



FIVE KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL GOVERNMENT-FAITH COLLABORATION

(Amy L. Sherman, Hudson Institute, 2004. Used with permission.)

Partnerships between government entities and faith-based organizations (FBOs) delivering social services are becoming more common. Many of the collaborations involve FBOs with no previous history of formal, financial relationships with public agencies. For example, a 2002 study of nearly 400 faith-based contractors in 15 states by the Hudson Institute's Faith in Communities project found that 56 percent of these leaders had only begun contracting with government since the passage of the charitable choice guidelines.¹ Nonetheless, a remarkable 92 percent reported that their experience with government was "positive" or "very positive" and that they would be willing to hold a government contract again in the future.²

Many FBOs, in short, have learned how to craft healthy partnerships with government agencies.

The effective collaborations I have witnessed are marked by several common characteristics. Not every collaboration may include every one of these elements, but the five listed below appear to be key stepping stones for workable, positive cooperation.

- 1. Ground-floor-up involvement:** This first is "ground-floor-up-involvement." This describes a collaboration that is mutually designed by the government agency and the FBO. Together they craft the contours of their partnership, rather than that government agency imposing a pre-designed program upon the faith community.
- 2. Discerning teachability:** Second, it is important for the faith partner to display a respectful and teachable attitude toward the government partner. FBO leaders may well be critical of the ways of the "old welfare system." And, agreement exists across the board that the old system was deficient in numerous respects; hence the fundamental reforms of 1996. But the FBO must avoid a smug attitude that secretly thinks: "Government has certainly made a lot of mistakes in the past. It's a good thing they are finally looking to the faith community to supply them with some better answers." The plain reality that many of the government's ways under the old welfare system did not work does not mean that government officials and case managers are bereft of good ideas, compassion, or wisdom. Many public officials and caseworkers have a wealth of experience and keen insights about working with low-income families — wisdom and experience from which faith community leaders can learn. FBOs should be humble and teachable.

But this posture needs to be one of *discerning* teachability. This is because, in some instances, the worldviews of the government officials and the faith leaders will be different. Specific case managers may or may not hold the same presuppositions or values as do the staff or leaders of the FBO. These differences should be acknowledged and talked through candidly.



3. **Sympathetic respect:** For their part, government officials must eschew an elitist perspective that holds that only highly educated professionals are equipped to help poor people. Instead, agency staff should acknowledge that lay volunteers can provide crucial emotional support and moral guidance to needy families — things that government, by its nature, does not offer well. The government partner should allow FBO service deliverers the flexibility and creativity to meet the needs of the families they are serving under the government contract, even when ministries rely on strategies remarkably different from those employed by government agencies.
4. **Connected Autonomy:** In most current FBO–government relationships, the FBO is willing to do a lot, but does not want *full* responsibility for the disadvantaged families it is assisting. FBOs want assurances that the individuals they serve will also be linked to government-sponsored programs that address needs the FBOs themselves cannot meet. At the same time, FBOs want to help poor people without excessive governmental interference that would totally squelch the spiritual character of their outreach. FBOs want, in short, “connected autonomy.” That is, they want to be a part of a team that surrounds the family in need — a team on which they play a significant, largely unfettered, and unique role —but a team nonetheless. I call this “connected autonomy.”
5. **Strategic Internal Organization:** Government is looking to the faith community for help in part because FBOs are often marked by a flexibility and informality that enables them to interact with families in a way that feels more personal and individually-tailored than “dealing with government bureaucracy.” And that is good. But the faith organizations must also maintain a sufficient level of organization and administrative sophistication that permits them to interact effectively with government. FBOs need to be excellent record-keepers; they must have financial accounting systems and procedures that are well-organized and above reproach; and they need to be able to document what they have done with the public funds — how staff has been spent, what goals have been achieved with the families served, and so forth.

1 Amy L. Sherman and John Green, *Fruitful Collaborations: A Survey of Government-Funded Faith-Based Programs in 15 States* (Hudson Institute, 2002).

2 Ibid.