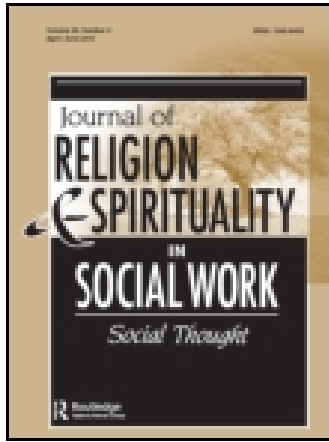


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Publisher: Routledge

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## Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/wrsp20>

### The Safety Net and Faith-Based Services

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Published online: 06 Nov 2010.

To cite this article: Ram A. Cnaan PhD & Edward Newman PhD (2010) The Safety Net and Faith-Based Services, *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought*, 29:4, 321-336, DOI: [10.1080/15426432.2010.518871](https://doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2010.518871)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15426432.2010.518871>

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## The Safety Net and Faith-Based Services

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*The focus of this policy article is not on the merit of faith-based initiative but on who serves the poor. The key argument is that in the United States, especially through its federal government, has increasingly abdicated “safety net” services of helping poor cope with the hardship of poverty. As we document, as a collective, Americans pay low taxes and turn away from using taxes to help poor people. Furthermore, the American government no longer financially supports the poor but rather provide them with work-incentive-based services. While the general public and their politicians have turned away from the poor, year in and year out faith-based communities and their congregations and organizations care for and actively serve those with the least resources. Thus, it is our position that the current administration needs the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, but this office needs to adopt new approaches that are more community oriented.*

*KEYWORDS* faith-based service, safety net, work incentives, serving the poor, policy

There are many ways by which one can approach the necessity and roles of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships (WHFNP). This paper does not focus on constitutional aspects of faith-based

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Received October 15, 2009; accepted May 15, 2010.

Paper presented at the Murray Friedman Lecture Series panel discussion on faith-based services in the new administration, March 15, 2009, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

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initiatives. Other experts concentrate on these topics. Many scholars and policymakers attempted to assess if such a blending of religion and politics will sustain legal challenges and are we breaking the wall of separation between church and state (DiIulio, 2007; Dionne & Chen, 2001; Kramnick & Moore, 1997; Kuzma, 2000).

This paper also does not focus on the issues of the effectiveness of faith-based social care a topic that gained wide attention elsewhere (Boddie & Cnaan, 2007; Monsma, 2004; Reingold, Pirog, & Brady, 2007; Wineburg, 2007). It is this paper's assumption that some faith-based social services are better, some are equal, and some are lesser than their secular counterpart. While popular beliefs suggest that faith-based services are superior, for the purposes of discussion they are not proven inferior and as such they are very relevant for those who benefit from them. It is also accepted for the purposes of discussion that the first eight years of the White House Office of Community and Faith-Based Initiatives are not necessarily what advocates were waiting and that there is room for improvement.

This paper starts elsewhere. It poses a simple question: Who cares for the poor and needy in the American context? It is one thing to ask if helping a few church-based social services may be a potential violation of the church-state separation or to contrast them to secular programs (public or private) and another thing to ask who is available and willing to assist the needy. The focus in this policy paper is on the latter question.

Even before the current economic recession, poverty was persistent in America. This is not a trivial issue but a serious endemic problem. Feeding America (2008), formerly known as Second Harvest reports that in 2007, 36.2 million Americans lived in food insecure households, 23.8 million adults and 12.4 million children. Put differently, 11.1% of households (13 million households) were food insecure. While this was similar to the 2006 statistics, in 2008 the numbers and percentages grew to 39.9 million and 13.2% respectively (Feeding America, 2010). As such, one wonders if we can rely on government, secular organizations, and individual citizens to successfully cope with this social problem. Sound policy calls for harnessing the faith community to help serve the poor, and, hence, the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships (WHFNP) can be of help.

