



A paper on:  
The White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighbourhood Partnerships

Prepared for the All Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society

October 2012

## An Introduction

### What it is today and why it exists

The *White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighbourhood Partnerships* is part of the *Executive Office of the President of the United States*. Joshua DuBois is currently head of the Office.

It exists to form partnerships between government and non-profit organisations, both secular and faith-based, to more effectively serve the people and communities they represent. The Office is founded on the principle that it is these organisations, birthed at grassroots level, that are best placed to meet local needs. As President Barack Obama has said of the Office:

*'...whether it's a secular group advising families facing foreclosure or faith-based groups providing job-training to those who need work, few are closer to what's happening on our streets and in our neighbourhoods than these organisations.'* (2009)

Upon announcing the establishment of the Office, Obama proposed:

*'There is a force for good greater than the government. It is an expression of faith, this yearning to give back, this hungering for a purpose larger than our own, that reveals itself not simply in places of worship, but in senior Centers and shelters, schools and hospitals, and any place an American decides.'* (2009)

### How it works

#### Federal Centers

The Office coordinates 13 'Federal Centres' for Faith-based and Community Initiatives, each one representing a particular government department, and each located in their respective department headquarters. These 'Centres' act as a key link between departments and grassroots organisations, ensuring that successful partnerships between the two are built and maintained—a setup designed to better connect faith-based and community organisations with the heart of government. It is important to note, however, that these Federal Centers do not themselves make funding decisions; such matters are handled through procedures established by the departmental grant programmes, commonly involving a competitive application process. The role of the partnerships forged by the Federal Centers is to ensure that faith-based organisations

have the appropriate training and information to be able to fully participate in funding opportunities relevant to their specialisation.

The Department of Labour (DOL) Center, for example, might form partnerships between the DOL and community-based groups to help integrate them in *job training* and *workforce development* programs, whereas the Department of Homeland Security Center might connect with such groups over issues related to *disaster response*.

Alongside Labour and Homeland Security, Centers exist for the Departments of:

- Agriculture
- Commerce
- Education
- Health and Human Services
- Housing and Urban Development
- Justice
- Veterans Affairs

As well as:

- The Small Business Administration
- The Corporation for National and Community Service
- The US Agency for International Development
- The Environmental Protection Agency

There is no separate funding stream set aside for faith-based organisations. Rather, faith groups have an opportunity to compete for funding on an equal footing with other non-governmental organisations. The type of grant with which these Federal Centers are concerned is the *discretionary grant*, which ensures that the allocation of funding remains within the intentions, rules and regulations of the federal government. This is in contrast to the *formula (or block) grant*, which enables federal money to be distributed by states, cities and counties on their own terms.

Announcements regarding the availability of these *discretionary grants* are known *Federal Funding Opportunities (FFOs)*, *Request for Proposals (RFPs)*, or *Solicitation for Grant Applications (SGAs)*. Each FFO, RFP or SGA contains instructions on how to apply, and most federal agencies have experts who are available to help organisations apply for and manage their grants.

### **President's Advisory Council**

The Office also oversees the President's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighbourhood Partnerships. This is a panel, comprising 25 members from both faith-based and non-sectarian organisations, designed to further advise government on

building successful partnerships with local organisations. Each Council serves a 1-year term, and they are appointed in late spring.

Summarised, the three main tasks of the Council are:

- Identify best practices and successful modes of delivering social services;
- Evaluate the need for improvements in the implementation and coordination of public policies relating to faith-based and neighbourhood organisations; and
- Make recommendations to the President and the Administration on changes in policies, programmes and practices.

The connections and expertise of the Council's leaders mean they are ideally placed to give such advice. After conducting its research, reviews, and deliberation, the Council will submit a written report of its recommendations.

## Current Priorities

President Obama has outlined 4 key priorities for the Office that are tailored to America's current social and economic situation:

- 1. Strengthening the Role of Community Organisations in the Economic Recovery:**
  - The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act created more opportunities for community groups to participate in the recovery.
  - The Office works within government to ensure a role for community groups in grant opportunities created by the Recovery Act.
- 2. Reducing Unintended Pregnancies, Supporting Maternal and Child Health, and Reducing the Need for Abortion:**
  - The Office partners with the White House Council on Women and Girls with the intention of further exploring how the federal government might achieve this goal.
- 3. Promoting Responsible Fatherhood and Strong Communities:**
  - An issue particularly close to Obama's heart, prompting him to start a National Conversation on Responsible Fatherhood and Strong Communities.
  - The Office is helping to coordinate the federal government's fatherhood policy, and has launched a national fatherhood tour to hear directly local communities' ideas regarding this particular priority.
- 4. Promoting Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation:**

- The Office works with offices and programs throughout the Federal Government—the National Security Council, Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development and Corporation for National and Community Service—to foster dialogue and cooperation both in America and the rest of the world.

The Office seeks to address these priorities by working closely with the President’s Cabinet Secretaries and the 13 Agency Centres for Faith-Based and Neighbourhood Partnerships, as well as the strategic Advisor at the Corporation for National and Community Service.

## A History of the Office

### Under George W. Bush

The *White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighbourhood Partnerships* started life as the *White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives*, having been set up in January 2001 by George W. Bush. The first director of the office was John Dilulio, and its original aim, like today, was to expand the capacity of faith and community groups to provide federally-funded social services. In 2005, for example, more than \$2.2 billion in social service grants were awarded to faith-based organisations.

