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BUILDING ADVOCACY FROM WITHIN: REPORT ON THE WEST COAST LISTENING POST PROJECT ROUNDTABLE ON NONPROFIT ADVOCACY AND LOBBYING

Los Angeles, California

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In 2007, the Johns Hopkins Listening Post Project conducted a survey (“Sounding”) focused on nonprofit involvement in the public policy process. Following a 2008 Roundtable at the Aspen Institute in Washington, D.C., and another in 2009 in Chicago, the Listening Post Project convened a third Roundtable in July 2010 at the California Endowment in Los Angeles to further explore nonprofit involvement in advocacy and to identify additional steps that might be taken to help boost the scope, scale, relevance, and effectiveness of nonprofit advocacy. The meeting brought together mostly West Coast-based nonprofit advocacy experts, representatives of nonprofit intermediary organizations, and practitioners from nonprofit organizations of different sizes and fields to share their experiences and ideas for improved policy engagement.

This report summarizes the major findings that emerged from the session and proposes strategies that could help strengthen the nonprofit sector’s effectiveness in the policy arena.

KEY FINDINGS

The participants in Los Angeles added some new and useful insights into nonprofit involvement in advocacy and how it could be improved. Whereas the first two Roundtables focused more on resource, staffing, and educational barriers, participants in California emphasized two key points:

* Nonprofits must look inward to revitalize their advocacy efforts; and

* Coalitions, funders and policymakers must modify their stance toward advocacy and lobbying.

To help address the significant challenges limiting greater nonprofit involvement in advocacy, the meeting broke into working groups charged with identifying strategies to strengthen nonprofit advocacy and lobbying. Key recommendations of these groups included:

1. Nonprofits must think of advocacy and lobbying more broadly, i.e., they need to connect advocacy to the needs of their clients and to broader public objectives.

Dalouge Smith of the San Diego Youth Symphony noted that nonprofits tend to downplay their role in working for the common good. They lose sight of the “big picture”, e.g., they fail to see the connection between their own organization and the welfare of the community and even the country. Nonprofits can lessen this problem by getting more involved in local community groups and schools. Reflecting this, Patty Metropulos of Metropolitan Family Services explained that it is important for nonprofits to share information about their mission and services. For example, a representative from Metropolitan Family Services attends school board meetings to describe the organization’s services. This, she says, is a way to “strengthen relationships without asking for something in return.” However, the group hopes that this awareness will translate into greater community support

for the organization, which could be critical for future advocacy efforts.

Along these lines, several attendees suggested getting clients/patrons involved in advocacy efforts instead of limiting that role to staff only. This is especially important as the staff at nonprofits tend to be overburdened with carrying out basic operations and have little time to devote to advocacy.

“We need hopeful stories rather than ones of despair.” – Ken Larsen, California Association of Nonprofits

2. Nonprofits need to build advocacy more explicitly into the infrastructure of their organizations and boards. As many participants emphasized that major impediments to nonprofit advocacy and lobbying are internal to nonprofit organizations, they noted that nonprofits need to make internal, structural changes if they want to increase their involvement. Participants stressed making advocacy a priority and slowly building it into the character and culture of an organization. Demonstrating one way to do this, Wendy McKinney of Neighborhood House explained that both the executive director and COO at her organization are responsible for reaching out to the government and other groups; advocacy is a mandatory part of their jobs. Other participants mentioned that to get board members more involved, it is critical to ask each what their interests are and assign them one specific advocacy task related to their interests, as opposed to vaguely encouraging all board members to lobby. Each board member can also be assigned to form a relationship with an individual lobbying or advocacy group. Finally, advocacy needs to be considered an integral part of the organization’s mission and core values.

3. Foundations must be better educated on the importance of advocacy to the ability of nonprofit organizations to fulfill their missions, and must be aware of the benefits that supporting nonprofits and coalitions can bring to them. Peter Manzo of the United Ways of California pointed out that many foundations measure their own impact rather than how their funding impacts the community, which results in their advocating for themselves rather than for the nonprofits they fund. (For example, a foundation can say it is helping to end poverty by giving 25% of its grants to anti-poverty causes, but it fails to investigate whether or not the funding is actually helping to meet this goal.) Ken Larsen of the California Association of Nonprofits added that it would be helpful for nonprofits to document the intan-

gible and anecdotal outcomes of their work for funders. He stated, “We need qualitative data and social indicators in addition to quantitative data, and we need hopeful stories rather than ones of despair.”

