

washingtonpost.com

Atheist soldier alleges discrimination by military Advertisement

By JOHN HANNA

The Associated Press

Friday, September 26, 2008; 7:33 PM

TOPEKA, Kan. -- An atheist soldier says in a federal lawsuit that his superiors required him to be present for Christian prayers, and that the military allows fundamentalist Christians to proselytize.

Spc. Dustin Chalker, a combat medic with an engineering battalion, alleges he was required to attend three events from December 2007 to May 2008 at Fort Riley in which Christian prayers were delivered. Chalker has served in Iraq and Korea.

Chalker and the Military Religious Freedom Foundation filed the lawsuit against Defense Secretary Robert Gates on Thursday in Kansas City, Kan. It alleges violations of the soldier's religious freedoms.

The lawsuit alleges the military allows religious discrimination by fundamentalist Christians who try to force their views on others, especially subordinates. Its examples include programs for soldiers, presentations by "anti-Muslim activists" and a "spiritual handbook" for soldiers endorsed by Gen. David Petraeus, the commander of U.S. forces in the Middle East.

Defense Department spokeswoman Eileen Lainez said Friday the department has received fewer than 50 complaints alleging religious discrimination in the past three years. The armed forces have more than 2.2 million active-duty and Reserve personnel.

"The department respects (and supports by its policy) the rights of others to their own religious beliefs, including the right to hold no beliefs," Lainez said in a statement. "There are systems in place to provide a means to address and resolve any perceived unfair treatment."

Lainez said the department does not comment on pending lawsuits.

In March, the foundation and another atheist soldier at Fort Riley, Pfc. Jeremy Hall, filed a lawsuit raising similar issues. Hall alleges he was harassed by fellow soldiers in Iraq and after he returned late last year to military police duty, and that his promotion to sergeant was blocked.

On the Net:

Department of Defense: <http://www.defenselink.mil>

U.S. District Court for Kansas: <http://www.ksd.uscourts.gov/>

Military Religious Freedom Foundation: <http://www.militaryreligiousfreedom.org>

Fort Riley: <http://www.riley.army.mil>

© 2008 The Associated Press