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Diverse group to advise faith-based office (make sure you read end on hiring issues)

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Subject: Diverse group to advise faith-based office (make sure you read end on hiring issues)

Diverse group to advise faith-based office

By ERIC GORSKI, AP Religion Writer Eric Gorski, Ap Religion Writer Tue Feb 3, 9:03 pm ET

The Obama administration is set to announce a diverse set of advisers to a revamped White House office that will steer government money to religious and neighborhood groups doing social service work. They include a former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, a Jewish rabbi active in Washington and a pioneering female African-American bishop. The advisory council is scheduled to be introduced Thursday with the formal announcement of the new White House Office for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, according to a religious leader familiar with the details.

The official spoke on condition of anonymity because the details have not been announced.

Joshua DuBois, a 26-year-old Pentecostal minister who headed religious outreach for the Obama campaign, is to head the office, a senior administration official confirmed last week on the same condition. The White House press office did not immediately respond to requests for comment Tuesday night. According to the religious leader, the advisory group is a mix of leaders from the religious and secular world who have experience in social services. The group will convene at least twice a year. Members include:

_The Rev. Joel Hunter, an Orlando, Fla.-area evangelical megachurch pastor who was consulted by the Obama campaign and prayed privately with Obama over the phone the night he was elected.

_Bishop Vashti McKenzie, the first female bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

_The Rev. Frank Page of Taylors, S.C., the most recent past president of the conservative Southern Baptist Convention, the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

_Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Washington-based Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, a public policy arm of Judaism's liberal Reform branch.

Judith Vredenburg, president and chief executive officer of Big Brothers and Big Sisters of America.

The religious leader with knowledge of the advisory group said representation from the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community is also anticipated.

"Certainly, they'll be encouraged to voice their individual voices," the leader said.

By far, the most sensitive issue surrounding the initiative is Obama's campaign pledge to allow religious institutions taking part in the program to hire and fire based on religion only in the non-taxpayer funded portions of their activities.

Where there are state or local laws prohibiting hiring choices based on sexual orientation in the federally funded portion of the programs, Obama has said he would support those being applied.

It remains unclear whether the Obama administration will rescind executive orders from then-President George W. Bush that allowed religious groups that get government money to hire only those who share their religious beliefs.

However, the religious leader knowledgeable of the plans for the revamped office said: "You can do a lot of things without rescinding those orders. That's not a necessary step to make changes."

The Rev. Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, said he and other religious leaders have conveyed their concerns about the hiring issue in conference calls with the transition team and the Obama White House. One concern is that churches or other faith groups would be required to change their bylaws or hiring practices to qualify for the grants.

"I believe it's not practical and it's not going to happen — and the president knows the backlash from the faith community would be egregious," Rodriguez said. "To push the envelope on that, to say, for example, 'You're going to have to hire gays and lesbians' ... that would be unprecedented."

Obama said during the campaign that he wanted to expand and reform the White House faith-based efforts that began under Bush. As a candidate, Obama pledged to increase spending on social services, increase training for charities applying for funding, pour \$500 million a year into a summer learning program for children and elevate the program's status within the White House.

The new office is scheduled to be unveiled on the same day as the annual National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, which Obama is expected to attend

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