the hospital lack living family members and therefore receive few visits during the Christmas season. Despite calling in advance and receiving prior approval, Ms. McLendon was denied the opportunity to distribute the gifts. According to news reports, the acting-Director of the hospital made this decision based on his understanding of existing guidelines promulgated by the VA's central office in Washington.

I have personally spoken to Ms. McLendon to discuss this matter and to confirm the details of the news account. Ms. McLendon's actions are a prime example of the selfless, patriotic, and community-minded acts that we should encourage. Instead, Ms. McLendon's government blocked her good work.

My frustration is not with the VA staff at the local facility, who appear to have reluctantly enforced what they believed to be an existing regulation. I understand that similar incidents have occurred at other VA facilities in the past.

Rather, my concern is that such a senseless policy exists to begin with, or, in the case that no such policy expressly prohibits mentioning Christmas in cases like this, that the culture of bureaucracy at the VA would encourage facility administrators to err on the side of suppressing religious expression and discouraging acts of kindness toward veterans.

Accordingly, I write today to ask that you:

1. Provide the text of any and all applicable policies, regulations, or guidelines that expressly prohibit the distribution of material in VA facilities that include the word Jesus, Christ, Christmas, or similar, or in the alternative, if no such policy exists,
2. Provide a clear description of what affirmative steps you have taken or will immediately take to explain, clarify, or amend existing policies to ensure that this outcome is not repeated in the future.

Perhaps this matter may seem trivial to some. I assure you that it is not trivial to the constituents in my district, home to one of the highest veteran retiree populations in the country. This sort of political correctness defies common sense and, to many Americans, is offensive. I have little doubt that there would be even greater public interest in this incident if a government policy had been invoked to refuse gifts containing non-Christian religious language.

I recognize that your department faces many important challenges while providing care for our veteran population, but I urge you to take swift action to rectify this situation at the earliest possible opportunity.

Thank you for your time and attention to this matter. I look forward to your prompt reply by Wednesday, January 8, 2014.

Very truly yours,



Martha Roby
Member of Congress

Montgomery VA refuses to let woman give 'Christmas' gifts to veterans

Dec 27, 2013 9:15 PM
By Bryan Henry

MONTGOMERY, AL (WSFA) - Jordan McLendon simply wanted to honor her late grandfather who was a Vietnam veteran.

"I made over a hundred goodie bags. I put candy in the goodie bags and I wrote out over a hundred Christmas cards," McClendon explained.

McLendon spent two days making the gifts which she wanted to deliver to all the veterans at the VA Hospital on Perry Hill Road in Montgomery. She said she did it because many veterans don't get visits from their family on Christmas.



When McLendon arrived on Christmas Eve morning, a VA official told her she couldn't deliver all of them because some of the cards and bags had 'Merry Christmas' on them.

"I wasn't mad, McClendon said, "I was just speechless."

McLendon told WSFA 12 News she had been assured by a receptionist on the phone before she made the trip from Wetumpka that the items were acceptable.

Dr. Cliff Robinson is the acting director for the VA Hospital. Robinson declined an opportunity to go on camera. Robinson did say, however, the VA cannot give the impression that it favors one religion. He

says these are not his rules but guidelines handed down years ago by the VA Administration in Washington, D.C.

Dr. Robinson added the VA in Montgomery has a diverse population with various backgrounds and strives to respect all beliefs.

In fact, Robinson said some veterans told VA officials they did not want to hear Christmas carolers three Christmases ago.

Even McLendon admitted the VA official who wouldn't allow her to deliver all the cards and bags was nice about the situation, but she still doesn't understand why this has to be.

"He actually kept on saying how sorry he was," McLendon explained, "that it wasn't his fault."

"He could see the tears in my eyes and was apologetic. He said this was beyond his control, but these veterans fought for our country and I can't do this for them?" McLendon asked.

The 20-year old McLendon ended up delivering just 18 bags and 2 cards because they were generic enough to pass the VA's guidelines.

Asked whether he personally agreed with the guidelines, Dr. Robinson had 'no comment.'

Meantime, Dr. Robinson applauded McLendon's good intentions and big heart but insisted rules are rules.

For McLendon she got an unexpected lesson on government policies on Christmas Eve.

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