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About the Author

Professor Scott W. Allard is an Associate Professor at the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration, where his work revolves around issues of poverty, place, and social policy in the United States. He has written extensively on antipoverty policy, place, and nonprofit organizations. His recent book, *Out of Reach: Place, Poverty, and the New American Welfare State* (Yale University Press, 2009) explores the realities of safety net assistance in the U.S. and the role played by nonprofit service organizations in the delivery of assistance to the poor. He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Michigan in 1999. Professor Allard is an affiliate of the National Poverty Center at the University of Michigan, an affiliate of the Institute for Research on Poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and an affiliate of the Rural Poverty Research Center at Oregon State University. Previously, Professor Allard has held faculty appointments in the Department of Public Administration at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University and the Departments of Political Science and Public Policy at Brown University.

Seeing Past Politics in Obama's Faith-based Initiative

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There has been a lot of discussion lately about Senator Obama's moves to the right. Perhaps most prominent was last week's unveiling of a new initiative called the Council for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, which would extend the work of the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI) created under President George W. Bush. When we view this proposal through political or religious lenses, we look past the most important reason for extending the current faith-based initiative: it is essential to ensuring our communities can help families in need during the current economic hard times.

Secular and faith-based nonprofits form the bedrock of our modern safety net, yet these organizations are finding it difficult to provide adequate help to the rising numbers of families in need. We often think of cash assistance as the primary method for helping poor people in our country. But for every dollar we spend on welfare, we spend at least \$10 to \$15 on social programs providing services like job training, adult education, and child care to poor persons that help them find or keep a job. In fact, we spend more on social services that promote work and well-being than we do on welfare, food stamps, and the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) combined. While government may fund a majority of these programs, they are delivered in many instances by nonprofit organizations – secular and faith-based – in our neighborhoods and towns. In fact, secular and faith-based organizations are particularly important sources of support in our highest-poverty urban and rural communities. When those nonprofits struggle, our communities struggle to help the poor find work, grapple with rising rents, and provide food for their children.

Having interviewed more than 1,000 nonprofits in urban and rural America since 2005, I hear one consistent message: we need more help.

Nonprofits face rising demand for assistance, rising costs of operation, and lower levels of funding. Like many of us, they are having to do more and more with less and less. Although lots of public and private money is spent on social service programs that promote work and self-sufficiency, that money dries up during recessions, as governments deal with budget deficits and private donors have less to give.

To put the need of local service providers in clearer perspective, nearly 50% of the nonprofits I've interviewed have experienced recent cuts in their core funding sources. The majority have had to cut services, staff, or the amount of assistance provided as a result. Yet, two-thirds report significant increases in demand for assistance – and those numbers predate the housing crisis and the most recent economic downturn. Many communities see dozens, if not hundreds, of nonprofits go out of business each year. In a bitterly ironic twist, it is organizations in the highest-poverty neighborhoods that are most likely to lose funding, cut assistance amidst rising demand, and close down.

An initiative like the Council for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships that supports secular and religious nonprofits is critical to ensuring the safety net is there when families need it. In the current economic environment, communities must strengthen and develop nonprofits that can help the poor. In some cases this may mean helping new faith-based organizations receive public grants or contracts. More often it means helping agencies build capacity and train staff.

In other cases, it means helping local nonprofits grow and partner with other public and private organizations to provide more effective and efficient programs of assistance. And in most cases, it means helping secular nonprofits, as much, if not more so, than faith-based nonprofits. Nearly two-thirds of the recipients of support through the Bush Administration's Compassion Capital Fund -- similar to the program proposed by Senator Obama -- are secular organizations.

Most importantly for all of us, there is good value here. A community- and faith-based initiative that cultivates local nonprofits creates institutions with a lasting presence and impact, often developing their own revenue base for operation. Helping secular and faith-based nonprofits is critical if we are to help the nearly 60 million individuals in working poor families in America today. Before voters throw up their hands about Obama's "moves to the right", we should consider this single fact: annual appropriations for Senator Obama's Council for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships amount to the cost of roughly one day of operations in Iraq. We owe at least that much to the nonprofit community that works every day to serve those who need a helping hand. It is the kind of investment in America that should appeal to all voters, whether they are liberal, moderate, or conservative, deeply religious or more privately spiritual.