

October 27, 2026

The Honorable Jack Reed
Ranking Member
Senate Armed Services Committee
728 Hart Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Adam Smith
Ranking Member
House Armed Services Committee
2264 Rayburn Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader
U.S. Senate
S-221 Capitol Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Hakeem Jeffries
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
H-204 Capitol Building
Washington, DC 20515

Ranking Member Reed, Ranking Member Smith, Leader Schumer, and Leader Jeffries:

The undersigned national religious, religious freedom, and civil rights and civil liberty organizations strongly urge you to remove the “Military Chaplains Modernization Act of 2026” (MCMA) from the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2027.

The push to “modernize” would controversially and significantly change the mission of the chaplaincy. The provision would impede commanders’ ability to provide for service members’ religious exercise and promote their resilience and well-being. It 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.

For more than two hundred years, military chaplains have fostered a reputation for caring for all service members and their families, regardless of their faith or belief. Chaplains are distinct from other religious leaders who are called to specifically serve those within their own religious community. Chaplains serve the religious and spiritual needs of all in their care. But, the “modernization” provision threatens the role of chaplains and would harm service members’ religious freedom.

The Constitution and federal law already protect chaplains’ religious freedom. A chaplain cannot be required to perform any rite, ritual, or ceremony that is contrary to their conscience, moral principles, or religious beliefs. And if a chaplain cannot support a service member’s specific request for care—because of their religious endorsing organization’s teachings—the chaplain must offer referral to another chaplain or professional. These protections already ensure that chaplains’ and service members’ religious freedom rights are upheld and ensure service members get the care they need.

Congress has not only the power but the responsibility to protect the religious freedom of our service members. Military chaplains have capably served the religious and spiritual needs of everyone in their care for centuries. We urge you to protect their ability to uphold this honorable duty and defend the religious freedom of all service members by ensuring MCMA is not made law through the NDAA for FY 2027.

Thank you for your consideration. Please contact Dena Sher (Sher@au.org) or Rachel Deitch (rdeitch@americanhumanist.org) with any questions.

Signed,

ACLU
Alliance of Baptists
American Atheists
American Humanist Association
Americans United for Separation of Church and State
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty
Bend the Arc: Jewish Action
Center for Inquiry (CFI)
The Coalition of Spirit-filled Churches
Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, U.S. Region
Cooperative Baptist Fellowship
FaithWorks
Forum on the Military Chaplaincy
Hindus for Human Rights
Interfaith Alliance
JACL
Jewish Council for Public Affairs
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
Shoulder to Shoulder Campaign
The Sikh Coalition
United Church of Christ

Cc: Sen. Elizabeth Warren
Sen. Richard Blumenthal
Sen. Mazie Hirono
Sen. Tammy Duckworth
Rep. Chrissy Houlahan
Rep. Sara Jacobs
Rep. Marilyn Strickland
Rep. Jill Tokuda
Rep. Gil Cisneros
Rep. Maggie Goodlander