

Coalition seeks repeal of grant memo allowing Christians-only hiring: Asks Obama administration to review Bush policy

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Dozens of legal and religious groups have asked Attorney General Eric Holder to rescind a Bush-era memorandum that they believe wrongly permitted a religious charity to receive federal grant money despite its policy of hiring only Christians.

Organizations including Americans United for Separation of Church and State and the Anti-Defamation League told Holder in a letter September 17 that the 2007 memo from the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel misinterpreted the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

At issue is whether religious groups that receive federal grants are exempt from federal nondiscrimination employment law, or whether groups that make hiring decisions on the basis of the applicant's faith should be eligible to receive federal funding at all.

"The OLC wrongly asserts that RFRA is 'reasonably construed' to require that a federal agency categorically exempt a religious organization from an explicit federal nondiscrimination provision tied to a grant program," reads the letter signed by 58 organizations.

The memorandum specifically referred to a \$1.5 million grant for a gang reduction program of the Christian relief organization World Vision.

In their letter, the organizations said the "overly broad and questionable interpretation of RFRA has been cited by other federal agencies and extended to other programs and grants." The coalition asked for a review by the Obama administration and a withdrawal of the memo.

“The Bush administration twisted federal law to buttress its misguided policies and allow religious discrimination in taxpayer-funded ‘faith-based’ programs,” said Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United. “It’s time for the Obama administration to correct this error.”

C. Welton Gaddy, president of the Interfaith Alliance and a member of the task force that will suggest reforms for the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships, was among the leaders calling for the memo to be revoked.

“The Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) was enacted to protect religion and those who wish to freely exercise it,” he said in a statement. “Unfortunately, the Office of Legal Counsel (OLC) memo instead turned RFRA into an enabler of religious discrimination.” *-Religion News Service*