Three themes need to be kept in mind when assessing poverty in America and the role of the WHFNP, and they will serve as the key themes of the article's sections. They are quite related, though each has a different impact on the quality of life of poor. Each one reflects a long-term fundamental trend in American public policy that reflects our collective ideology. First, one must assess the extent to which the richest country in the world is invested in the welfare of its citizens. We will show that neither government nor individual citizens are invested in the welfare of the poor. Furthermore, public opinion in America is hostile toward helping the poor, and it influences public policy. Second, the past method of cash allowances for poor

people was replaced by a host of social services that aim at preparing people for the workplace but do not address survival needs (shelter, food, and clothing to name a few). Finally we demonstrate that the American congregations and religious organizations are one crucial source of caring for poor people in America. With these three themes discussed, we show that if the focus is on extending the pool of social service nonprofits that can serve the poor, we ought to enhance and coordinate the involvement of religious organizations in the local welfare efforts. The faith community is one of the few that care for the needy and as such its role should be coordinated. This is especially important in this era of economic meltdown, increased recession, and massive unemployment. We will conclude, based on the data discussed, that WHFNP is needed in this administration and beyond but that it should change its approach and should focus locally to maximize the potential of voluntary help and assist faith organizations to better integrate and be better utilized in the local social service ecology.

Before this argument is developed, the term “safety net” must be defined. This refers to a system of support, usually in cash or in-kind that ensures that no person in a given society falls below a minimum standard of living. In other words, these are the institutional arrangements that prevent hunger, homelessness, illnesses, and social isolation (Subbarao, 1997).

#### WELFARE COMMITMENT: AMERICAN STYLE

In this section we aim to establish a few points. First, compared to most Western democracies, the U.S. government is low on helping people in need. Second, poor people’s needs and rights receive low status in public discourse. This is important as government policies often follow voter preferences. Residents are not generous with their donations regarding helping the poor. In the United States, both citizens and politicians alike are critical of poor people for their dependency and shed themselves from the responsibility to help. Third, public rejection of the poor is compounded with the low level of taxation in the United States. As such there are no available resources to help the poor. Due to low tax burden, the base from which welfare resources are driven is among the lowest among Western democracies. Again, public opinion and political discourse resist increased taxation, and as such the likelihood of new resources to finance welfare services is slim.

First, a study of Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2007) that assesses the welfare expenditure of 24 Western democracies places the United States third from the bottom (only better than Mexico and South Korea) regarding welfare allocations (see Table 1). While the data cover the year 2003 there is no reason to believe that our social expenditure rose since 2003. The implication of this column is quite clear. The U.S. government does not put high public priority on helping the

**TABLE 1** Welfare Allocations

| Country         | Gross public social expenditure (2003)<br>(In rank order) | Total tax burden (2001) (Rank order in parentheses) |
|-----------------|---|---|
| Sweden          | 27.1%   | 53.2% (1)   |
| France          | 33.1%   | 45.4% (5)   |
| Denmark         | 32.2%   | 49.0% (2)   |
| Germany         | 30.5%   | 40.8% (9)   |
| Belgium         | 30.0%   | 45.3% (6)   |
| Austria         | 29.3%   | 45.7% (4)   |
| Norway          | 28.2%   | 44.9% (7)   |
| Italy           | 27.7%   | 41.8% (8)   |
| Portugal        | 25.8%   | 34.5% (14)  |
| Finland         | 25.7%   | 46.3% (3)   |
| U.K.            | 23.7%   | 37.4% (12)  |
| Netherlands     | 23.2%   | 39.9% (10)  |
| Czech Republic  | 23.1%   | 39.0% (11)  |
| Spain           | 22.6%   | 35.2% (13)  |
| Iceland         | 21.7%   | 24.8% (19)  |
| New Zealand     | 20.6%   | 34.8% (15)  |
| Australia       | 20.3%   | 31.5% (18)  |
| Canada          | 19.6%   | 35.2% (16)  |
| Japan           | 19.1%   | 27.1% (22)  |
| Slovak republic | 19.0%   | 33.1% (17)  |
| Ireland         | 17.8%   | 29.2% (21)  |
| United States   | 17.4% (22)  | 29.6% (20)  |
| Mexico          | 7.6%  | 18.3% (24)  |
| Japan           | 6.5%  | 27.1% (23)  |

needy. A larger portion than in other countries of the welfare expenditure is the Social Security Administration, which is not directly geared to help the poor but those who worked and likely accumulated wealth. Note that most social security expenditures are universal (without means test) and as such gear to the wider population and to the poor (Nelson, 2008). Indeed, as Behrendt (2000) showed, among OECD countries the United States reports the highest rates of poverty and the effectiveness of welfare mechanisms to alleviate poverty are the least effective.

