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Hiring in federal faith-based program discussed

by Carmen Blanco by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- A June 11 panel discussion about the government's partnership with faith-based organizations was meant to focus on President Barack Obama's plans for the future of the program, first established under the administration of former President George W. Bush.

The attention of the audience listening to the panel, however, gravitated toward the question of whether religious organizations hiring for positions funded with taxpayer money retain the right to base employment decisions on a person's faith.

One difference cited between the past and current administrations was their stance on hiring rights. Bush was a proponent of religious hiring rights as part of the faith-based initiative effort and argued that allowing religious organizations to hire who they wanted was essential to maintaining the religious identity of the organization.

Opponents counter that religious groups, when receiving public dollars, should not be allowed to discriminate against prospective employees on the basis of their faith or religious beliefs.

Audience members, who included the press, wanted clarification on Obama's stance on the issue because there is uncertainty on whether his stance has changed since his election into office.

During his presidential campaign, Obama said he would not support the right of faith-based groups who receive public funding to "discriminate against the people you hire on the basis of their religion."

Joshua DuBois, special assistant to the president and executive director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, would not comment directly on whether Obama has changed his position, but he said that the current administration would consider religious hiring questions on a case-by-case basis with the help of advisers and legal experts.

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