

Critics say action needed at faith-based office

by [Adelle M. Banks](#) in the [November 2, 2010](#) issue

Six months after advisers turned in 164 pages of recommendations to the White House's faith-based office, thorny church-state questions remain unanswered, and some critics say the office has been used to push President Obama's health-care reform.

Much of the work done by the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships has been low profile, and successors to the blue-ribbon advisory panel that ended its work in March haven't been named.

Outsiders say whatever progress has been made has been done too quietly and that the White House has dragged its feet on a promise to change Bush-era rules that allow federal grant recipients to hire and fire based on religion.

"As far as I'm concerned, it's been six months of silence," said Barry Lynn of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, who served on a task force charged with reforming the office.

Joshua DuBois, who was tasked by President Obama with overhauling and expanding the office, estimated that the administration has started or finished implementing at least half of the advisory council's 64 recommendations.

Members of the original 25-member panel say the office is making gradual progress on their advice even if it is, as one adviser put it, "less sexy."

DuBois said his office is making steady progress in mulling or implementing the council's suggestions, even as he conceded that "we can always do more to get the word out about those efforts.

"There's a tremendous amount of work going on helping faith-based organizations serve people in need," DuBois said, citing progress in feeding hungry children in Latino communities and providing flood disaster relief in Tennessee. He said the

announcement of a new set of advisers, which took longer than he expected, should occur "pretty soon."

According to an internal memo obtained by Religion News Service, the office is drafting an executive order to implement recommendations on internal reforms, which advisers had hoped would address church-state concerns.

DuBois declined to specify the nature of the reforms but said, "I think you will see the exact form of that implementation soon. We're working diligently on this."

The office's low profile has allowed it to fly below much of the political chatter in Washington—until recently when critics charged that it was adopting the same practices that dogged the office under former president George W. Bush.

Critics have questioned why the office was involved in connecting faith leaders on a September conference call with the president about health-care reform. Obama told clergy they could be "validators" for the reform, according to Politico.

"If that office is doing this, what are they not doing that they should be doing?" asked Welton Gaddy, president of the Interfaith Alliance. Added former Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson in a *Washington Post* column: "Obama has mainly employed his faith-based office to defend federal initiatives, particularly health-care reform."

Some council members, however, said there was nothing inappropriate about the White House trying to reach a broader audience through religious leaders.

"When there are issues at the federal level and information that need to get out to a network, we've got a great relational network," said Peg Chamberlin, president of the National Council of Churches and a former advisory council member.

DuBois strongly rejected the criticism and said such outreach would continue. "It is reflective of an important shift from the previous office and those officials . . . that really saw faith-based organizations only as recipients of dollars and cents as opposed to important partners on nonfinancial issues, like sharing health-care information," he said.

Melissa Rogers, a church-state expert who chaired the advisory council, said the office has moved to implement some of the council's goals; she remains hopeful that the recommendations on "much needed reform of the church-state rules" will be

acted on soon. "The White House has been putting them through a process," she said, "and the process is near the finish line."

But the matter of whether faith-based organizations can make hiring decisions based on religion and still receive federal grants remains as it was in the Bush administration. "It's a continuing frustration that they haven't moved to clarify this," said David Saperstein, a Reform Jewish rabbi and another former member of the council. White House officials decided early on that that question would not be included in the panel's portfolio.

DuBois said the hiring issue is being reviewed "very closely" by the Justice Department and White House counsel, but "there is no further update at this point."
—RNS