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Bush legacy shaped by faith-based programs

Adelle M. Banks Religion News Service | Jan. 13, 2009

WASHINGTON -- To hear Jean Patterson Cushman tell it, President Bush's faith-based initiative has been critical for her Baltimore organization that helps ex-prisoners find new jobs.

Infused with $2.3 million in grant money from a Department of Labor initiative, Cushman's group, Episcopal Community Services of Maryland, has moved from helping 50 men and women a year to 200.

"I would say it's made a fundamental change in what we could do," said Cushman, who hosted Bush during a visit to her agency nearly a year ago. "We were a little program, sort of going along by ourselves. ... It's just opened up so many doors for us."

Love it or hate it -- and many feel that strongly about the initiative -- the program started by Bush days after he entered the Oval Office has been a major contributor to the debate over the proper intersection of God and government.

Its long-term effects on public policy may well be determined by the Obama administration -- which has vowed to continue the program after a top-to-bottom review -- but experts say it already has made significant changes in how religious groups can partner with governmental agencies.

Which is not to say the program has been universally embraced. In fact, the initiative has been battled in the courts since its inception, and an atheist-led legal challenge resulted in a landmark Supreme Court ruling that experts say will have long-range effects on taxpayers? ability to challenge any manner of government spending.

Church-state watchdog Rev. Barry Lynn, for one, wishes the White House Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives had never opened its doors.

"I think this is truly one of the most corrupted and useless programs in modern presidential history," said Lynn, whose Washington-based Americans United for Separation of Church and State has filed multiple suits against the Bush program during its eight-year run.

"It became so totally politicized, utterly nontransparent -- nobody to this day knows where most of the money went -- and turned out to be kind of the 21st-century equivalent of walking-around money doled out for political purposes to groups which frequently had no record of success at all."

While the Clinton-era "charitable choice" welfare provision expanded existing federal funding for faith-based

social programs, the Bush administration added a "very splashy push" to public-private partnerships, said Ira C. Lupu, a professor at George Washington University Law School.

Lupu recently co-authored a report that assessed the program's legal impact, and doubts that such partnerships will ever again be "categorically disqualified" for delivering social services.

"The constitutional era of mandatory exclusion of intensely faith-oriented organizations from these kinds of partnerships is over," said Lupu. "It's really quite indelibly marked on the consciousnesses of both sides that things have changed, that if it's done right, it can be done in a way that satisfies the Constitution. If it's done wrong, it will invite lawsuits."

As Bush prepares to yield the White House to President-elect Barack Obama, the faith-based office issued a final report Monday (Jan. 12) to its religious and secular partners, declaring it a success.

"...(F)ederal partnerships with faith-based and other community organizations have greatly expanded," the president wrote in "Innovations in Compassion." "The initiative has also extended and strengthened the capabilities of these groups. Most importantly, together we have brought life-changing aid to millions in need."

According to White House tallies, nonprofit groups received $15.3 billion in competitive grants in fiscal year 2007, an increase of 3.9 percent over the previous year. That figure included $2.2 billion to faith-based nonprofits, which have received federal grants of more than $10.6 billion since the initiative got underway in 2002.

Yet federal dollars were subjected to numerous legal challenges. A federal appeals court ruled that a prominent faith-based prison rehabilitation program was unconstitutional, while the Supreme Court determined that atheist taxpayers lacked standing to challenge the overall faith-based initiative.

Critics also accused the White House of using the office as a political tool to appease religious conservatives in the GOP base, and to build electoral bridges to blacks and Hispanics. Even some staff left the project disillusioned and disappointed.

"After the 2004 election they cut the White House faith-based staff by 30 percent, 40 percent, because it became clear that it had served its purpose," David Kuo, a former deputy director of the faith-based program, recently told Vanity Fair magazine. The White House's political shop, he added, viewed many religious conservatives as "pains in the butt who had to be accommodated."

But on the ground, groups like Episcopal Community Services of Maryland say the initiative has boosted their professionalism, made them more accountable and increased their ability to help those in need at a deeper level.

Melissa Rogers, who directs the Center for Religion and Public Affairs at Wake Forest University's School of Divinity, applauded the Bush White House for codifying rules that say the clients of social service groups cannot be discriminated against on the basis of religion. She also praised the initiative's international efforts to fight AIDS and malaria, which she said were "warmly and widely embraced."

At the same time, Rogers, who recently co-wrote a report on federal/faith-based partnerships, urged Obama to work with Congress to avoid "a kind of whiplash" for social service providers who must operate under rules that can change from one administration to the next. Bush, for example, used executive orders to open the office and its 11 related centers in federal agencies, but executive orders can be repealed or rewritten by following administrations.

"It's not fair to the providers, it's not fair to the people that they serve, and it's not fair to taxpayers who have to

shell out money for a bunch of changes that are not durable," she said.

The faith-based push is not confined to Washington. According to White House figures, 36 governors -- 19 Democrats and 17 Republicans -- have established faith-based offices or liaisons, as have more than 70 mayors.

Jedd Medefind, acting director of the White House Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives, expects those beyond-the-Beltway efforts to be part of Bush's legacy.

"I suspect that governors and mayors across party lines will continue to build on the success of addressing their communities' needs," he said.

Perhaps the greatest indication of the long-term influence of the initiative is the fact that Obama has signaled he will maintain, and perhaps expand, the office. Obama's transition team has already met with critics, like Lynn, and supporters, like Stanley Carlson-Thies, who worked in the Bush office early on to help adjust what he called "an unlevel playing field" for faith-based groups seeking access to federal funds.

"I think there's a good sense that there was positive work done and they would like to see that continue," said Carlson-Thies. "They're reaching out very widely. I think that's a sign of how seriously they're taking what's been done."

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