One may expect that if government gives a cold shoulder to the poor, individual citizens are then helping the poor on their own. Trusting American generosity and the tradition of mutual support we expect citizens to help those in need. However, using three panels of the Center of Philanthropy Panel Survey data, Wilhelm (2009) reported that only a small percentage of American households donated money to help the organizations that support the poor. While 53% of households reported at least once to give money for supporting poor people, only 10% did so consistently in all three panels. What is even more alarming is that the median across families (of this three-year average) is \$105 and the mean is \$271. These lower percentages of givers and low sums of donated money indicate that the

average American household is not keen on supporting the poor (see also Cooter & Broughman, 2005). This is most puzzling as Americans are very generous in their donations and are considered the most donating society. These findings should be juxtaposed with Brooks (2006) who found that frequent (every week or more) religious attendance has a strong effect on secular giving. In fact, he claimed that the group of regular attendees is the most generous people in general and toward the needs of poor people in particular.

Second, the public in general is not in favor of public support for the poor and as such the government distaste for helping the poor is a reflection of public opinion. Bowman (2003) reported that a survey by NBC News and the *Wall Street Journal* in 1995 asked people if poor people should be assisted in cash or they should work for whatever help they get, and 95% of respondents preferred to require welfare recipients to work in exchange for their benefits. In addition, 40% of Americans on a regular basis report that the reason poor people are not working is “lack of effort.” This finding was reported by over 20 different studies from 1964 to 2003. In 2000 the Harris Interactive asked people, “In general, do you think that most adults who are poor are mainly to blame themselves or are they poor through no fault of their own?” While a third (36%) answered “No fault of their own,” a little under half (45%) answer “Blame the poor.” When the Pew Research Forum asked in 2002, “Some say that most poor people are poor because of society’s failures. Others say that most poor people are poor because of their own individual failure. Which comes closer to your point of view?” A little under a quarter (22%) answered “society’s fault” while almost two thirds (61%) answered “individual failure.” Most notable in this study is that even among current or past welfare recipients a little over half (51%) responded “individual failure” and only a quarter (21%) answered “society’s fault.” Furthermore, in 2000, the Harris Interactive asked, “Overall do you agree or disagree with the following statements . . . Most people who are on welfare and do not work would find paid work if they were not on welfare?” Three quarters (75%) of respondents agreed. Similarly, in the 2001 NPR/Kaiser/Harvard survey, 78% of respondents said that jobs are available for poor people.

Bowman (2003) also reported a series of studies that show that about two thirds of Americans agree that “it is the responsibility of the government to take care of people who can’t take care of themselves.” This latter finding is encouraging when our focus is the American safety net. However, when the following stipulation was added, “The government should help more needy people even if it means going deeper into debt,” the level of support declined to about half. Ironically, many Americans believe that the meager welfare benefits are what can drive our budget into deficit. Furthermore, a series of National Opinion Resource Center (NORC) studies also found that about half the population thinks we spend too much on welfare. The picture

that emerges from these many public opinion surveys is that the American public is suspicious of poor people and is not in favor of government supporting the poor with cash assistance that would help alleviate the misery of living in poverty (Shapiro & Shaw, 2002). In fact, many Americans believe that cash assistance to poor people would undermine incentive to work and will promote idleness, out-of-wedlock pregnancies, and intergenerational dependency (Larsen, 2008).

Third, using the Forbes Global Tax Misery Index we see that the tax burden of Americans is one of the lowest among Western democracies. As can be seen from the right column of Table 1, regarding tax burden the United States is ranked 20th among 24 countries (Forbes, 2006). It is well documented that American citizens are strong in their opposition to tax increase and politicians were fast to follow suit. For example, in 2000 George W. Bush promised lower taxes and indeed in his first year in office not only lowered taxes but sent tax refunds to all tax-paying Americans. Similarly, in the 2008 election season, regardless of the massive national debt and the looming recession, no serious contender suggested tax increase but they all suggested lowering taxes on the middle class.

