

Obama urged to change faith-based hiring rules

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [July 26, 2011](#) issue

A group of clergy and lawmakers is trying to overturn a nearly decade-old policy that allows faith-based organizations that receive federal funds to hire and fire employees on the basis of religion.

Critics

say President Obama has reneged on a campaign promise to repeal the policy, which was put into place by President Bush in 2002.

"It is

shocking that we would even be having a debate about whether basic civil rights practices should apply to programs run with federal dollars," said Rep. Bobby Scott (D., Va.). "There is just no justification for sponsors of government-funded programs to tell job applicants, 'We don't hire your kind.'"

Scott has sponsored

legislation to repeal the policy. But advocates for the change say the most effective route would be for Obama to issue an executive order to overturn Bush's, Scott told reporters on June 21.

Bush introduced

the policy to advance what he deemed a more faith-friendly federal approach toward charitable organizations that receive federal contracts for social services. Previously, groups that received government money were forbidden to consider religion in their employment decisions.

Bush,

however, argued that while an organization accepting federal support could not refuse to help people based on their religion, it should be able to take religion into account when hiring and firing employees.

Many religious organizations—particularly conservative ones—hailed the overall initiative and continue to support it.

"We will do whatever we can to make sure this stays," said Michele Combs, spokeswoman for the Christian Coalition, saying charitable organizations should have the right to employ those who share their groups' values. "That's our freedom," she said, "to hire and fire people of our faith."

More liberal religious leaders, who typically toe a strict line on church-state separation, said the lingering Bush order undermines a century of progress in civil rights.

"Tax dollars should not be used to discriminate," said Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism.

Congressman Scott and others referred to a speech Obama gave on the campaign trail four months before his 2008 election in which he promised to reform Bush's faith-based program.

Obama said a group receiving federal money shouldn't be able to "use that grant money to proselytize to the people you help, and you can't discriminate against them—or against the people you hire—on the basis of their religion."

Asked for comment June 22, a White House spokesperson said: "The Justice Department continues to examine this issue on a case-by-case basis." —RNS