News




Archbishop Timothy Broglio of the U.S. Archdiocese of the Military Services celebrates Ash Wednesday Mass at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., March 2, 2022. On March 31, 2023, Walter Reed hospital terminated a contract with Franciscan priests and brothers to provide pastoral care to Catholics. (OSV News/CNS file, courtesy of U.S. Archdiocese of the Military Services)



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Responding to recent comments by military Archbishop Timothy Broglio that Walter Reed National Military Medical Center is refusing to provide adequate pastoral care to Catholic service members and veterans, the hospital said it can still offer Catholic services despite not renewing its contract with the Franciscan friars who served there for 20 years.

In a prepared statement, Walter Reed hospital, located in Bethesda, Maryland, said it has an active-duty U.S. Army Catholic chaplain in its Department of Pastoral Care. When additional support is needed, Walter Reed said, it can call upon three Catholic priests in the capital region as well as priests assigned to other Department of Defense organizations. In addition, the facility said it can call upon Red Cross volunteers and active-duty military chaplains' assistants.

The facility said it "continues to provide religious, spiritual, and emotional care to our patients, staff, and beneficiaries."

Walter Reed did not explain its decision not to award a new contract to the Franciscan Friars of Holy Name Province. The friars' contract ended March 31.

After putting the contract out for bid in mid-March, Walter Reed hospital awarded the new pastoral services contract to Mack Global LLC, a Virginia-based company that provides religious service staffing for the U.S. Air Force and various Defense Department agencies.

In a prepared statement on April 13, the Franciscan Friars of Holy Name Province said they respected the contract-awarding process while adding that they were disappointed "after building trust and so many wonderful relationships and friendships" over 20 years of service at Walter Reed.

"The Franciscans have been blessed for two decades of faithfully and joyfully bringing this ministry of presence, peace, and compassionate pastoral care to our service men and women, and their families, in the hopes of helping them to heal

physically, emotionally and spiritually during the most difficult and challenging times of their lives," the friars said.

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The Franciscans' statement was more conciliatory than that offered by Broglio, who heads the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services. On April 7, he condemned the facility's contract decision "as an encroachment on the First Amendment guarantee of the Free Exercise of Religion."

"It is incomprehensible that essential pastoral care is taken away from the sick and the aged when it was so readily available," said Broglio, who characterized the decision to not renew the Franciscans' contract as "a classic case where the adage 'if it is not broken, do not fix it' applies."

Said Broglio, "I fear that giving a contract to the lowest bidder overlooked the fact that the bidder cannot provide the necessary service. I earnestly hope that this disdain for the sick will be remedied at once and their First Amendment rights will be respected."

In his statement, Broglio claimed that the secular defense contracting firm that will now provide religious service staffing at Walter Reed "cannot fulfill the statement of work in the contract."

Mack Global did not immediately respond to messages seeking a response to Broglio's comments.

While adding that Walter Reed will continue to "support all faiths for their religious, spiritual, and emotional needs including those of the Catholic faith," the military hospital said it is reviewing its contract with Mack Global LLC "to ensure it adequately supports the religious needs of our patients, staff and beneficiaries."

"We just want to make sure the patients' needs are met," Sandy Dean, the communications director of the Defense Health Agency for the National Capital Region Market, told NCR.

On April 4, the federal government issued a cease-and-desist order to the Holy Name Province' Franciscan Friars to stop providing pastoral care at Walter Reed. The

facility said the friars were still providing services there despite their contract having ended on March 31.

Walter Reed said its active-duty Army chaplain provided Catholic liturgies during Holy Week, and bedside service to patients who were unable to attend those liturgies in person.

In their statement, the Holy Name Franciscan Friars said it had been "an incredible privilege — and, really, a very powerful ministerial experience" for them to have been "invited into the lives of these true American heroes who have sacrificed so much for our country."

The friars added: "From administering the sacraments and celebrating Mass, to bedside visits and quiet chats, to being a comforting voice or a good listener, to emergency visits, the Franciscan Friars have ministered with the dignity and respect that these suffering military men and women deserve."

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