



Mississippi Today (<https://mississippitoday.org/2017/02/07/bill-would-create-governors-faith-based-council/>)

GOVERNMENT

Bill would create governor's faith-based council

BY **ADAM GANUCHEAU** | FEBRUARY 7, 2017

The Senate passed a bill Tuesday that would create a governor's council for faith-based groups that wish to address social issues with state governmental entities and obtain funding for certain services.

The bill, which the Senate passed by a vote of 37-7, would create the "Mississippi Faith-Based and Community Advisory Council" and give it authority to advise Gov. Phil Bryant on "policies, priorities, and objectives to enlist, equip, enable, empower, and expand the work of faith-based, volunteer, and other community organizations."

"It would allow the governor's office to communicate with various faith-based constituency groups to identify and address social issues," said Sen. Jenifer Branning, R-Philadelphia. "This bill would simply create the framework only to address the needs of these various groups."

The bill, **SB 2514**, in its current form would simply create the council, and the Legislature would not initially be asked to fund the council with state dollars, Branning said on the floor.

The governor would appoint 17 members of the council, and Lt. Gov. Tate Reeves and House Speaker Philip Gunn would appoint four members each. While state appropriations would not be necessary, the council itself and members of the council could receive "gifts, grants and donations from any public or private sources."

If created, Mississippi's faith-based council would not be the first in the country.

The idea was put into motion by the governor's office after being approached by Rabbi Jeffrey Kurtz-Lendner of Beth Israel Congregation in Jackson. Kurtz-Lendner served on a similar council in Florida.

"The concept (in Florida) was that you bring people of all faiths and all political approaches – this was a nonpartisan group – to help the state extend services to people in need though



Mississippi Senate
*Sen. Jenifer
Branning, R-
Philadelphia*

partnerships with faith-based organizations,” Kurtz-Lendner said. “The truth is, most states have allocations of resources to help people in need, but people in need don’t often know how to access that assistance ... This would be a way to help Mississippians get the help they need.”

If created, Mississippi’s faith-based council would not be the first in the country.

The idea was put into motion by the governor’s office after being approached by Rabbi Jeffrey Kurtz-Lendner of Beth Israel Congregation in Jackson. Kurtz-Lendner served on a similar council in Florida.

“The concept (in Florida) was that you bring people of all faiths and all political approaches – this was a nonpartisan group – to help the state extend services to people in need through partnerships with faith-based organizations,” Kurtz-Lendner said. “The truth is, most states have allocations of resources to help people in need, but people in need don’t often know how to access that assistance ... This would be a way to help Mississippians get the help they need.”

Several other states have adopted similar councils, including New Jersey, Delaware and Michigan.

Bryant announced the proposal in his State of the State address in January.

“I believe it will strengthen families all across Mississippi, with no cost to the taxpayers,” Bryant said. “I believe it will be a valuable tool to help serve our families and individuals in need.”

On the Senate floor Tuesday, several senators pressed Branning on the specifics of the bill.

Sen. Derrick Simmons, D-Greenville, asked Branning if the proposal would violate the Establishment Clause of the U.S. Constitution, or the section that mandates separation of church and state.

The bill itself does not mention any specific faiths or religious groups. Kurtz-Lendner said Florida’s council worked with groups of varying theological and political philosophies.

“(The bill) specifically says any recommendations may not violate the Establishment Clause,” Branning said.

If implemented similar to Florida’s council, Kurtz-Lendner said, none of the council members would receive compensation and the group’s sole mission would be to help Mississippians, not further political or religious agendas.

“The goal was to stay focused on things that bring us all together and away from things that divide us,” Kurtz-Lendner said. “Regardless of religious or political views, nobody disagrees that hungry people should get food or that children involved in trafficking should have every resource available to them.”