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TANNER: Obama's faith-based boondoggle

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The Obama administration has enough bad ideas of its own without holding onto one of the more ill-conceived programs from the George W. Bush years - the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

Established by President Bush in 2001 to help steer federal funds to religious and community social service organizations, the program has been expanded by President Obama also to promote programs that reduce demand for abortion, encourage "responsible fatherhood," and "facilitate global interfaith dialogue."

It's not that the so-called faith-based initiative costs all that much money. Its annual budget is just \$385 million, and it oversees slightly more than \$2 billion in grants, barely a rounding error by Washington budgetary standards. But the damage done by government co-option of private charity goes far beyond money.

No one denies that private charities, especially faith-based ones, can transform lives and help lift people out of poverty and despair. Indeed, private charities are more effective than government welfare programs in fulfilling those roles. It seems natural, therefore, to want to encourage these groups. However, mixing government and charity risks undermining the things that have made private charity effective.

Government money never comes without strings. In the case of faith-based organizations, legitimate concerns about the separation of church and state mean that charities must prove they are not using government funds for proselytizing and other exclusively religious

activities. This can impose significant administrative burdens on small local charities and give government the ability to snoop through a church's books and records.

Besides, why should faith-based charities eschew proselytizing and strictly religious functions? There is a reason for the "faith" in "faith-based charities." These organizations believe that helping people requires more than food or a bed. It requires addressing deeper spiritual needs. From their perspective, it is about God. Yet, in the end, government involvement transforms private charities from institutions that change people's lives to providers of services - government programs in clerical collars.

In addition, taxpayers have a right to demand that institutions receiving public funds adhere to standards for nondiscriminatory treatment in employment and the provision of services. But religious institutions often feel those requirements conflict with the tenets of their faith. Just look to the District of Columbia, where the Catholic Church is threatening to cancel social service contracts with the District government rather than recognize gay marriages. There is no way to square such a circle. District taxpayers, including gay taxpayers, should not have to provide funds to an organization that violates their basic civil rights. And the church should not have to act contrary to its beliefs.

Finally, there is a more profound threat to the identity and mission of these charities. If the history of welfare proves anything, it is that government money is as addictive as any narcotic. Ironically, therefore, given that many private charities are dedicated to fighting welfare dependency, government funding may quickly become a source of dependency for the charities themselves. Lobbying for, securing and retaining that funding can become the organization's top priority.

Many of the largest charities, such as Catholic Charities, Lutheran Social Services and the Jewish Federations, already receive more money from the government than from private donations. These groups also run large professional lobbying machines in Washington. In many ways, they have become another special interest at the trough of federal largesse.

Government funding is antithetical to the nature of charity. After all, the essence of private charity is that it is voluntary. Tax money is based on coercion. There is neither compassion nor love behind a grant of money forcibly taken from taxpayers who may have no desire to support the charity in question.

There is no reason for government to be in bed with private charity. Charity is thriving in America. We are the most generous nation on earth. Every year, Americans contribute

more than \$300 billion to charity. In addition, more than half of all American adults perform volunteer work. That time and effort is worth more than another \$300 billion. And that does not include the countless dollars and time given to family members, neighbors and others outside the formal charity system. A few extra dollars from Washington add little to this amazing success story.

The faith-based initiative was a typical example of Bush-style "big-government" conservatism. It has been co-opted by the Obama administration as another weapon for social engineering. That makes it a bad idea on a bipartisan basis. Budget hawks, advocates of religious freedom, and the faith-based community itself should join together and get government out of the charity business.

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