The eventual establishment of this office demonstrated the government’s increasing awareness of faith groups’ capacity to provide effective social services, thus giving official recognition to a tradition of welfare provision that has its roots in the work of the Salvation Army of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But the groundwork had arguably already been laid for this move: at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, President Bill Clinton’s welfare reform bill, containing “charitable choice” provisions, began to give religious organisations greater freedom to provide federally-funded services from designated programs on the same basis as any other provider. So Bush’s establishment of the *Office of Faith-Based Initiatives* in 2001, and his Charitable Choice Act of that year, which proposed expanding provisions of charitable choice law to nine new program areas, therefore marked the next step in the development of this relationship between government and faith-based organisations.

Perhaps inevitably, the Office came under considerable criticism by groups, like Americans United for Separation of Church and State and the American Civil Liberties Union, who feared that it violated the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment by using tax money to fund religion. In a bid to safeguard the Office from such a situation and alleviate concerns, a number of restrictions were placed on those faith-based organisations that choose to accept government funding:

- They may not use direct government funds to support inherently religious activities such as prayer, worship, religious instruction, or proselytisation.
- Any inherently religious activities that the organisations may engage in must be offered separately in time or location from services that receive federal assistance.
- Faith-based organisations cannot discriminate on the basis of religion when providing services.

### **Under Barack Obama**

In February 2009, Barack Obama renamed the Office to the *White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighbourhood Partnerships*, placing increased emphasis on the partnerships to be built between government and non-profit organisations. These partnerships are not just financial in nature, but go deeper, involving improved two-way dialogue between government and communities.

A key alteration Obama made when setting up the new Office was the establishment of its aforementioned advisory council—a 25-member panel that works to strengthen the partnerships at the heart of the Office’s activities by conducting research and providing recommendations to the government.

### **Recent Activities of the Office**

Below are a few examples of the work currently being carried out by the *Office of Faith-Based and Neighbourhood Partnerships*, particularly by the Federal Centers at the departments of Health and Human Services and Education. Initiatives such as these demonstrate the Office’s role as an active link between the grassroots and the Federal Government, providing a key channel of dialogue through which available information and resources are communicated.

#### **Federal Center at the Department of Health and Human Services**

- Adoption:
  - The *Office for Faith-Based and Neighbourhood Partnerships* is working closely with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to strengthen adoption throughout America, seeking to build upon the steady increase in adoptions since the start of the new century. Adoption is a priority for Obama, as evidenced by his increase of the Adoption Tax Credit, and its extension into 2012. The Office aims to improve awareness of adoption procedures among faith-based organisations and to provide them with the tools needed to better promote the Adoption

Tax Credit throughout their congregations and communities. Tools and seminar resources are provided by *AdoptUSKids*, a collaboration funded by HHS.

- Childhood obesity:
  - The *Let's Move!* initiative was set up by the First Lady in an attempt to tackle the problem of childhood obesity in one generation. *Let's Move Faith and Communities* is an effort to connect faith and community groups with the broader aims of *Let's Move!*, recognising that such groups are uniquely positioned to provide a positive influence on children and families. The *Office of Faith-Based and Neighbourhood Partnerships* acts as a promotional link between such groups and *Let's Move!*, and hundreds of faith-based and community organisations are now engaged in promoting healthier lifestyles among their congregations and communities. The Office has also devised a special toolkit, available on the HHS website, for congregations and organisations participating in the initiative.

### Federal Center at the Department of Education

- Partnering with local schools:
  - The Office is working to encourage faith and community organisations to partner with school districts, emphasising the positive outcomes that can be brought about by this kind of collaboration. Faith and community groups can work with low-performing schools to implement programs that aim to, among other things, boost school attendance, decrease negative behaviour, improve academic performance and increase access to post-secondary education. Added to this, many community and faith-based organisations are eligible for sub-grants to carry out both summer school and before- and after-school programmes. The Office provides interested organisations with the relevant information to secure this kind of funding.
- Information on college education:
  - Recognising that many young Americans are unaware of the opportunities they have to attend college, the Office provides community and faith groups with the necessary resources and information to host 'college fairs,' college tours and family education events for those thinking about attending college and their families.

### Conclusion

The *White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighbourhood Partnerships* has, since its establishment, sought to strengthen links between faith and community groups and the

US government, recognising the benefits to be gained from such a relationship. Faith-motivated welfare work in America is nothing new—in fact, it stretches back to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where it found expression in the activities of the Salvation Army. Yet it was not really until the beginning of this century that the importance of such activities was formally recognised: first, in President Clinton’s Welfare Reform Bill, and then in President George W. Bush’s establishment of the Office in its first form.

The Office has undergone significant development since then, but its continued existence serves to clearly demonstrate the value that the White House places on the activities of faith groups. Whilst remaining aware of the need to avoid the establishment of religion, Obama is keen to ensure that significant partnerships between government and grassroots organisations are built and maintained; the continuation of a government office set aside specifically for this purpose has proved to be an effective means of working towards this aim.

In recent years, for example, the *Office of Faith-Based and Neighbourhood Initiatives* has been a valuable channel of communication between faith and community groups and government, providing information about the ways in which faith-inspired social action can help achieve the wider targets set by this administration. In doing so, it has given faith and community organisations an official, centralised focal point—a place to look to for the latest information about how best to respond to challenges faced country-wide, and how to access any resources that may be available to aid in this. UK-based faith and community organisations currently lack such a focal point, and, having examined the US model, we believe that an official recognition of the value of faith groups, whether in the form of a government ‘Office’ or another means, may aid faith groups’ awareness of their continued importance to society.

For further information on the All Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society, please contact FaithAction, the secretariat for the group.

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