

**“Naming and Claiming Our Value”
Sample School Chaplain Policy Brief and Resources**

To: Senate Education Committee (the group who will be reviewing the bill)

From: Michele Gourley, MD, MTS, MHL (your name or organization)

Date: February 27, 2026

Re: School Chaplain Bill SB1041 (topic and/or bill number of proposed policy)

Scope of Problem

(outline and evidence of issue being addressed)

In this brief I addressed the following issues:

- The impact of spiritual distress on well-being
- The role religion and spirituality can play in a child’s mental health
- Who chaplains are
- What constitutes a board-certified chaplain
- Why clergy are not chaplains

Here is an excerpt from my Scope of Problem:

“Spiritual distress can cause significant impact to one’s mental, physical, and emotional well-being. Religion and spirituality can play a positive role in children’s mental health. On the other hand, in certain situations, religion and spirituality have a negative impact on children’s well-being.

Chaplains are trained professionals who provide spiritual and emotional support in a variety of settings and whose role is to alleviate and address spiritual distress. The role of a chaplain is defined as one who has completed graduate level training in an academic field related to chaplaincy, chaplaincy training, and adheres to a code of ethics.

Certifying chaplaincy organizations define a board-certified chaplain as one who has completed at least 3 years of graduate training, at least 2000 hours of clinical work, and has completed at least 2-4 chaplaincy education (CPE) units. Certified chaplains are bound to a code of ethics that prohibit proselytizing or evangelizing.

On the other hand, clergy are trained to be experts in their religious or spiritual practices which may include the roles of proselytizing or evangelizing and may not be trained in nor respect the religious and spiritual practices of other belief systems. Clergy may or may not be trained in how to appropriately assess and address spiritual needs and alleviate spiritual distress.”

Financial Impact

(What are the costs, direct and indirect, of the bill? Who will be responsible for the costs?)

For this bill you could include in your financial impact paragraph:

- Number of volunteers needed (I assumed 1-2 days per month per volunteer based on volunteer chaplain requirements for local police departments yielding 10-15 chaplains per month if the school provided full-time chaplain services)
- How many background checks would be needed for the volunteers and the costs
- Who will pay for the background checks
- Where will the funding come from
- How many chaplains would be needed if employed
- How much a chaplain would cost (I used an average salary for TN chaplains of around \$58,000 (I did not add 15-20% to include benefits but you could include benefit costs)
- Other indirect costs such as lawsuits for child abuse or any mistreatment

Here's an excerpt from my financial impact:

“...the financial impact of SB1041 could create up to 97 million dollars in annual expenses. If a volunteer approach were utilized, approximately 17,000-25,500 chaplains would be needed to fully staff Tennessee public schools creating an annual cost of up to half a million dollars in background checks alone.”

Policy Recommendation

(What are the next steps you recommend? Should the bill pass? Is there a better alternative?)

Here is the recommendation I wrote:

“Given the lack of clarity in the definition of the word “chaplain” for SB1041, the lack of requirement of training, certification, and adherence to the ethical standards of professional chaplaincy, as well as the potential fiscal impact, it is recommended at this time to abstain from passing SB1041.”

You could also include any alternatives that you might recommend in this closing paragraph.

Sources Used for SB1041

1. Handzo G, Buhuro D. et al. (2023) A Statement on the Role and Qualifications of Health Care Chaplains for Research and Quality. *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*, Volume 65, Issue 6, e745 - e75.
2. Elzamzamy K, Naveed S and Dell ML (2024) Religion, spirituality, and pediatric mental health: a scoping review of research on religion and spirituality in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* from 2000 to 2023. *Front. Psychiatry* 15:1472629. doi: 10.3389/fpsyt.2024.1472629
3. Requirements and Definitions for Board Certified Chaplains
<https://www.apchaplains.org/bccci-site/becoming-certified/qualifications-for-board-certified-associate-certified-chaplains/>
4. Cadge, W., Lawton, A., Holleman, A., & Roso, J. (2024). Which U.S. Congregational Leaders Also Work as Chaplains? A National Overview. *Review of Religious Research*, 66(1), 81-91. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034673X231222905>

Other Helpful Sources

Patient and Provider Perspectives of Chaplains

Stavig A, Bowlby LA, Oliver JP, Henderson KK, Dillard J, Nickolopoulos E, Hemming P. Patients', Staff, and Providers' Factual Knowledge About Hospital Chaplains and Association with Desire for Chaplain Services. *J Gen Intern Med* [Internet]. 2022 Feb;37(3):697-699. doi: 10.1007/s11606-020-06388-8.

Patient Outcomes

Balboni TA, VanderWeele TJ, Doan-Soares SD, et al. Spirituality in Serious Illness and Health. *JAMA* [Internet] 2022;328(2):184–197. doi:10.1001/jama.2022.11086

Chow R, Tenenbaum L, Balboni TA, Horn E. Medical Outcomes of Oncology Inpatients with and Without Chaplain Spiritual Care Visit: The Yale New Haven Hospital Experience. *Prsic JCO Oncology Practice*. [Internet] 2022 18:3, e334-e338. <https://doi.org/10.1200/OP.21.00600>

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Ehman JW, Edgar JR. Spirituality and Chaplaincy Supporting ICU Survivorship: A Practical Overview and Strategy for Clinicians. *J Relig Health*. [Internet] 2023 Feb;62(1):65-82. doi: 10.1007/s10943-022-01730-2.

Chaplain Staffing Benchmarks

Tartaglia A, Corson T, White KB, Charlescraft A. et al. Chaplain staffing and scope of service: benchmarking spiritual care departments, *J Health Care Chapl* [Internet]. 2022 Sep 14;30(1):1-18. doi: 10.1080/08854726.2022.2121579