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Congressman Sees Progress in Military Prayer Issue

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The lawmaker leading a congressional drive against Air Force guidelines encouraging non-sectarian prayers in certain situations is confident that the White House is looking into the matter, according to the legislator's spokeswoman.

Rep. Walter Jones (R-N.C.) discussed the contested military policy last Thursday with President Bush's Domestic Policy Advisor Claude Allen, and was confident that the matter would receive more attention within the Bush administration.

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"The Congressman was very pleased, because he felt that [Allen] had a good grasp of the issue," said spokeswoman Kathleen Joyce.

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The controversy over military prayer policies stem from larger changes introduced in Air Force policies issued in August, recommending that commanders be more sensitive about discussing faith with subordinates.

On the issue of prayer, the guidelines encouraged "a brief non-sectarian prayer" in events of "special importance." The guidelines also urged that "public prayer should not usually be included in official settings" such as staff meetings, classes and sports events.

The "Interim Guidelines Concerning Free Exercise of

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Religion in the Air Force” were introduced after an official review of allegations that evangelical Christian commanders and upperclassmen cadets pressured others regarding faith at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo.

Lawsuits concerning alleged abuses have been filed.

Some evangelical groups objected specifically to the “non-sectarian” prayer guidelines. Many maintain that it is necessary for Christian chaplains to specifically pray “in Jesus’ name” in any situation where a prayer is made.

Over 70 Washington lawmakers led by Jones signed a petition in October decrying the guidelines about non-sectarian prayer as a euphemism for prayer censorship. The argument made by the legislators for the Executive Order is for religious freedom to be accorded to chaplains to pray according to their faith regardless of what it may be.

Since the guidelines were introduced, conservative Christian groups have shown support for the request, citing the First Amendment right to free expression and accommodation of religion.

In early January, the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) announced that over 200,000 people had added their names to a petition campaign which started after the guidelines were introduced, urging the president to issue an Executive Order. ACLJ Chief Counsel Jay Sekulow said it was “pressure inside the military to censor chaplains and prevent them from praying according to their faith.”

The law center has been working together with Rep. Jones to promote awareness of the matter.

The issue of military restrictions on prayer also received attention recently when Navy Chaplain James Klingenschmitt went on a 19-day fast which ended on Jan. 7 after alleging that the Navy had ordered him that not to pray in public using Jesus’ name while

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wearing his uniform. He ended his fast on Jan. 7 after he says he had been given approval to pray by the Navy.

A navy spokeswoman said that the military branch's policy does not require restrictions on prayer but rather suggests that chaplains be inclusive of other faiths in pluralistic situations.

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