With the currently low tax burden, the economic recession, the increasing public debt, and the public unwillingness to pay higher taxes it is unlikely that additional public funds will become available to help the needy. If additional resources will become available they will be used for job creation, paying our national debt, and boosting the economy and not for assisting the poor. A related question is how we collectively through our various governments actually do support the poor. Even our marginal public support is unique and pertinent in understanding the role that the faith community plays in assisting American poor and needy.

### HOW ARE WE HELPING THE POOR?

Public opinion and indeed also public programs do not focus on alleviating the misery of poverty but rather on pushing poor people to join the workforce. The ideology of economic individualism that is highly prevalent in the United States focuses on holding individuals responsible for their and their families' welfare (Robertson, 1993). Thus, the public is not liable for supplying the individual needs of the poor and at best will assist in helping the individual become job ready (Hasenfeld & Rafferty, 1988). The suffering that one and one's family are experiencing is insufficient to allow for cash assistance or in-kind support to be the focus of our public welfare policy but rather social services that encourage labor participation are the center of the American welfare policy.

In this respect, the first question is what the American public thinks about the government role in welfare provision. In 2001, the

NPR/Kaiser/Harvard study asked people to state if they support a list of possible increases in government involvement. Very telling, the programs that encourage work were rated very high and those of direct assistance to the poor were rated the lowest. For example, at the top of the list we find “expanding job training programs” (94% in favor), “expanding subsidized day care,” and “increasing the minimum wage (both with 85% in favor). “Increasing cash assistance for families,” however, was almost at the bottom of public interest, with only 54% in favor. It is clear that as far as public sentiments go, helping the poor getting a job has a strong public mandate but directly supporting the poor while in poverty is not a favorable public option. Similarly, a series of NORC studies from 1973 onward asked respondents if government should reduce income differences. Only about a quarter can be defined as strong supporters of such a measure. In 2001, a NPR/Kaiser/Harvard survey asked people why they like welfare reform and the number one answer was “The law requires people to go to work.” This statement was supported by 89% of respondents. Clearly central public opinion is that poverty is a personal responsibility and the government should focus its resources and programs on redirecting people to find and maintain work (Alesina & Glaeser, 2004).

The most visible manifestation of these public opinions is the welfare reform of 1996. Assessments of the welfare reform legislation of 1996 points to the significant decreasing numbers of individuals who remain on the public payrolls as an indication of the reform’s success. Ziliak, Figlio, Favis, and Connolly (2000) noted that the Aid For Dependent Children (AFDC)/Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) caseload was cut in half from 5 million to 2.5 million. As such welfare “reform’s” success is in limiting the amount of federal dollars available to people at the bottom rungs of the economic ladder. Some consequences include multiple part-time jobs, mostly without health insurance, for large numbers of single parents and others pushed to the underground economy, many no longer counted, now “off the radar screen” of federal agencies that use those statistics to alert legislative branches to the needs of constituents. Many who were considered “success” in the late 1990s are now again unemployed and were the first to be laid off.

If there is less and less cash assistance, what is the substitute? Over the past three decades, public welfare in the United States has dramatically shifted its approach for caring for the poor. The means-tested cash benefits—public assistance and Aid for Families with Dependent Children (AFDC)—were either abolished or significantly curtailed. The public cash assistance or in-kind support system was substituted with a network of services that support people readiness for work (Soss, Schram, Vartanian, & O’Brien, 2001). Most of these vocationally related support services are provided by nonprofit social services under public financing as part of devolution. Allard (2009) reported that “what has typically is thought of as the



most important source of support for poor populations, government cash assistance, has declined substantially—from \$30 billion in 1975 to about \$11 billion today” (p. 13). In other words, along with public opinion, public policies shifted from helping the poor cope with the hardships of poverty to offering programs that enhance poor people’s labor market participation (Twombly, 2001). It is a philosophy that states that poverty is a personal responsibility and the collective’s assistance is geared toward self-sufficiency and not toward providing a minimum level of quality of life while under poverty. As such, government hires the services of numerous small and large nonprofit organizations and contracts with them to provide a large array of work-related services such as vocational training, job referrals, day care services, adult education, and counseling. Smith and Lipsky (1993) and Kettl (1988) were among the first to note the development of grassroots and institutional nonprofit human service agencies that in the past three decades grew in number and size and are carrying out government tasks.

