

White House releases faith-based guidelines

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [May 30, 2012](#) issue

A new White House report that offers guidance on public-private partnerships between the government and faith-based groups leaves critical questions unanswered and does not resolve the issue of religious groups' ability to discriminate in hiring and firing, two church-state experts have said.

The 50-page report, issued April 28, comes 18 months after President Obama issued an executive order calling for more transparency as faith-based groups work with the government to meet social needs. The report breaks little new ground but reaffirms that:

- A faith-based organization can provide federally funded social services without removing religious art, scriptures and symbols from its facilities.
- Explicitly religious activities can't be supported by federal funds but are permitted if they are funded privately and occur at a separate time and location from programs that receive government money.
- Beneficiaries who object to the religious character of a provider must be referred promptly to an alternative.

Joshua DuBois, director of the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships, called the guidance "an important step" in implementing the recommendations from a blue-ribbon advisory board. "A diverse group of faith and nonprofit leaders proposed ways to strengthen the government's relationship with faith-based organizations in a manner that protects religious liberty and the separation of church and state, and we are glad to move these recommendations forward," he said.

The report includes detailed examples of how to separate federally funded programs from privately funded religious activities, such as in using distinct web pages and reporting travel and use of electronic equipment.

Rabbi David Saperstein, who directs the Washington office of the Union for Reform Judaism and served on the advisory council, said the new guidance is “a great step forward,” but he and others remain unsatisfied with the administration’s apparent silence on addressing the ability of federally funded organizations to discriminate on the basis of religion when hiring or firing staff.

The White House has previously said the issue would be handled on a case-by-case basis and has resisted finalizing any formal policy. “We do hope that the president will move expeditiously to ensure that no one is discriminated against when it comes to hiring with tax dollars,” Saperstein said.

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, also welcomed the report’s safeguards but said loopholes remain. “This guidance makes some significant improvements to the Bush faith-based initiative, but it falls far short of what it ought to do,” said Lynn, who served on a reform task force for DuBois’s office.

Lynn said a fundamentalist Christian church can still run a publicly funded social service program and hang out a sign that says, “Government job opening: No Catholics, Jews, Muslims or Atheists need apply.”

The report includes a true-or-false questionnaire to train individuals working most closely with programs at the intersection of government and religion. Among its statements:

- “Recipients of federal funds, including state and local governments, cannot discriminate in the provision of program services on the basis of religion.” (True.)
- “There is no money set aside by the federal government for faith-based organizations to receive a designated portion of awards in federal social services.” (True.)
- “Federal funds can be used to buy religious materials as long as the materials are used in a social service program serving the needy.” (False.) —RNS