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Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., is seen in an Oct. 2, 2020, photo. The Franciscan friars of Holy Name College Friary of Silver Spring, Md., returned to pastoral ministry to military members and veterans who are patients at the medical center June 13, 2023, two months after the U.S. Defense Health Agency decided to end their contract. DHA reopened bidding to provide the services in May and awarded the contract to the Franciscans June 8. (OSV News photo/Joshua Roberts, Reuters)

Gina Christian

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Franciscan priests have returned to pastoral ministry at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, two months after the center decided to end their contract.

The priests and brothers of Holy Name College Friary of Silver Spring, Maryland, resumed their service at the medical center June 13, according to a June 15 press release issued by the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services, which exercises pastoral jurisdiction over the center.

The U.S. Defense Health Agency (DHA) has awarded a five-year contract to the Franciscans that is renewable annually.

On March 31, the Franciscans had been advised their contract -- which was set to expire but had routinely been upheld for close to 20 years -- would not be renewed.

The center instead assigned the ministry to Mack Global LLC, a secular defense contracting firm based in Mechanicsville, Virginia. According to its website, the company provides "telework consulting services, administrative and religious staffing, transportation and roadway services, (and) professional development and training." The "typical religious positions" staffed by the company, the site says, include music directors and musicians for "Catholic services," as well as coordinators for Catholic religious education and youth.

The move, announced hours ahead of Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday services, was labeled "incomprehensible" at the time by Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio, head of the military archdiocese, who also serves as president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

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Catholic lawmakers -- among them, Rep. Chris Smith, R-N.J. and Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla. -- also protested the decision by contacting Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.

The DHA reopened bidding in May and awarded the contract to the Franciscans June 8. As before, a team of five friars will alternate service at Walter Reed six days a week, ministering to hospitalized patients.

In his June 15 statement, Broglio said he was "very grateful" to the Army's chief of chaplains, the Rev. Thomas L. Solhjem, an ordained Assemblies of God minister, who holds the rank of major general, for "his personal intervention and interest in resolving the question of Catholic pastoral care at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center."

Solhjem had "moved quickly to assure the presence of additional Catholic priests from the Army Reserves as soon as the contract with the Franciscan Friars ended," said the archbishop. "He also made certain that the needs of Catholics were addressed in the renegotiation of the contract."

Broglio said it was "a source of great joy that the Franciscans have returned to the medical center and care for patients and staff there."