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COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

Congress of the United States House of Representatives

June 5, 2014

Sloan Gibson
Acting Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Ave NW
Washington, D.C. 20240

Dear Mr. Gibson:

As you are likely aware, many veterans that utilize the Oscar G. Johnson VA Center in Iron Mountain, Michigan have recently become concerned over the installation of curtains to cover objects of a religious nature in the chapel.

The ground on which the Oscar G. Johnson VA stands was broken on March 14, 1948, and the center was completed on March 5, 1950. Many of the permanently affixed objects in the chapel, including stained glass windows, statues, and an altar, are religious in nature. However, they represent symbols from multiple religions (including Christianity and Judaism), as well as items of regional significance. Many of these items have been installed in the chapel for decades, and are historic in nature.

According to the VHA Handbook 1111.02, "Spiritual and Pastoral Care Procedures," facilities that were built prior to 1945 are allowed to retain permanent religious symbols. As this chapel was completed in 1950 yet retains items of historical significance, I write to formally request a waiver for this policy.

I kindly request that you consider the cost of removing permanent structures to the chapel, as well as the related repairs that would be required to bring the facility into compliance as "religiously neutral." It is my understanding that temporary curtains have been placed in the chapel, but discussion of permanent removal of the windows and fixtures has caused undue emotional burden on the local veteran population.

It is the hope of the local community that, at a minimum, the curtains would be allowed to retain an "open until shut" policy, for those who felt the need to worship in an environment free of religious objects. Ideally, many veterans have expressed to me that they would like for the curtains to be permanently removed and the chapel to be restored to its historic nature.

As a former consulting physician at the Oscar G. Johnson VA Center, I ask you to remember the stated vision of the facility as you consider this request: "leaders in rural healthcare-focused on excellence-putting veterans first." I look forward to working with you on this issue, as we continue to put the needs of our veterans first.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Dan Benishek".

Dan Benishek M.D.
Member of Congress
Michigan's First Congressional District