

IN GOOD CONSCIENCE

November 18, 2010

The Honorable Jerrold Nadler
Chairman, Subcommittee on the Constitution, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
Committee on the Judiciary
US House of Representatives
B-353 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Nadler, Ranking Member Sensenbrenner and Members of the Subcommittee:

Catholics for Choice is pleased to have the opportunity to submit this statement in support of the Subcommittee's assessment of the Faith-Based Initiative, the status of the recommendations of the President's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships and other issues related to federally-supported projects with faith-based organizations.

Catholics for Choice works to shape and advance sexual and reproductive ethics that are based on justice, reflect a commitment to women's well-being and respect and affirm the capacity of women and men to make moral decisions about their lives. For more than 35 years, CFC has been at the forefront of national and international debates on the intersection of faith, women's health and reproductive rights and justice.

American Catholics support policies that help men and women make informed decisions about their lives, be they regarding healthcare in general, specific matters of reproductive health or other social service needs. The role of individual, informed conscience in matters of moral decision making is at the core of the Catholic tradition—and the public policy views of Catholics in the United States reflect this tradition.

While it is clearly appropriate for religious voices to be present and heard in policy debates regarding social service delivery, it is important that they are not granted too much deference. Religion has a lot to offer the world, but all those involved need to be aware of the dangers of permitting religion too much influence. Measured examination of the roles, influence and deference paid to faith-based organizations in the delivery of social service programs is a vital part of balancing the ability of religious organizations to provide services in line with their moral and religious beliefs and the right of those served to have access to services no matter their religion. Institutions should not seek to impose an ideology on their employees nor those they serve, but should instead defer to the individual consciences of those involved in both delivering and receiving assistance.

This Subcommittee's study of the administration's progress on implementing necessary changes to the Faith-Based Initiatives and the consensus recommendations issued by the Advisory Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships is an important part of maintaining that balance.

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When clients seek services, especially from social service projects that receive federal support, the end result must be that the program provides the assistance the client needs, regardless of the religious affiliation of the sponsoring entity. In addition, organizations that receive federal grants to support project employment must not discriminate against any employee, applicant for employment or potential client based on religion. Concrete action to address the issue of federally funded employment discrimination on the basis of religion is an essential part of the necessary reform of the Faith-Based Initiatives. An additional element of reform will be moving forward with implementation of the consensus recommendations of the Advisory Council.

The debates over the proper role for religion in public policy are not new, nor will they be settled any time soon. Forty years ago, US president John F. Kennedy described his own determination to keep his religion and the demands of democracy and pluralism in appropriately distinct spheres. The Catholic hierarchy has a long history of involving itself in debates over public policy. From advocating for the poor to opposing war and the death penalty, there is much good the church has done in this arena. However, while even the bishops don't always speak with one voice on some issues, it is patently clear that they do not represent the views and actions of all Catholics. The world over, Catholics think and act independently, practicing what is best for their families and themselves.

Halting any employment discrimination in federally funded projects and thoughtful implementation of the Advisory Council's recommendations are proposals that Catholics can and do support. I appreciate the time that you are taking on this important issue. Thank you for your consideration of my testimony.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jon O'Brien". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "J" and "O".

Jon O'Brien
President