



Government Partnerships Toolbox

Public Positioning

OVERVIEW OF TOOLBOXES

Sacred Sector has created six different “toolboxes” to guide you through the common challenges that faith-based organizations face: Religious Staffing, SOGI Nondiscrimination Laws, Government Partnerships, Advocacy and Lobbying, Family Supportive Workplaces and Positive Engagement in the Public Square. Each toolbox is composed of three papers:

- Public Policy papers equip you to know how the topic of the toolbox influences public policy and your partnership with officials.
- Organizational Practice papers equip you to apply the topic of the toolbox to the internal and external practices of your organization.
- Public Positioning papers equip you to communicate the topic of the toolbox clearly with stakeholders and the community.

LEGAL DISCLAIMER

These resources are provided for general information purposes only and are not a substitute for legal advice particular to your situation. No recipients of these resources should act or refrain from acting solely on the basis of these resources without seeking professional legal counsel. The Center for Public Justice and any of its partners, including Sacred Sector, expressly disclaim all liability relating to actions taken or not taken based solely on the content.

TEMPLETON RELIGION TRUST

This publication was made possible through the support of a grant from Templeton Religion Trust. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Templeton Religion Trust.

Government Partnerships Public Positioning

Objective: *This paper shows how Faith-Based Organizations (FBOs) can cultivate a positive public perception of partnerships between FBOs and the federal government. It discusses how an FBO that receives government funding can promote a favorable public reputation, and why it is so important that community leaders, government officials and the general public hold a positive view.*

Communicate the Value of FBOs in the Community

Faith-based organizations (FBOs) are often the major providers of social services within their communities. FBOs can develop a positive perception of the social impact made possible by their partnerships with government by consistently highlighting their community involvement, their positive religious values and the way their distinct religious identity motivates their work. Government funding of faith-based organizations is often looked upon negatively these days, when so many are skeptical about religious freedom and about religious organizations generally. Yet such funding can be positive for the beneficiaries a government program seeks to help.

FBOs that receive government funding should proactively communicate to the public, stakeholders and policymakers the positive impact in the lives of individuals and communities made possible by the funding:

- ✓ Communicate to the public how the organization's faith-based mission is connected to the positive impact it makes in the community.
- ✓ Communicate how the government benefits from partnerships with a diverse spectrum of community-serving organizations, both faith-based and secular.
- ✓ Emphasize that the government's goals are best achieved through partnership with the most effective organizations, and how a level playing field for FBOs to compete creates stronger and more innovative social service partnerships.
- ✓ Initiate discussions with policymakers and community leaders to educate them about the FBO's religious mission, explain how the program effectively serves all eligible beneficiaries and demonstrate how the organization won't become an arm of the government when accepting a government grant or contract.
- ✓ Diminish public misconceptions concerning FBO partnerships with the government by developing positive public messaging so that the public understands how protecting the religious freedom of FBOs contributes to the public good.
- ✓ Explain that many FBOs (and secular nonprofits) raise additional private funds beyond government funding to add or enhance service offerings.

A public that is skeptical about religion and FBOs can be even more negative about government support of faith-based service providers. FBOs whose missions of service can benefit from government funding should work specifically to overcome these negative

perceptions about government partnerships with FBOs. Of particular importance is helping the public understand that the “faith” of an FBO adds to its ability to serve the community beyond only fellow believers. Through public messaging, FBOs should stress how its services are distinct and effective due to its religious mission and how its government-supported services make positive contributions to the community.

Internal Education

An FBO’s employees, volunteers and board members should be able to talk comfortably about the good that the organization does in the community. These same people need to be able to articulate and express clearly the connection between the FBO’s religious mission and its social service work. Employees, board members and volunteers are embodiments of the organization, so help them accurately communicate its mission and its positive impact. They should be able to say how government funding supports both the organization’s mission and the government’s service goals. Additionally, they should be able to express the benefit of the FBO’s partnership with the government.

Educating the Public

Government partnerships with FBOs are unique. That's why FBOs need to help community leaders, policy makers and stakeholders to understand how these partnerships contribute to the common good. FBOs should demonstrate how their religious identity supports, rather than undermines, their public service:

- Consistently engage with the public about the organization’s religious identity and why the organization is pursuing the community goals it has, based on its deeply held religious beliefs.
- Provide positive and affirming examples of how the work of the FBO has been advanced through a government grant or contract.
- Demonstrate the services beneficiaries have received because of the good work the program has accomplished with the help of government funding.
- Ensure the organization’s religious mission statement is carried out in a clear and concise manner by every employee, and that the mission is appropriately conveyed to the public through its services.