The problems with this system of service and care for the poor are many. First, the money to alleviate the pains of poverty is geared to the providers of service and not to those in need. Second, this means that no public agency provides safety net support and that basic needs remain unmet. Third, the cost of delivering work-incentive programs is significantly higher than the cost of distributing cash payment. Fourth, the availability of services is uneven and often disproportional to where the need is (Fording, Soss, & Schram, 2007). Allard (2009) showed how most nonprofit organizations that are charged with assisting poor people are located in center cities and along major highways far from the residential location of most poor people. As such, poor people who wish to consume these services must spend much time and money on inefficient public transportation (see also Cnaan & Frazier, 2008). Related to this issue is the fact that in neighborhoods where poor people of color reside services are the least available. Fifth, the services that are available do not always meet the specific needs of people who can access them. Sixth, the type and quality of services offered are locally based and there is no way to establish national standards or to compare service provision in one location to another location (Morgan, 2001). There is no way to assess who is eligible and unserved, which was not the case under cash allowances. Seventh, these hired agencies are working in an unsecured environment and their contracts with the government are continually tentative and subject to renewal (Raymond, 2010). As such, and especially in these days of economic recession, many nonprofit organizations will not get their contracts renewed and will move out of the welfare arena.

This outsourcing of government’s traditional services to the nonprofit and private sectors has many ramifications. These organizations focus their efforts on improving the lives of specific populations-at-risk: people who are homeless, prisoners, substance abusers, abused, assaulted, prisoners and ex-prisoners, etc. Many of these agencies have developed skills that

enable them to participate in the give-and-take of the political process, write successful grants, and participate in contracts for services required by public agencies. However, their coverage is usually limited and their commitment is resources dependent. As a society, America abdicates cash allowances that provide means to meet basic needs and takes a punitive/restrictive approach that calls on the poor to be assisted only through the labor market. This practical realization of our economic individualism ideology leaves millions of Americans hungry, home unsecured, without health insurance, and vulnerable. And in the face of the current recession it is clear that the poor who undergo vocational training will not be able to find gainful employment and their plight will go unheard.

Taking all the previous data points together, it is clear that the United States is not ready for additional public commitment or investment in helping the needy. Neither public attitudes nor political will is found in support of poor people. Furthermore, the care that is provided is predicated on the existence and availability of numerous social service nonprofit organizations that are rarely located close or within poor neighborhoods. Even these services are not secured, and many of them are bound to be cut as the recession intensifies. Clearly, there is a need for more committed players in the field of social services provision as is practiced by the government and in meeting basic needs of poor people, and one group of providers that are least tapped are the faith-based organizations. Enhancing these organizations' capacities to assist the poor and needy is a challenge facing our society. Amid these realities that were portrayed until this part of the paper, we ask what role the faith community can play in helping the American society help the poor and needy.

## FAITH COMMUNITY AND HELPING THE POOR

In European and in most Western democracies the government is the key actor responsible for and providing welfare services for poor people (Alesina, & Glaeser, 2004; Esping-Anderson, 1990). Less advanced societies such as in East Asia structure their welfare arrangements on family responsibility. People live in large family structures, and the normative arrangements are for family members within and between generations to care for one another. Unlike most advanced democracies, in the United States, as demonstrated, the government is not very active in meeting poor people's needs. Yet, welfare is also not based on family responsibility. As an immigrant society, America developed the ethos of self-reliance (economic individualism), and as it is the most mobile society in the world, family responsibility, even if normatively available, is often impractical. Compared with most societies, Americans live in smaller nuclear families and are expected to care for themselves since young adulthood. In the United States, the prevalence of poverty

is either permanent or on the rise, and the lack of domestic policy does not help to alleviate the problem. (Feeding America, 2010) What is unique to America is the rich involvement of religious organizations, especially congregations in voluntarily caring for the needy (Ammerman, 2005; Beaumont, 2008; Chaves, 2004; Cnaan et al., 2002, 2006).

