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Bannister

4/10/14

HOUSE CS FOR CS FOR SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 24(MLV)

IN THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF ALASKA

TWENTY-EIGHTH LEGISLATURE - SECOND SESSION

BY THE HOUSE SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON MILITARY AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS

Offered:

Referred:

Sponsor(s): SENATORS HUGGINS, McGuire, Micciche, Kelly, Bishop, Giessel, Meyer, Dunleavy

A RESOLUTION

1 **Relating to certain holiday practices at federal Veterans Health Administration**
2 **facilities.**

3 **BE IT RESOLVED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF ALASKA:**

4 **WHEREAS**, in December 2013, federal Veterans Health Administration facilities in
5 Texas, Georgia, Iowa, and Alabama violated the religious freedom rights of convalescing
6 veterans in their care; and

7 **WHEREAS** a Veterans Health Administration hospital in Dallas, Texas, did not
8 distribute to the veterans in its care holiday cards that used certain language, including "Merry
9 Christmas" and "God bless you"; and

10 **WHEREAS** a Veterans Health Administration hospital in Augusta, Georgia, denied
11 Christmas carolers from the local high school the opportunity to sing in public areas of the
12 hospital; and

13 **WHEREAS** two other Veterans Health Administration facilities in Iowa and Alabama
14 prohibited the distribution of Christmas gifts and Christmas gift bags; and

15 **WHEREAS** a Veterans Health Administration official cited the policy of the Veterans

1 Health Administration for the nondistribution of the holiday cards; and

2 **WHEREAS** the Veterans Health Administration official stated that, in order to
3 respect veterans' religious beliefs, all donated holiday cards are reviewed by a
4 multidisciplinary team of staff led by the chaplaincy services to determine whether the cards
5 are appropriate and can be freely distributed to patients; and

6 **WHEREAS** the Veterans Health Administration official stated that the process for
7 reviewing holiday cards was not fully explained to the particular group involved and
8 apologized for any misunderstanding; and

9 **WHEREAS** the officials at the Veterans Health Administration facilities described in
10 this resolution ignored the policies established by the United States Secretary of Veterans
11 Affairs regarding holiday practices at the facilities; and

12 **WHEREAS** those holiday cards, gifts, and presentations came from caring citizens,
13 including young children, who took the time to recognize the heroic actions of men and
14 women who have sacrificed so much in the service of their country in times of both peace and
15 war; and

16 **WHEREAS**, although Christmas Day has origins in religious beliefs, it is recognized
17 as a civic holiday for federal employees; and

18 **WHEREAS** the Veterans Health Administration violates the right to religious
19 freedom of the veterans in its care by not allowing them to receive certain holiday cards and
20 gifts and to attend certain presentations;

21 **BE IT RESOLVED** that the Alaska State Legislature condemns the actions of the
22 Veterans Health Administration officials that prohibited religious holiday messages and gifts
23 from being conveyed to veterans at Veterans Health Administration facilities and respectfully
24 requests that the United States Secretary of Veterans Affairs ensure that the violations of
25 veterans' rights described in this resolution do not occur again; and be it

26 **FURTHER RESOLVED** that the Alaska State Legislature finds it unconscionable
27 that the established policies of the United States Secretary of Veterans Affairs on holiday
28 practices at Veterans Health Administration facilities are being ignored and respectfully
29 requests that the United States Secretary of Veterans Affairs follow the established policies on
30 holiday practices at Veterans Health Administration facilities and train personnel on those
31 policies so that the violations of veterans' rights described in this resolution do not occur

1 again; and be it

2 **FURTHER RESOLVED** that the Alaska State Legislature respectfully requests that
3 the United States Secretary of Veterans Affairs provide each member of the Alaska State
4 Legislature with a written assurance that the actions of the Veterans Health Administration
5 officials described in this resolution do not reflect the policies on holiday practices at
6 Veterans Health Administration facilities.

7 **COPIES** of this resolution shall be sent to the Honorable Barack Obama, President of
8 the United States; the Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr., Vice-President of the United States and
9 President of the U.S. Senate; the Honorable John Boehner, Speaker of the U.S. House of
10 Representatives; the Honorable Nancy Pelosi, Minority Leader of the U.S. House of
11 Representatives; the Honorable Harry Reid, Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate; the
12 Honorable Mitch McConnell, Minority Leader of the U.S. Senate; the Honorable Bernie
13 Sanders, Chair, U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs; the Honorable Richard Burr,
14 Ranking Member, U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs; the Honorable Eric K.
15 Shinseki, United States Secretary of Veterans Affairs; Verdie Bowen, Director, Office of
16 Veterans Affairs, Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs; and the Honorable Lisa
17 Murkowski and the Honorable Mark Begich, U.S. Senators, and the Honorable Don Young,
18 U.S. Representative, members of the Alaska delegation in Congress; and all other members of
19 the 113th United States Congress.