Participants also brought up the issue of restrictions placed on lobbying and advocacy by foundations. Dan Schay of the Phoenix Theatre said that nonprofit board members may be aware of these restrictions but since so many foundations do not give a direct explanation of what’s permissible, they are afraid to engage in any sort of advocacy at all. Kathay Feng of Common Cause of California suggested that a neutral investigative arm, perhaps an organization like

Independent Sector, examine the language foundations are using to express the types of advocacy or lobbying that can and cannot be carried out with their support. She added that there should also be an organization or coordinated effort among several organizations to help nonprofits navigate the major restrictions that state and national foundations are under with regard to advocacy and lobbying and determine whether foundations are being overly narrow in their interpretation of them.

“Coalitions are successful when individual organizations are active and engaged with them in advocacy.”

– Patricia Gardner, Silicon Valley Council of Nonprofits

4. Coalitions must be careful not to distance themselves from the work that grassroots organizations are doing. Participants noted that there is a disconnect between coalitions and grassroots organizations, and that coalitions need to approach their advocacy efforts differently in order to be more in line with grassroots organizations and the public at large. First, they need to make sure that their message is unified among their members. One way to do this would be to choose a core competency, either mission specific (advocate on behalf of a particular issue), or sector specific (advocate on behalf of the nonprofit sector.) A common goal would be to reduce the competition for resources and make for a more powerful organizational network. Nonprofits need to do their part as well for this idea to succeed. Patricia Gardner of the Silicon Valley Council of Nonprofits stated that “coalitions are successful when individual organizations are active and engaged with them in advocacy.” Second,

coalitions need to participate at the local level to ensure they are politically effective and work to make certain that “civilians”, e.g., members of the community, are aware of their mission. Finally, coalitions focusing on different issues should convene on a regular basis to learn effective strategies from each other.

5. The policy community must be educated on the consequences of not only their policy decisions but also procedural decisions. Participants agreed that over-regulation of advocacy and the paperwork burden this imposes greatly reduce the time and energy nonprofits can actually devote to advocacy. The complexity involved in compliance with government regulations and procedures on advocacy also restricts the effectiveness of the organization’s advocacy work. Thus, nonprofits and coalitions should work to inform government officials and policymakers about how their regulatory choices can adversely affect nonprofit engagement in advocacy.

CONCLUSION

While the participants of the Los Angeles Advocacy Roundtable noted some of the barriers to nonprofit involvement in advocacy and lobbying, they also identified a number of innovative ways that the sector can better engage in advocacy. Nonprofits can further their organization’s advocacy efforts internally by making advocacy a part of their mission, and externally by communicating more effectively with coalitions, policymakers, clients/patrons and funders. In turn, coalitions, policymakers and funders can take the steps outlined to ensure nonprofits have a more active role in public policy. The Listening Post Project hopes that the nation’s nonprofits will use these findings, along with the others from the previous Advocacy Roundtables, to help set the sector’s policy advocacy agenda.

APPENDIX: NONPROFIT ADVOCACY ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANT LIST

Paul Castro

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Elizabeth Doran

The Actors' Gang, Culver City, CA

Kathay Feng

Common Cause of California, Los Angeles, CA

Patricia Gardner

Silicon Valley Council of Nonprofits, San Jose, CA

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Arizona State Museum, Tucson, AZ

Peter Goldberg

Alliance for Children and Families and United Neighborhood Centers of America, Milwaukee, WI

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Joyce Hayes

Humboldt Senior Living, Eureka, CA

Keith Kelley

Fresno West Coalition for Economic Development, Fresno, CA

Barbara Dröher Kline

Lutheran Social Services of Northern California, Concord, CA

Ken Larsen

California Association of Nonprofits, Sacramento, CA

Cassandra Malry

California Consumer Protection Foundation, Los Angeles, CA

Peter Manzo

United Ways of California, South Pasadena, CA

Wendy McKinney

Neighborhood House Association, San Diego, CA

Patty Metropulos

Metropolitan Family Service, Portland, OR

Melissa Mikesell

Alliance for Justice, Oakland, CA

Virgil Roberts

Bobbitt & Roberts, Los Angeles, CA

Daniel Schay

Phoenix Theatre, Phoenix, AZ

Dalouge Smith

San Diego Youth Symphony, San Diego, CA

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The Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies

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