

CS FOR SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION NO. 24(STA)

IN THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF ALASKA

TWENTY-EIGHTH LEGISLATURE - SECOND SESSION

BY THE SENATE STATE AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Offered: 3/12/14

Referred: Rules

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

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

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

18 **BE IT RESOLVED** that the Alaska State Legislature respectfully requests that the
19 United States Secretary of Veterans Affairs reconsider the policies on holiday practices at
20 Veterans Health Administration facilities and rewrite those policies so that the violations of
21 veterans' rights described in this resolution do not occur again; and be it

22 **FURTHER RESOLVED** that the Alaska State Legislature respectfully requests that
23 the United States Secretary of Veterans Affairs provide each member of the Alaska State
24 Legislature with a copy of the rewritten policies on holiday practices at Veterans Health
25 Administration facilities.

26 **COPIES** of this resolution shall be sent to the Honorable Barack Obama, President of
27 the United States; the Honorable Joseph R. Biden, Jr., Vice-President of the United States and
28 President of the U.S. Senate; the Honorable John Boehner, Speaker of the U.S. House of
29 Representatives; the Honorable Nancy Pelosi, Minority Leader of the U.S. House of
30 Representatives; the Honorable Harry Reid, Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate; the
31 Honorable Mitch McConnell, Minority Leader of the U.S. Senate; the Honorable Eric K.

1 Shinseki, United States Secretary of Veterans Affairs; Verdie Bowen, Director, Office of
2 Veterans Affairs, Department of Military and Veterans' Affairs; and the Honorable Lisa
3 Murkowski and the Honorable Mark Begich, U.S. Senators, and the Honorable Don Young,
4 U.S. Representative, members of the Alaska delegation in Congress; and all other members of
5 the 113th United States Congress.