



Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-4302
June 29, 2011

The Honorable Eric Shinseki
Secretary of Veteran Affairs
U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Mr. Secretary:

I bring you disturbing news from Houston, Texas. Members of The American Legion Post 586, Veterans of Foreign Wars District 4 and the National Memorial Ladies, a volunteer group that attends funerals of fallen service members, accuse Houston National Cemetery Director Arleen Ocasio of a widespread and consistent practice of discriminating against private religious speech.

I met with the veterans groups yesterday—what they told me was greatly troubling. In their accusations, veterans describe how Director Ocasio required them to get their prayers pre-approved, forbid them from using words like “God” or “Jesus,” and took the Bibles and the cross out of the chapel before completely closing it. Most people in America believe a funeral and a burial is a religious service. To deny veterans, those who fought for the very freedoms we enjoy today, of their basic and fundamental first amendment right is always wrong, but it is particularly malicious to do so when they are saying goodbye to a loved one.

I ask that you conduct an independent investigation to determine the veracity of these accusations. If these accusations are true, Director Ocasio’s authoritative actions and blatant hostility to the free exercise of religion provision in the first amendment should not be tolerated—she should be immediately removed from her position. I urge you to appoint a more appropriate person who understands the needs of our veterans and respects their religious beliefs to direct the nation’s second largest veterans’ cemetery. Veterans and their families will be awaiting your response.

Sincerely,

A blue ink handwritten signature of Ted Poe, consisting of a stylized 'T' followed by a series of loops and a horizontal line.

Ted Poe
Member of Congress
TEXAS