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Obama aides to meet with atheists on White House grounds

By Margaret Talev
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WASHINGTON Â— President Barack Obama has burnished his Christian credentials, courted Jewish support and preached outreach toward Muslims. On Friday, his administration will host a group that fits none of the above: America's non believers.

The president isn't expected to make an appearance at the meeting with the Secular Coalition for America or to unveil any new policy as a result of it.

Instead, several administration officials will sit down quietly for a morning meeting at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building on the White House campus with about 60 workhorses from the coalition's 10 member groups, including the American Atheists and the Council for Secular Humanism. Tina Tchen, the director of the White House Office of Public Engagement, and representatives from the Justice and Health and Human Services departments will participate.

Coalition leaders are billing their visit as an important meeting between a presidential administration and the "nontheist" community. On the agenda are three policy areas: child medical neglect, military proselytizing and faith-based initiatives.

"We're raising important issues that affect real people's lives," said Sean Faircloth, 49, a former Maine state legislator who's the coalition's executive director.

White House spokesman Shin Inouye downplayed the meeting, saying only that Tchen's office "regularly meets with a wide range of organizations and individuals on a diverse set of issues."

The coalition's board includes such controversy magnets as authors Salman Rushdie ("The Satanic Verses") and Christopher Hitchens ("God Is Not Great"), as well as Michael Newdow, the Sacramento, Calif., doctor who argued against all owing the words "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance before the Supreme Court, but didn't prevail. South Carolina activist Herb Silverman founded the coalition in 2002. It's had a Washington office and a lobbyist since 2005.

"Despite what we hear from Glenn Beck or Sarah Palin, we're in a stage in history where millions upon millions of Americans share a secular perspective on American public policy," Faircloth said. "We think the real 'silent majority,' if you will, is the Americans who say, 'Enough of this religious and even theocratic nature to American policy.'"

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life found in a 2008 survey before Obama's election that a majority of Americans, 52 percent to 45 percent, think that churches should stay out of politics. That sentiment had changed from three election cycles back, 1996, when 54 percent favored churches expressing political views.

Still, nearly three-fourths of Americans told Pew in December 2009 that they attend religious services each year. Americans also told Pew that month that the Republican Party seems friendlier toward religion than Democrats do, but that Obama seems friendlier toward religion than most Democrats are.

The coalition doesn't embrace all the Obama administration's stances, but members think that they have more of a kindred spirit in the president than in his predecessor, George W. Bush.

Obama once taught constitutional law. His late mother was spiritual but agnostic. His inaugural address is credited as the first by a U.S. president to include explicit recognition of "nonbelievers" as part of the fabric of the nation.

Coalition members plan to use Friday's meeting to advocate closing federal loopholes in the law that governs medical ne

glect. They say that officials in any state should be able to remove sick children who need medical treatment from homes in which parents believe in faith healing as easily as they could intervene on behalf of other children.

Liz Heywood, of Ithaca, N.Y., said she was 13 when she contracted a bone infection that her Christian Scientist parents wouldn't seek medical attention to treat. She experienced permanent damage, and three years ago, at 45, had the leg amputated above the knee.

Heywood planned to fly to Washington to participate in the coalition meeting until fresh snow left her stuck in New York. She'll participate by speaker phone.

"I fell through the cracks at every turn," Heywood said of her experience as a sick teen in a faith-healing home. "I am hoping I can make a difference with my story."

Other coalition activists have concerns about proselytizing in the military and a rise in the military's evangelical culture. They want the Department of Defense to give protected-class status to nonbelievers, as it does to members of minority religions.

On faith-based initiatives, the coalition differs from the president in opposing taxpayer funding of all faith-based groups. Obama has emphasized that faith-based groups that receive government money for charitable work shouldn't proselytize or discriminate on the basis of religion. Faircloth said the president should formalize that position through an executive order.

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