

Faith-based partnerships

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Under President Obama, the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships has kept an extremely low profile. Given the excessive enthusiasms of the Bush administration in establishing the office, achieving a low profile has been in many respects an appropriate goal.

The Bush administration heralded the funding of faith-based groups as somehow the solution to the nation's social ills. It imagined that faith groups would provide cheaper and more effective versions of government programs. Captivated by this vision, it vastly overestimated the capacity of religious groups to address systemic social problems, and it took a casual approach to the First Amendment issues that attend government partnerships with religious groups.

Obama's OFBNP has focused on clarifying the rules of such partnerships. It has explained, for example, that religious organizations that receive federal funds are still entitled to choose leaders from their own religious traditions and to express an explicitly religious statement of mission. They are also able to retain religious symbols in their buildings that house government-funded programs. At the same time, the OFBNP has said that government funds cannot be used to support explicitly religious activities such as prayer, worship and proselytizing, and it has stressed that recipients who object to a program's religious character have the right

to an alternative provider.

In line with keeping a low profile, the office has carefully sidestepped the most controversial issue dogging faith-based partnerships: Can faith-based groups that receive government funds use religious criteria in hiring staff to run their government-funded programs? During his first presidential campaign, Obama said no—faith-based groups should not be allowed to discriminate in hiring under government contracts. But as president he has avoided the issue. His administration has said the matter can be addressed on a case-by-case basis.

It is time for OFBNP to clarify policy in this field. It is time to state that discrimination in government-funded programs is not allowed. In the words of one of its advisers: “while religious organizations should have full freedom to make religious calls regarding jobs subsidized by tithes and offerings, taxpayers are right to expect to be able to compete for positions created by government grants without regard to their personal religious beliefs or lack thereof.”

Those words were written a couple years ago by Melissa Rogers, who in March was named head of the OFBNP. Her appointment is an encouraging sign. Rogers’s past work displays her keen sense of how the integrity of religion and state are preserved when the two realms are distinguished.

No religious group is forced to seek or take government funds. Faith groups are free to create and fund missions of their own. But when faith-based groups partner financially with governments, they are partnering with the diverse body politic that funds that government. In that case they should open themselves to a full engagement with the members of that body politic. That means no discrimination.