

June 29, 2026

The Honorable Virginia Foxx
Chair
House Rules Committee
H-312, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable James P. McGovern
Ranking Member
House Rules Committee
H-152, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chair Foxx and Ranking Member McGovern:

The undersigned national religious, religious freedom, and civil rights and civil liberty organizations write to urgently request that Congress protect the religious freedom of service members in the National Defense Authorization Act. First we urge you to reject any effort to upend the military chaplaincy, misleadingly called a “modernization.” Second, we urge you to rescind the Department of Defense May 20, 2026, memorandum regarding implementation guidance for updated religious affiliation codes, issued under the guise of helping chaplains, and restore the more comprehensive faith and belief codes instituted in 2017.

Military chaplains serve all service members and their families. For more than two hundred years, military chaplains have fostered a reputation for putting the needs of service members first. Chaplains are called to serve the religious and spiritual needs of all in their care. They are distinct from other religious leaders who are called to specifically serve those within their own religious community. But now, the “modernization” efforts and spartan list of religious affiliation codes threaten the role of chaplains and would harm service members’ religious freedom.

The push to “modernize” the military chaplaincy is troubling and would significantly change its mission. These efforts would impede commanders’ ability to provide for service members’ religious exercise and promote their resilience and well-being. They would abandon chaplains’ obligation to operate in a pluralistic environment. Indeed the “modernization” effort would allow chaplains to point to religion to refuse to carry out their duties, including facilitating service members’ free exercise, providing care and counseling to service members and their families, and assessing the needs of service members within a command. It would give chaplains a right to proselytize service members and demand to invoke their religious traditions to pray or engage in faith-based counseling rather than provide spiritual and emotional support according to the dictates of service members’ conscience.

At the same time, the Department of Defense has drastically reduced the number of religious affiliation codes available for service members to select from in their personnel records from 216 to 30, officially erasing religious diversity of service members. The new, limited codes force most service members to choose either generic labels that conflate distinct Christian or Jewish denominations or catch-all “other” or “no religion” labels that entirely erase data about minority religious and belief communities. The military relies on those religious codes to set policy, allocate resources, and train chaplains to operate in a pluralistic environment and serve the diverse needs of service members in their care. Service members rely on accurate faith and belief codes to ensure their convictions are respected throughout their military careers. These codes allow personnel to promptly secure essential religious accommodations, including dietary, grooming, and holy day requirements, while ensuring that families don’t face hurdles to lay their fallen loved ones to rest in accordance with their beliefs.

The gaps in the data will do nothing to provide “chaplains with clear, readily available information that will better enable them to anticipate the religious support needs of Service members” as the May 20 memorandum claims. Rather, the lack of information would exacerbate efforts to abandon chaplains’ obligations to serve a religiously diverse population.

Like all Americans, military personnel and their families have a right to religious freedom that is guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. Congress has not only the power but the responsibility to protect their religious freedom. Allowing service members to follow their beliefs and ensuring chaplains are prepared to provide them care are both vital to achieving resilience, military readiness, unit cohesion, and mission accomplishment.

Throughout our history, military chaplains have capably served the religious and spiritual needs of everyone in their care. We urge you to protect their ability to continue to uphold this honorable duty and defend the religious freedom of all service members. Thank you for your consideration. Please direct any questions to Rachel Deitch at the American Humanist Association (rdeitch@americanhumanist.org) or Dena Sher at Americans United for Separation of Church and State (sher@au.org).

Sincerely,

Alliance of Baptists
American Atheists
American Civil Liberties Union
American Humanist Association
Americans United for Separation of Church and State
Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty
Bend the Arc: Jewish Action
Center for Inquiry (CFI)
Circle Sanctuary
The Coalition of Spirit-filled Churches
Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, U.S. Region
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship
Council of Bishops, United Methodist Church
The Episcopal Church
Faith in Public Life Action
FFRF Action Fund
Forum on the Military Chaplaincy
Hindus for Human Rights
Interfaith Alliance
Japanese American Citizens League
Jewish Council for Public Affairs
Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC)
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
National Council of Jewish Women
NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice
People For the American Way
Presbyterian Peace Fellowship
Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism
The Secular Coalition for America
Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF)
The Sikh Coalition
Unitarian Universalist Association
United Church of Christ