

Food pantry's prayers violate federal rules

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SEYMOUR, Ind. (RNS) Food pantry volunteer Shirley Sears patiently walked a young woman through a series of questions on an application for emergency assistance. After they complete the form, Sears told the woman she has one more question.

"Is there anything," Sears asked, "that you would like us to pray with you about?"

Yes, the woman replied without hesitation. Reaching across the small desk that separates them, Sears grasped the woman's hands and began to pray. That scene has been repeated thousands of times over the past 15 years inside this small, southern Indiana food pantry operated by non-profit Community Provisions of Jackson County.

This month, the practice was found to be against federal policy, leaving the pantry's founder with a Solomon-like choice: Stop the prayers or give up truckloads of free food provided through the federal Emergency Food Assistance Program.

Paul Brock, who started the faith-based pantry in 1997, refused to order his volunteers to quit asking recipients whether they wanted to pray. The federal food was suspended while the sides discussed a compromise.

"These kind of cases are popping up in a lot of places around the country," said Michael Cromartie, vice president of the Ethics and Public Policy Center in Washington. "People can be overly sensitive on both sides."

Cromartie said it is not a matter of stifling religious speech, but rather following the constitutional mandate of separation of church and state

rules that come along with receiving and administering government assistance.

"If this food or money was coming from a Christian charity, there would be no problem with praying," he explained, "but the (government) money comes with attachments, and you have to follow the rules if you are going to take the money."

The food pantry issue arose after an inspection last winter by Gleaners Food Bank of Indiana, which runs the program for the Indiana Department of Health and ensures compliance with federal guidelines. Inspectors noted that pantry staff members asked recipients whether they wanted to pray. They reported that to state officials, who determined the practice was a violation of the federal rule.

"The guidelines are no religious (activity) or teaching can be required for providing services," Gleaners spokeswoman Carrie Fulbright said.

Because many food pantries have ties to churches, the state suggested to faith-based operations that they offer brochures or establish a separate room for prayer while complying with regulations.

Brock bristled at the call to stop the prayers, but he worried about having enough food to feed the 300 or so people who show up each week for help. The federal aid accounts for about 15 percent of the food distributed by the pantry, Brock said.

Brock said the pantry workers weren't violating the rules because no one was ever required to pray. "We still give food to people," he said, "even when they say they don't want to pray."

Officials from Gleaners, the state and the U.S. Department of Agriculture have been working to find a solution that meets the requirements of the law and Brock's commitment to his faith. Brock said he "is strongly leaning toward" signing a compromise that would allow his program to again receive food items through the federal program if it made the offer to pray after recipients receive their food, instead of before.

"I think I can work with that," Brock said. "But I've still got people pushing on me from both sides."

Cindy Hubert, president and CEO of Gleaners Food Bank of Indiana, said she thinks the plan addresses the concerns and needs of all the parties.

"It really wasn't a case of anyone objecting to praying," Hubert said. "It is just that it can never be a requirement to get food. It can't even be perceived that way."

Filling a grocery with fresh and canned goods, single mother Kathy Gabbard said she has turned to the pantry several times for assistance and has been asked whether she would like to pray. On some of those visits, Gabbard said, she accepted the invitation.

"It didn't offend me whatsoever," she said. "I think this is a great program."