

February 18, 2020

Conrad Washington
Deputy Director
Center for Faith and Opportunities Initiatives
Office of the Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

Re: AQ75-Joint Proposed Rule-Equal Participation of Faith-Based Organizations in Veterans Affairs Programs: Implementation of Executive Order 13831 (RIN 2900-AQ75)

Dear Mr. Washington,

I write on behalf of the Union for Reform Judaism, whose nearly 850 congregations across North America encompass 1.5 million Reform Jews, and the Central Conference of American Rabbis, whose membership includes more than 2,000 Reform rabbis, in response to the proposed rule entitled “AQ75-Joint Proposed Rule-Equal Participation of Faith-Based Organizations in Veterans Affairs Programs: Implementation of Executive Order 13831” (RIN 2900-AQ75). This proposed rule is an attack on religious freedom and will harm marginalized veterans and their families, including LGBTQ people, women, and religious minorities, seeking benefits. Accordingly, we urge the Department to withdraw the proposed rule.

We also object to the unusually short 30-day period provided for public comment. The administration issued eight interconnected but distinct proposed regulations on the same day. Given the complexity and wide-ranging impact of these proposed rules, 30 days does not allow organizations such as ours a meaningful opportunity to comment.

The proposed rule includes several harmful changes that would authorize discrimination against marginalized communities seeking veterans’ benefits. We are concerned that the rule would strip the rights of beneficiaries and employees of faith-based organizations that provide government-funded social services. The proposal would also eliminate the alternative provider and written notice requirements, expand exemptions allowing religious organizations to discriminate in employment, broaden religious exemptions permitting providers to discriminate against beneficiaries, and eliminate

voucher program safeguards. The proposed rule would negatively impact a variety of government-funded veterans benefits programs including the VA Homeless Providers Grant and Per Diem Program and the Supportive Services for Veteran Families program.

Impact of Eliminating the Alternative Provider and Written Notice Requirements

This proposed rule would eliminate an existing requirement that providers refer beneficiaries who are uncomfortable accessing services at a religious provider to an alternative provider. Although religious social service organizations receiving government funding must offer only secular content, individuals may still feel uncomfortable obtaining services at certain providers and may wish to be referred elsewhere. By removing the alternative provider requirement, the proposed rule places a burden upon beneficiaries to identify alternative providers, which might result in beneficiaries being unable to access services at all. In light of other provisions within the proposed rule expanding religious exemptions and eliminating the requirement for secular alternatives, the alternative provider requirement is even more critical.

The proposed rule would also eliminate the requirement that social service providers inform beneficiaries of their religious freedom rights. Current regulations stipulate that a provider may not discriminate against beneficiaries based on their religion or coerce beneficiaries to participate in religious activities. Without appropriate notice, beneficiaries may not understand or be able to exercise their rights and may be vulnerable to proselytization, coercion, or discrimination without recourse. The written notice requirement imposes minimal administrative burden for providers; it should be preserved. Providers must prioritize the rights and well-being of their beneficiaries.

Impact of Allowing Taxpayer-Funded Employment Discrimination

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 allows religiously affiliated employers to prefer co-religionists in employment, and existing regulations extend this exemption to government-funded social service providers. The proposed rule would expand this exemption even further, allowing religious social service providers to “select its employees on the basis of their acceptance of or adherence to the religious tenets of the organization.”¹ Not only would the proposed rule allow service providers to discriminate against employees from different faiths, but it would also open the door to allowing providers to refuse to hire LGBTQ people, someone who uses birth control or had an abortion, someone who is pregnant and unmarried, or anyone else whom the provider believes violates its religious tenets.

Impact of Expanding Religious Exemptions and Discrimination Against Beneficiaries

¹ VA, 85 Fed. Reg. at 2947 (to be codified at 38 CFR pt. 50.2(f)).

In addition to allowing faith-based providers to discriminate in employment practices, the proposed rule would allow discrimination against beneficiaries through multiple provisions expanding religious exemptions and creating new accommodations for religious providers. The proposed rule would also add special notices to grant announcements and awards informing faith-based organizations that they can seek additional religious exemptions from federal laws and regulations governing the program. Such notices actively encourage discrimination against religious minorities, LGBTQ people, and women, whom providers may consider to be in violation of their religious beliefs. For example, an unmarried pregnant veteran might be refused services by a government-funded social service agency providing housing, employment support, or other benefits.

Impact of Eliminating Voucher Safeguards

Finally, the proposed rule eliminates critical safeguards within voucher programs. Even while people may use vouchers for religious programs, current regulations stipulate that a secular alternative must always exist. Yet by redefining “indirect federal financial assistance,” the proposed rule would eliminate the requirement that beneficiaries have the option of a secular provider. The proposed rule would also allow religious providers to require that beneficiaries participate in religious activities and eliminate nondiscrimination protections, thereby allowing providers to discriminate on the basis of religion. As a result, a nonreligious veteran might be forced to seek services from a faith-based provider and might not be aware of alternative providers. Similarly, an LGBTQ veteran at risk of homelessness may be forced to select a faith-based service provider that forces the veteran to participate in religious programming that is hostile to the LGBTQ community.

Jewish text and tradition compel our beliefs in the principles of nondiscrimination and the separation of church and state. Judaism teaches that all people are created *b'tzelem Elohim* (in the image of God) and deserve dignity and respect regardless of their religion, sex, sexual orientation, or gender identity. As it says in Genesis, “And God created human in God’s own image, in the image of God, God created them” (Genesis 1:27). Furthermore, throughout our history, the Jewish people have experienced religious persecution and discrimination. We understand the devastating effects and know that state-backed discrimination quickly becomes a stain on the nation. As we live conscious of this history and of being created in God’s image, we must work to ensure that nobody faces discrimination due to their religious beliefs or any other protected characteristic.

The proposed rule will make it possible for government-funded social service agencies to deny services to already marginalized communities. The well-being of our nations’ veterans and their families must come first, and taxpayer-funded social service providers should never be allowed to choose whom to serve. Allowing discrimination to supersede provision of services will harm the most vulnerable among us. Veterans

should not be denied benefits or be subject to discrimination simply because of who they are.

I urge the Department to rescind this proposed rule and instead work to ensure that all veterans and their families receive the benefits they need without facing discrimination.

Sincerely,
Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner