

Ethics for Chaplains

Ethics: Ethics is a branch of philosophy that deals with the subject of what's morally right or wrong.

For us as chaplains, ethics means in simplest terms that we “do no harm” That's borrowed from the Hippocratic oath. Another way of looking at it is that we should follow the golden rule. Do unto others as you would have done unto you. Treat others the way you want to be treated.

The purpose of chaplaincy ethics

Accountability: Codes of ethics guide our conduct and holds us chaplains accountable for our actions.

Public trust: Upholding these ethical standards helps build and maintain public trust in the chaplaincy.

Safety and well-being: The ethics are designed to ensure the safety and well-being of both those receiving care and the chaplains themselves.

Key Ethical Duties

Confidentiality: Uphold strict confidentiality for all information shared, with clear communication about legal limits, such as mandatory reporting of threats.

Non-proselytizing: Do not engage in evangelizing activities with those who are not share your faith beliefs, but you do retain the right to evangelize those who do.

Competence: Continuously strive to enhance skills and knowledge to provide the best spiritual and emotional support possible. Be a lifelong learner.

Attend monthly training

Find a chaplain mentor

Read books on chaplaincy topics

Ask other chaplains questions and discuss situations and concerns.

Respect for autonomy: Respect individuals' right to make their own decisions.

Avoid exploitation: Never use your position of authority or the trust placed in you for personal gain or to violate a person's right to self-determination.

VFW Chaplain Statement of Ethics and Guiding Principles *on our Website*

1. Chaplains will demonstrate utmost personal and professional integrity: truthfulness, honesty, and compassion to those who they minister to. *The way you talk to people, the way you dress and the courtesies extended to people. Integrity means behave in such a manner that you give no ammunition to fault find in your words and deeds.*

2. Chaplains will provide an objective, appropriate, holistic support and a comforting presence. *Patient, calm, warm, caring, willing to get them the help they need. We don't have all the answers. Holistic in this context means we consider all aspects of humankind: mind, body, spirit.*

3. Chaplains will not proselytize. Those who are cared for will be provided freedom from unwanted gifts of religious literature or symbols, evangelistic and sermonizing speech, or forced acceptance of specific moral values and traditions. *This is one of the most controversial or misunderstood aspects of chaplaincy. What does proselytize mean? It's very similar to the word evangelize. There are many that see the chaplaincy as being an evangelist. This is wrong. Can you share your faith? yes. In fact, it's good to broach the subject of God or spirituality. It can start the conversation. But keep in mind your first task is to find out what they believe and then meet them there. Your task is not to recruit or convince them that your belief is the only one, even though you may feel that way. If they ask you what you personally believe by all means do so. But again, that is not your primary task and in fact would be a violation of the non-sectarian chaplain code of ethics. You can certainly answer theological questions from your perspective if they want to know. Remember you contact must be client centered. You are there to meet their needs, not yours. Don't proselytize, but do deny your faith.*

4. Chaplains will demonstrate sensitivity to all faith traditions and provide appropriate and sensitive spiritual care to all persons in need, irrespective of their religious or nonreligious identity. *We are nonsectarian meaning we are not there to represent a specific faith, rather we minister to all.*

5. Chaplains will not discriminate, with regards to their care, based on sex, age, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disabilities, socioeconomic status, or any other factors that would hamper a person's ability to receive spiritual care.
6. Chaplains will, whenever possible, attempt to locate a spiritual leader within the faith tradition of an affected person, if needed. *Who best understands and is best equipped to help them from a specialized spiritual perspective? Someone of their faith group. Offer to connect them if that is what they need or prefer.*
7. Out of respect for those who are served, Chaplains will maintain confidentiality.
8. Chaplains recognize their personal and professional limits, know their boundaries and make referrals to professionals with appropriate expertise. *You are probably not the expert in their faith or denomination. You are probably not a psychiatrist or psychologist. Refer people and encourage them to get the help they may need. That may be a pastor priest, mental health worker, social worker etc.*
9. Chaplains will do no harm. *In this context it can include things like guilt tripping, manipulation, breaking confidentiality.*
10. Chaplains are volunteers and will take no monetary gifts from those who are served. *If someone tries to give you money tell them you can't accept money, but they can donate to the post or the VFW in general if they are so inclined. We are not here to make money or exploit others.*
11. Chaplains shall adhere to all applicable Codes of Ethical Standards as prescribed by the VFW. *Don't misrepresent yourself or the VFW. Don't exploit or manipulate others. Don't use your position for personal gain. Most departments have a VFW dept code of ethics you can access on their websites. These are worth reviewing. Not that you don't already abide but they are a great review and reminder of what is expected of us.*

Additional Points

As chaplains we are not just contacted for spiritual or ceremonial matters. We can get calls from commanders regarding ethical dilemmas or other sensitive issues. This is very rewarding and encouraging that we are considered that kind of

resource. Once again if you feel you can properly advise and guide do so but never hesitate to ask for help or consultation. That's why we have a chaplaincy chain of command and each other.

Chaplain ethics forbid taking sides *AI summary*

Chaplain ethics strictly forbid taking sides in personal, family, or institutional disputes. Chaplains are to remain neutral, non-partisan. [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#)]

Why Chaplains Must Avoid Taking Sides

- **Maintaining Neutrality:** Chaplains function as a non-judgmental presence for all parties, and aligning with one person or faction instantly destroys credibility with the other. [[1](#), [2](#)]
- **Preventing Triangulation:** Accepting a role as a secret ally or carrying messages between warring family members or coworkers creates toxic divisions rather than healing. [[1](#), [2](#)]
- **Protecting the Care Environment:** A chaplain's duty is to care for the whole person, not to act as a judge, fixer, or private therapist in disputes. [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#)]

Ethical Alternatives to Choosing a Side

- **Fostering Safe conversations:** Help people express emotions (such as anger or grief) without validating attacks or validating toxic agendas. [[1](#)]
- **Maintaining Boundaries:** maintain transparent professional limits so that all involved parties know the chaplain remains fair and trustworthy. [[1](#), [2](#)]
- **Making Professional Referrals:** Directing individuals to formal conflict resolution specialists, licensed counselors, or legal mediators when an issue goes beyond the scope of our chaplaincy. [[1](#), [2](#)]

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Avoid or correct any conflicts of interest or appearance of conflicting interest(s).

Understand the limits of your individual expertise and make referrals to other professionals when appropriate.

Seek the advice and counsel of other professionals whenever it is in the best interest of those being served and make referrals when appropriate.

Do not directly or by implication claim professional qualifications that exceed actual qualifications or misrepresent an affiliation with any institution. Represent yourself honestly.

Promote good relationships with your fellow chaplains; both VFW and other VSOs. We are all team members and need to work together. Never disparage others or compete with them. They are our allies!

Never forget we each represent the VFW, the chaplaincy, God, your church etc. Each one of us has the ability to promote the reputation and effectiveness of the chaplaincy and to damage it. Our words and deeds have an effect far and wide.