

The VA and Religion

From the Associated Press (1-10-07):

The Department of Veterans Affairs' increasing use of religion in treating ailing veterans does not violate the separation of church and state, a federal judge has ruled.

U.S. District Judge John Shabaz dismissed a lawsuit by the Madison-based Freedom From Religion Foundation and defended the agency's practices in his decision Monday, saying religion can help patients heal and is legal when done on a voluntary basis....

The group's president, Annie Laurie Gaylor, said Tuesday it would appeal the ruling...

The lawsuit challenged the agency's practice of giving most patients spiritual assessments that ask questions about faith, such as how often they attend church and how important religion is in their lives. Agency officials say the assessments help them determine patients' needs.

The suit also targeted VA drug and alcohol treatment programs that incorporate religion, the integration of its chaplain program into patient care and the expansion of chaplain services for outpatient veterans instead of just those at VA hospitals.

The veterans' agency, which treated 5.3 million people at its facilities in 2005, acknowledged it believes spirituality should be integrated into care but said it allows patients to decide whether that involves religion.

[The judge said that] "The choice to receive spiritual care, the choice to complete a spiritual assessment, and the choice to participate in a religious or spiritually based treatment program always remains the private choice of the

veteran...Accordingly, there is no evidence of governmental indoctrination of religion."