

Chaplains

Ethical Perspective

- *Chaplains are the sacred portable presence of the divine in environments where God seem absent (Petero Sabune, Chaplain, Sing Sing Correctional Facility)*
- Free exercise of religion is guaranteed by NY and US constitutional amendments.
- Chaplains in institutions have been seen as necessary for over 200 years.
- Holy writings of world religions call followers to care for those society neglects.

Background

- Some whom religious traditions are called to care for are in NY institutions, isolated from family and community – and invisible to most citizens.
- Those in institutions only have free exercise of religion through what the state makes available. The chaplain is key for implementing this.
- For decades, the NYSCC has certified as chaplains only those uniquely suited for institutional chaplaincy. Certification requires a theological degree, pastoral experience and special training such as Clinical Pastoral Education.
- State policy accommodates the religious rights of those in its institutions. But how this is carried out varies from agency to agency and from facility to facility.
- Agencies lack understanding about the role of the chaplain, so chaplains are not used to their full potential. Some facilities see chaplains as part of the care team, but others see them as a nuisance.

Present Situation

- The DOCS has classified chaplains as non-essential employees. In our present budget crisis chaplain vacancies are not being filled. To fill a non-essential position a budget waiver is needed. Ten facilities are now vacant. As long as a budget waiver is needed to fill the position, the vacancies will increase. A few waivers have been granted, others approved were rescinded..
- OMH and OMRDD use an old institutional chaplaincy model. Twenty-five years after deinstitutionalization, they have not developed a plan for the faith needs of their community-based consumers. The agencies are abrogating their responsibility, especially to consumers in state funded private facilities. Their responsibility cannot be met by developing a handbook listing the core beliefs of faith groups for use by non-theologically trained staff.
- Reporting requirements of chaplains shows a lack of respect for clergy confidentiality.

What Will Help

- Consistency in expectations of chaplains
- Training of other employees re role of chaplain
- Classify chaplains as essential and fill vacancies..
- OMH and OMRDD need a clear vision of their responsibility for the free exercise of religion of their consumers.

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Member Denominations

American Baptist Churches, Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Presbyterian Church (USA), Reformed Church in America, Religious Society of Friends, United Church of Christ, The United Methodist Church.