Cnaan and colleagues (2002, 2006) demonstrated that American congregations are most active in serving the poor. In fact, faith communities using their own resources have become the place where the most safety net services are offered. In the context and culture of the American society poor people turn to congregations and other religious organizations to cope with the hardships of poverty. In their study of urban congregations they found that these faith communities also provide the following safety net services: food pantries (offered by 37.4% of congregations), clothing closets (25%), after-school care (19.8%), programs for seniors (18.5%), and soup kitchens (13%). Given the estimated 400,000 places of worship across America and their geographical proximity to where people reside, there must be thousands of voluntary service stations throughout the country. These are only a few examples of many other services that are geared to assisting poor people ranging from 12-step programs to after-school program and from counseling to homeless shelters. As noted, it is members of faith communities who most often donate to help the poor (Wilhelm, 2009).

These services are almost always carried out on congregational property, involve many congregational volunteers, and are supported by cash and or in-kind goods paid for by the members of the congregation. Less than 5% of congregational programs are supported by public authorities. The estimated replacement value of these services for Philadelphia alone is estimated at \$250 million. Of this sum, only 13% is estimated to be cash support and the rest is the value of labor, space, and in-kind support.

The point is that these many voluntary services offered by American congregations and faith organizations are geared toward the immediate needs of poor people. They offer the food, clothing, and in many cases shelter for those in greatest need. Congregations and other religious organizations also offer services to assist with child care and childhood education.

Religious congregations are spaced-out throughout the city (and countryside) and more visible than other nonprofit and community organizations. For example, when Orr (1998) studied the institutional ecology of four Los Angeles neighborhoods, he reported "an average of 35 religious congregations and 12.5 religiously affiliated nonprofit corporations per square mile, far more than the number of gasoline stations, liquor stores, and supermarkets combined" (p. 3). Similar findings were reported for Philadelphia (Cnaan et al., 2006), Indianapolis (Farnsley, 2003), and Kent County, MI (Hernandez, Carlson, Medeiros-Ward, Stek, & Verspoor, 2008). Compounding the fact that most congregations are willing to assist the poor

and needy and they are located throughout the landscape of American cities and counties it is imperative to recruit them to the coordinated effort of serving the poor and needy.

However, as will be discussed in the last section of this paper, a coordinated effort to include congregations and other faith-based groups in a concerted welfare effort is a delicate matter. Each American community developed its own network of services and culture of civic life. However, faith organizations are often outside of these local arrangements and are not optimally utilized. As such, the following section is focused on the need for a public agency charged with harnessing and coordinating the pro-social activities and potential of congregations and faith organizations throughout America. We thus advocate for the long-term existence of WHFNP, and we suggest that it should focus on two key roles: encouraging the faith community to help the poor and needy to meet basic needs and encouraging religious social services to work with local government and local nonprofit organizations to care for the poor and needy in a coordinated manner.

#### REVISED ROLE FOR THE HOUSE OFFICE OF FAITH-BASED AND NEIGHBORHOOD PARTNERSHIPS

In this paper we established that both financially and politically one cannot expect the American government to increase its welfare allocation. Welfare allocations in America, to begin with, are small and do not intend to help alleviate the pain of poverty but rather to provide an incentive and an avenue to find work. The public discourse regarding welfare and poor people calls on the poor to get a job and is not supportive of assisting them. As such, America gradually shifted from cash assistance to social services provision. But this system of care has its own limitations, many of which were discussed.

In an era of economic recession when public resources are even fewer than in previous years, it is imperative that government seek to recruit any collaborator that is willing to participate in the provision of safety net services. Furthermore, with the massive layoffs one may expect that the circle of poverty will significantly increase especially when many people will graduate from being eligible for unemployment insurance. In an era when the number of poor people and poor families is on the rise, government should collaborate with all forces of society that are available and willing to help the poor. As demonstrated, the key voluntary community that is normatively welfare committed and engaged is the faith community. As such, the question about the need for WHFNP in the Obama Administration and beyond is moot. While it was the brainchild of President George W. Bush and may have been intended to serve the interests of the Religious Right (see Wineburg,

2007) the potential of this office is great. The office is essential, but its focus needs radical shifting.

