

Christian Military Chaplains Sue Veterans Affairs for Alleged Mocking

A lawsuit filed Friday alleges that the leader of a San Diego-based Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) chaplain-training program severely mocked two Christian participants because of their faith. One of the chaplains eventually left the program voluntarily because of the treatment; the program leader eventually ejected the other participant.

Military-Veterans Advocacy filed the suit against Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki on behalf of the Conservative Baptist Association of America, the organization that acted as an endorsing agent for the two chaplains.

"No American choosing to serve in the armed forces should be openly ridiculed for his Christian faith, and that is most obviously true for chaplains participating in a chaplain-training program," says retired Commander J.B. Wells, U.S. Navy, executive director of Military-Veterans Advocacy. "Not only was the treatment these men received inappropriate, it was also a violation of federal law and the religious freedom guarantees of the First Amendment."

Chaplains Maj. Steven Firtko, U.S. Army (Ret.) and Lt. Cmdr. Dan Klender, U.S. Navy, entered the San Diego VA-DOD Clinical Pastoral Education Center program in August 2012. Shortly thereafter, the program's supervisor, Nancy Dietsch, began to harass the two men for their beliefs. On various occasions and without provocation, she admonished them not to pray in Jesus' name or cite Scripture, sometimes pounding her fists on her desk, accusing them of "not giving a rat's a—" about Veterans Affairs patients and other members of the military and threatening to fail them. She continued to ridicule them and

their beliefs openly in class.

In February, Klender voluntarily withdrew from the program solely because of Dietsch's harassment. Firtko, whom Dietsch placed on probation, received a letter dated Feb. 15 from the VA and Dietsch notifying him that he would be dismissed from the program on March 1. Both Klender and Firtko filed formal complaints with the VA in July.

The lawsuit, *Conservative Baptist Association of America v. Shinseki*, filed in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, explains that all administrative options have been exhausted and that the harassment the chaplains endured violates the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act, the Administrative Procedures Act and the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.