



DOJ Defunds La. Military Youth Program Over Religious Content

The sheriff of Bossier Parish, Louisiana, has decided that a local chapter of the Young Marines youth outreach his department sponsors will continue with the tradition of prayer, and will continue reciting an oath that embraces faith in God, despite the fact that those actions will cost the organization about \$30,000 a year in funding from the federal Department of Justice (DOJ).

The outreach to youth in Bossier Parish is part of the national [Young Marines](#) program, which describes itself as a “youth education and service program” that “promotes the mental, moral, and physical development of its members.” Among their duties as members, Young Marine participants vow to “keep myself clean in mind by attending the church of my faith.” They are also required to recite the following oath upon joining: “From this day forward, I sincerely promise, I will set an example for all other youth to follow and I shall never do anything that would bring disgrace or dishonor upon my God, my Country and its flag, my parents, myself or the Young Marines. These I will honor and respect in a manner that will reflect credit upon them and myself. Semper Fidelis.”

Bossier Sheriff Julian Whittington said that the program has been very successful in the 10 years the parish has participated — prayer, oath, and all — graduating at least one thousand youth, many of whom have seen a real turnaround in their behavior, attitudes, and actions. He said problems arose after the DOJ performed an audit that uncovered the religious content of the program. “We were informed that these are unacceptable, inherently religious activities and the Department of Justice would not be able to fund the programs if it continued,” Whittington told [Fox News](#). “They wanted a letter from me stating that I would no longer have voluntary prayer and I would also have to remove ‘God’ from the Young Marine’s oath.”

Whittington explained to [local news media](#): “I flat said that it’s not going to happen. Enough is enough. This is the United States of America — and the idea that the mere mention of God or voluntary prayer is prohibited is ridiculous.” He added that the lost funding is the least of his concerns. “The money is not the issue,” he said. “It’s the principle of the matter. What is going on here? Who is dictating what can or can’t be said in Bossier Parish?” He said that “we’ve never had a complaint, and we’re going to keep it





Written by [Dave Bohon](#) on July 15, 2013

in our program as long as we're doing it here at the Bossier Sheriff's Office."

That decision prompted the Louisiana Commission on Law Enforcement to strip the local program of the \$30,000 DOJ funding, with a DOJ official explaining to Fox News that the federal bureaucracy's regulations prohibit "funding of inherently religious activities, such as prayer, religious instruction and proselytization. Any religious activities must be kept separate in time or location from DOJ-funded activities."

Whittington's stand led to an outpouring of support from a number of individuals and groups.

Republican Gov. Bobby Jindal showed up at a July 4 rally in Bossier in support of the local Young Marines program, and said he would do all he could to get the DOJ to reinstate the funding. "The First Amendment guarantees us freedom of religion, not freedom from religion," Jindal said. "It was written to protect people of faith from government officials, and we are going to hold on to that freedom." He added that "we are calling on the Department of Justice to restore the funding to the Young Marines so it can continue improving the lives of our young men and women through prayer."

Similarly, [Liberty Institute](#), a conservative legal advocacy group, stepped up to represent the local group, sending a terse [letter to the DOJ](#) demanding the money be reapplied to the outreach. "We are deeply troubled that the DOJ ... would engage in this type of discrimination by denying permission to fund this outstanding Young Marines program," said Michael Berry, a Liberty Institute attorney and former Marine, in a statement. "The Young Marines is a great organization for boys and girls to learn basic life skills that will enable them to serve their communities as productive citizens. It is shameful that a mere mention of God sends the DOJ officials running as if they had seen a ghost."

However, not all conservative leaders thought the DOJ's defunding of the group was such a bad thing. John F. McManus, president of The John Birch Society and also a former Marine, noted that the U.S. Constitution nowhere makes any entity of the federal government a conduit for funding what ought to be private initiatives. "It's a well-worn truth that what the government funds the government will always try to control," said McManus. "The Young Marines of Bossier are a prime example of that. The DOJ's move to defund the program is really a blessing in disguise."

McManus applauded Sheriff Whittington's refusal to allow the DOJ to dictate the content of the group he oversees, and suggested he continue to adamantly refuse those chains in the future. "No good can come of any such entanglements with government, despite what other well-intentioned — but misguided — individuals and groups may try to argue," he said. "I heartily concur with the sheriff's words directed to the DOJ: 'Keep the money! Game over!'"



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