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**BEFORE THE
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Over the past two years, President Bush has clearly demonstrated his commitment to elevating the importance of religious values and faith-based organizations in the battle to alleviate social ills. The President reminds us that Americans need to look into our hearts to see how we can help those that are most in need – be they at-risk youth, the elderly, homeless individuals, substance abusers or welfare-to-work families.

America is richly blessed with a long tradition and honorable commitment to assisting families and individuals who have not fully shared in our nation's prosperity. Yet, despite a multitude of programs and renewed commitments by the Federal and state governments to battle social distress, too many of our neighbors still suffer from poverty and despair amidst our abundance.

The American people are a caring people. As President Bush put it: "There is no great society which is not a caring society."

While Americans see a vital, yet limited role for government, they also want to see their Federal dollars making a real difference in the lives of the disadvantaged. And they believe that government should help the needy achieve independence and live responsible, productive lives.

They are not calling for "big government," they are calling for a more efficient and compassionate government that is a trustworthy steward of their hard-earned tax dollars.

While it is true that government has a solemn responsibility to help its citizens in need, it does not have a monopoly on compassion. Social entrepreneurs and dedicated volunteers are on the front lines of our nation's communities seeking to lift people's lives in ways that are beyond government's ability. Because of this, community groups and faith-based organizations have become an indispensable part of the social services network of the United States and they offer literally scores of social services to those in need.

In addition to churches, synagogues, and mosques, faith-based organizations include nonprofit organizations, grassroots groups, and any number of neighborhood groups formed to respond to a crisis or to lead community renewal. Faith-based groups everywhere, either acting on their own or as partners with other service providers and government programs, serve the underserved, and help to strengthen families and rebuild communities.

All too often, however, the government has inadvertently hampered the efforts of faith-based organizations to assist Federal agencies in carrying out their missions. Federal policy and programs have often disregarded faith-based groups as valuable resources for providing social assistance and have imposed federal, state, and local-level barriers to the participation of religious organizations in social service programs. This overzealous interpretation of the separation of church and state has only served to hurt those in our society who are most in need.

The President believes that there should be an equal opportunity for *all* organizations - both faith-based and nonreligious - to participate as partners in Federal programs.

To strengthen the work of what President Bush terms our nation's "armies of compassion" - those civic, social, charitable, and religious groups that exist in our neighborhoods - the President created the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives within days of taking office in January 2001.

This Office today exists as a resource to, and an advocate for, faith-based and community organizations. Its mission is to help these groups attract resources, gain access to federal programs, and overcome hurdles when learning how to work with government. The Office does this by:

- Working closely with Congress to secure the passage of legislation that would create a level playing field upon which private and charitable groups, including religious organizations, can compete for federal funding;
- Removing the barriers that prevent charities from doing their important work;
- Providing incentives for increased charitable giving in America; and
- Committing funds to increase the capacity of our nation's grassroots leaders.

At the same time the Office was created, the Administration also opened five cabinet-level Centers for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, which today are located in the Departments of Housing and Urban Development, Labor, Health and Human Services, Justice, and Education.

Each Center is doing great work to promote the President's initiative.

Unfortunately, decades of government hostility or indifference toward faith-based institutions has pushed many groups to the margins of social-welfare policy, thereby depriving people of assistance that is often more effective and more compassionate. In fact, many community service organizations have been denied Federal resources just because they have a religious affiliation or a rabbi or priest on their board. They are shunned because they have a religious symbol on their wall, or a mission statement inspired by their faith.

These organizations often are the lifeblood and last resort for people in need and their size can range from a struggling church soup kitchen to a global program such as Habitat for Humanity. Consequently, far too many of these groups have been overlooked as legitimate partners in our nation's efforts to help those left behind.

With the stroke of a pen last December, however, President Bush signaled to the American people that government would no longer discriminate against groups that are guided by their belief in God as they help their neighbors. Instead, the Administration is inviting them to the table to be part of the solution to our nation's problems.

Pure and simple: It is my understanding that HUD advocates an "open door policy" for faith-based organizations to provide social services to public housing residents. The content of spiritual programs should not and will not be distorted to satisfy some overzealous bureaucrat. Instead of fearing faith, government should embrace and encourage the good work of faith in our society.

Local charitable programs should be judged on one central question: do they work? If they work in part because they are anchored in faith, the government should not complain – the government should encourage them.

HUD appears to be breaking down the barriers to working with faith-based groups. The Department will not cross constitutional limits, but it is streamlining its regulations to let these organizations keep their independence and religious identity.

The objective is to make it easier for faith-based and other grassroots community organizations to join in HUD's mission. The goal is simple: HUD wants more organizations to provide more services to help more people.

It is my understanding that HUD intends to respond to organizations no matter how big they are or how much experience they have. The bottom line is: if a faith-based or community group can do the job, then HUD will talk with them and help them succeed in their communities.

There is a two-part process here: removing regulatory and administrative barriers to participation and supporting capacity-building activities for faith-based and community groups. Both parts are important to achieve our national goal of finding efficient and cost-effective ways to help the most people possible.

The goal, whether at HUD or another agency, should be to help expand society's capacity to respond with efficiency and compassion to human needs. The Bush Administration is seeking compassionate results, not just compassionate intentions.