WHFNP is facing a special challenge in the years to come. While its original mission was enabling faith-based organizations to be included in public contracting, this is no longer sufficient. Along with the rest of the government it will be challenged to assist the many families that are living in poverty. Job training and job readiness programs notwithstanding, there is a need to guarantee minimum care and provisions for poor families. The richest society should not let millions of people go hungry and become homeless. Among the many programs that the Obama administration may plan there should be a clear agenda of recruiting faith-based organizations to not only do what they do on their own but to do so in a more connected fashion. WHFNP's top priority should be to become the center for coordinating safety net services for poor people. In every community in America there should be a volunteer coordinator who can help local congregations and faith-based organizations meet the needs of the local poor. With the office's blessing and direction the coordinator should reach out to the faith community and work with them to meet the growing needs of poor Americans. Guidelines and best practice should come from the office; however, local communities should prioritize their needs and coordinate voluntary care with public care. Given the rich diversities between America's communities in each city or county a different configuration of service delivery system should be operationalized. Congregations and other faith groups should be encouraged to continue their current care but to do so in way that will be better coordinated and more accessible. Their previous commitment to helping the poor guarantee that if a call will come from Washington through a trusted channel they will come and help. It is more difficult and challenging to fit public agenda to local variations, but the office should start looking locally and assigning people to coordinate task on state and local levels. This is a paradigm shift and one that should start immediately.

As noted, the new structure of public social service delivery that focuses on services that encourage labor participation rather than cash allowances changed the nature of social services delivery. As there cannot be national guidelines and models for local social services, the models and best arrangements should develop locally. This reality of service delivery makes the work of a national governmental unit quite difficult. WHFNP is geared for national policies while services are evolving locally. In the field of welfare, the majority of the contracting between public authorities and the many service providers are done on state and local levels. For WHFNP to be relevant and to encourage the inclusion of faith-based providers it should acknowledge the new service reality. Given years of devolution and new federalism, decisions are mostly made locally, and they are organic to their communities. As such, encouraging the leveling of the playing field is important as it

will increase the volume of potential service providers. But it can be dictated from Washington (top) to the thousands of communities (down) with very limited effectiveness. It can be made only as an encouragement on the local level and as part of local planning process to be effective. For WHFNP to be relevant for the welfare of needy Americans, it should involve itself not in monitoring of government departments and offering of a few grants but in influencing local decision making to expand the pool of service providers to include faith-based service providers and to make sure that they are part of the local process rather than a forced implant. For that, local coordinators, paid or volunteers, should be retained and trained in utilizing local faith-based organizations and integrating them in the ever evolving local welfare system. This is how their special advantage and potential will be best used and be relevant in helping Americans in need.

## CONCLUSIONS

We dedicated this paper to a different perspective than most papers on the topic. We bypassed questions on constitutionality and effectiveness. In this paper we attempted to assess the need and roles for the WHFNP. As we demonstrated, in the United States helping the poor and needy is not a national priority, and as such few resources are devoted to help people who live under poverty. There is a significant withdrawal from public assistance through cash support or in-kind support to a complex set of social services aimed to put people back at work and that are provided by numerous private providers under contract with the government. We also established that faith-based groups are keenly involved in helping the poor often at their own expense.

In an era of economic recession when even larger pool of people will suffer from poverty and unemployment, government needs to recruit all sources of care that are available to help the poor and needy. As such WHFNP is needed and must be sustained under the Obama Administration. However, its mission should be revised.

The revised WHFNP should focus more on the local scene rather than on the national scene. Its greatest effect in these hard times will come from coordinating the work of congregations and other groups that care for helping poor people cope with the situation with shelter, food, clothing, and other basic needs. Indeed, community partnerships should be the real focus of the office. If the WHFNP will coordinate their work locally, many of our neediest citizens will be better protected and better served. Similarly, the current culture of public help for the poor through a large system of many local private providers contracting with local or state government also offers an opportunity for WHFNP. WHFNP should be active on the local level to help include faith-based providers as part of the local service system and

encourage their inclusion in all aspects of service delivery from planning to evaluation. These are tall-order challenges and ones that require shifting of orientations, priorities, and modes of operation. Indeed, the needs are many and the challenges are even more numerous.

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