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Sponsor Testimony for H.B. 531, House Education Committee

Chairwoman Fowler-Arthur, Vice Chair Odioso, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the Education Committee, thank you for hearing my testimony supporting H.B. 531, The School Chaplain Act. Here is why.

Mental Health Support for Students and Staff

The rise in mental health challenges among K-12 students is undeniable. Anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation have increased sharply, making schools the first line of defense. School chaplains provide essential emotional and spiritual support for both students and staff, complementing professional counseling services.

School Safety and Preemptive Measures

School safety is a primary concern for schools across the country. Chaplains enhance school safety by operating proactively and taking action before a crisis arises. Rather than merely responding to crises after they occur, chaplains focus on building trust and identifying issues early, preventing them from escalating into emergencies. The proactive approach lies in the unique relationships chaplains develop with students and staff. They help create an environment where students and staff feel safe discussing personal challenges, such as bullying, anger, or family problems. This trust yields critical insight into potential risks allowing for intervention early through counseling or mediation. As a result, schools with chaplains report fewer incidents of bullying, violence, and self-harm.

Character and Moral Development

Schools should play a key role in shaping moral character not only academic abilities. Chaplains promote empathy, respect, and accountability through their support, services, and programming. Their influence extends beyond individual interactions, fostering a culture of kindness and integrity. Chaplains play a critical role in guiding school communities toward positive life choices and healthy relationships. By promoting strong character and positive behaviors, chaplains help create a safer and more supportive school environment where students can thrive academically and personally. Schools with chaplains report: (https://mail.google.com/mail/u/1/#inbox/FMfcgzQcqbThxRljLKftgvCJBtWVgNnD?projector=1&messagePartId=0.2)

- Increase in graduation rates
- Reduction in teen pregnancies
- Reduction in school violence
- Reduction in suicides

What the Bill Does

The School Chaplain Act would permit school districts to utilize volunteer chaplains in K-12 schools – it is permissive, not a mandate. It permits schools to utilize volunteer, not paid chaplains, so it will come at no a cost to schools. Parental permission is required for a minor student to participate in chaplain services. Chaplains must undergo and pass a criminal background check as is required for school employees. Certification by the state board of education is not required but rather endorsement by the chaplain's ecclesiastical authority is required.

A list of these ecclesiastical authorities approved and maintained by the U.S. Department of Defense for use in employing military chaplains can be seen at this link. (https://prhome.defense.gov/M-RA/MPP/AFCB/Endorsements/). This list names 200+ chaplain endorsing authorities from a broad array of faith tradition including Lutheran, Anglican, Roman Catholic, Assembly of God, Baptist, Presbyterian, Jewish, Buddhist, Muslem, Latter Day Saints, Nazarene, and many more.

A Definition of Chaplain
Included in the bill is this definition: "chaplain means a religious professional who has received endorsement or certification by a recognized ecclesiastical endorsing agency and who provides spiritual programming, support, and counseling outside of a traditional church setting in such places as hospitals, the armed services, prisons, law enforcement agencies, and schools."

This definition is widely accepted among chaplain endorsing agencies and was recommended to us by U.S. Major General Douglas L. Carver, who held the position of Chief of Chaplains for the U.S. Military, the highest-ranking officer overseeing military chaplaincy. (Major General Carver offered to come give testimony.)

The bill states that chaplains will provide "support, services, and programs;" but those are not named specifically in the bill. Enumeration of services and programs is left to the discretion of the local school board. Naturally, volunteer chaplains would be mandatory reporters of abuse or neglect of any minor as are all school employees.

There is precedent and rich history of the use of chaplains dating back to the founding of our nation. This history demonstrates the reality that the use of chaplains was never viewed as a violation of church and state. When the Continental Army was established by Congress in 1775, General George Washington called for chaplains in every regiment. Chaplains were assigned to the newly formed Navy. Chaplains have served in every branch of the military since that time and in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives as well, beginning in 1789. Chaplains have served for many years in our nation's law enforcement and fire departments, and prisons. Now, schools in Texas, Florida, and Louisiana have begun utilizing chaplains.

School chaplaincy legislation has been passed into law in those three states, Texas, Florida, and Louisiana. Similar legislation has been introduced in 11 other states: Alabama, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Utah. Nationwide, parents welcome the idea of school chaplains. The June 26, 2025 poll by Associated Press-NORC (National Opinion Research Center) found that "58% think it is okay for religious chaplains to provide support services to students at public schools." https://apnorc.org/projects/the-public-holds-nuanced-views-on-the-role-of-religion-in-public-schools/

This comes at a time when chaplain support, services, and programs have never been more needed. As school districts in every state report students' increasing need for emotional and social support, they also report their shortages of sufficient support staff to supply the need. Additionally, in times of community crisis such as a suicide, natural disaster, or threat to national security, emotional support for students is in high demand. School boards who develop a well vetted and trained team of volunteer chaplains will have an ideal plan to meet their students' need.

Thank you, Chairman Fowler-Arthur, Vice Chair Odioso, Ranking Member Robinson, and members of the committee. We are happy to take your questions at this time.