Not a Government Actor

A common misconception is that FBOs that accept government funds thereby become an arm or extension of the government (technically, a “state actor”) and are thus bound to operate in the non-religious way the government must act. This is not true. Private organizations that receive government funds retain their autonomy. "Equal Treatment" regulations that control government funding of faith-based and secular organizations clearly state that FBOs retain their autonomy and religious character. Some suggestions for messaging:

- Make clear to the public through effective messaging that the organization’s religious mission has not been compromised by its partnership with the government.
- Stress that, in its “direct” government-funded services, the FBO does not turn away people because of their religion or lack of religion, nor will it require participation in religious activities.
- If the funding is indirect and religious activities are woven into the funded services, help the public to understand that people in the program specifically chose it rather than a secular program.
- Explain that the federal legal requirement states that grants and contracts be awarded not because an organization is religious — or secular — but because it is the best qualified to provide the service that the government seeks to support.

Positive Service Perception

To some of the public, FBOs are objectionable and should be excluded from government funding, not because of what they do, but because of what they will not do. Charges of “discrimination” are quickly thrown around when an FBO has internal and service standards that do not mirror the current consensus — even when FBOs are among a variety of available services, and thereby increase the choices people in need have. Some suggestions for messaging:

- Qualify and quantify the beneficial outcomes of your FBO’s services, including how it provides more options, how many people are impacted and the depth and/or breadth of service offerings.
- Note that the religious rights of beneficiaries are protected via the referral requirement and (if the funding is indirect) the choice of provider.
- State that the program serves people of all faiths not despite, but because of, the FBO’s religious beliefs.
- Phrase faith-shaped beliefs in a positive way where possible. For example, rather than saying “cohabitation is a biblical abomination,” say, “We believe that marriage is the setting in which a relationship between a man and a woman is best supported.”

FBOs that emphasize what they are for rather than leading with what they are against can help the public understand the positive value the program adds to the community, even if many disagree with its religious beliefs and practices.

Service to Beneficiaries

It is essential for FBOs to stress the commitment it has to those it serves and how government funding has enabled the program to better help the community. The organization might have religious and conduct standards for its privately funded services, but should emphasize service to all in the government-funded programs.

- Express to beneficiaries (clients, students, members, etc) how the organization does not discriminate in its services to recipients based on religion, beliefs or lifestyles in the services supported by government funds. For example, a Baptist homeless shelter

could convey to the public that it serves all homeless people regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, lifestyle, etc., even when some lifestyles or beliefs are contrary to the FBO's religious belief.

- Government-funded services are always targeted to specific subgroups and it may be helpful to the public to know the limitations on services that are due to this restriction. For example, a Catholic after-school program may admit only young male teens from the neighborhood because that is a requirement of the government program that provides the funding.

Educating Policymakers

Public policy is more likely to accommodate the religious freedom of FBOs if policymakers and influential community leaders are personally aware of the community impact and good intentions of the FBOs.

- FBOs that develop good relations with a policymaker before issues arise will find that the policymaker is more likely to listen to any concerns when a new piece of legislation is introduced that might impact the mission or service of a religious organization.
- FBOs should be prepared to defend its religious beliefs about social values, public policies and lifestyle choices in a positive manner. It is vital that policymakers see that an FBO's positive impact in the community as the fruit of its religious commitment. Private organizations are not interchangeable, and the "faith" of an FBO cannot be eliminated without harming its ability to serve.
- FBOs should educate policymakers on how the program serves the community with the assistance of government funding.
- FBO can remind elected officials that FBOs need to be protected from laws and regulations that encroach on the religious freedom they need in order to maximally serve the public. Shaping policy is more effective when the FBO has a positive public image and well-established relationships with policymakers.

It is important for religious institutions to engage with policymakers to promote religious freedoms for FBOs, showcase the positive impact on communities through FBO services and provide education on the benefits of FBOs partnering with the government through grants or contracts. See also the *Advocacy and Lobbying Toolbox*.

Conclusion

Most Americans do not understand the special relationship into which FBOs enter when they partner with the government through grants or contracts. Clearly defining your FBO's intentions in serving your community with government financial support can help foster better relations with community leaders, organizers and policy makers. Developing positive public messaging with your beneficiaries and the general public can allow your FBO to gain a respectable public image and help address any public misconceptions or negative rhetoric

surrounding your FBO. Do not be afraid to engage with the public, both secular and religious. Remember: it is because of a divine calling that your organization serves its neighbors and shines its religious light.

REVIEW AND EVALUATE:

1. If your organization has partnered with government through a contract, grant or other arrangement, your organization has:
 - a. Documented the positive social impact of this partnership on your beneficiaries and the broader community.
 - b. Publicly communicated the positive social impact of this partnership to stakeholders, government officials, community leaders and the general public.
2. Your organization looks for ways to educate public officials and community leaders about your sacred mission and the significance of allowing FBOs to remain faithful to their sacred mission when competing for government contracts and grants.
3. Your organization looks for ways to articulate your faith-based standards in a positive manner, especially those standards prone to being misunderstood or criticized — e.g., instead of focusing primarily on a particular moral prohibition in articulating an organizational standard, your organization emphasizes the correlative belief or conduct that you fully affirm.
4. If your organization has received government contract or grant funding, you are familiar with how to reach out to the relevant federal faith-based and neighborhood partnerships center or similar state or local government office to ask questions and seek guidance.