

Americans United files first suit challenging a U.S. faith-based grant: Question government money spent for religious purposes

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A national watchdog group has filed its first lawsuit to halt a federal government faith-based grant—in this case, to a Washington state program that offers Bible-based marriage workshops.

According to Americans United for Separation of Church and State, based in Washington, D.C., the government violated the Constitution when it awarded the “fundamentalist Christian” Northwest Marriage Institute two federal grants worth \$97,750 last year.

Barry Lynn, who heads Americans United, said its lawsuit filed September 13 could have “important national implications because the Bush administration is promoting massive federal funding for marriage programs.”

This is Americans United’s first lawsuit over federal funding, said spokesperson Joe Conn. The group is involved in three other lawsuits over state funding. In June a federal judge ruled in favor of Americans United against a state-funded prison ministry program in Iowa.

In 2005 the federal government poured more than \$2 billion into faith-based social service organizations, according to the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. In addition, Congress is setting aside \$500 million over the next five years to promote marriage.

Northwest Marriage Institute, based in Vancouver, Washington, received \$97,750 in government grants in 2005 through the Department of Health and Human Services. Northwest Marriage has two employees and offers distinctly Christian lessons for

spouses, said Bob Whiddon Jr., the former Churches of Christ pastor who runs the institute.

“We are a faith-based organization and we do provide faith-based counseling. . . . I use the Bible as my counseling manual,” Whiddon said. But no government money was spent on Northwest Marriage’s counseling programs, he added. Both the White House faith-based office and the Institute for Youth Development, an intermediary group that helps the government dispense grants, were clear about guidelines associated with federal funding, Whiddon said. “We haven’t done anything wrong and we have not used any money for religious activities.”

Instead, Whiddon said, the government grant funded “capacity building”—the purchase of office equipment and the hiring of a consultant and a federal-grant specialist.

But in the suit filed last month in Washington state, Americans United said the government money was spent “directly for religious purposes: to create material with explicitly religious content, to purchase supplies used in religious programming and to pay a portion of the salaries of the employees who conduct the Bible-based counseling.”

The Department of Health and Human Services could not be reached immediately for comment on the lawsuit. *—Religion News Service*