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PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

Alliance for Children and Families
Alliance for Nonprofit Management
American Association of Museums
Community Action Partnership
LeadingAge
League of American Orchestras
Lutheran Services in America
Michigan Nonprofit Association
National Council of Nonprofits
United Neighborhood Centers of America

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BACKGROUND

Much of our nation's ability to improve the lives of children, overcome poverty, clean the environment, promote the arts, and build sound communities depends on the strength and vitality of the nation's private, nonprofit organizations.

Yet these organizations face a host of challenges at the present time that are only partially understood in either the research or educational enterprises in this field, or in the world of practice itself. These include:

- ▶ Significant shifts in the size and structure of government support;
- ▶ Major demographic changes;
- ▶ Growing for-profit competition;
- ▶ New threats of government regulation;
- ▶ New forms of charitable support;
- ▶ Changing donor expectations;
- ▶ Expanded capital requirements; and
- ▶ Massive technological change.

In response, nonprofit organizations have begun to reinvent themselves in often creative ways. Changes that have occurred include:

- ▶ Expanded reliance on fee income;
- ▶ New consortium arrangements;
- ▶ Complex partnerships with government and business;
- ▶ New enterprise activity; and
- ▶ Significant organizational restructuring.

Despite the importance of these developments, however, we know very little about them in a systematic or comprehensive way. As a consequence, nonprofit managers and those who would support their activities are often flying blind in a world of extraordinarily rapid change.

To remedy this situation, the Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies, working with a broad array of national and state-level nonprofit associations, has created an "information platform" for the country's not-for-profit sector, a network of approximately 1,000 nonprofit organizations that have agreed to serve as organizational "listening posts" to identify how nonprofit organizations are being affected by the major developments confronting them and to explore promising approaches that organizations have tried in response. To do so, the project uses a combination of web-based "Soundings," Innovators' Roundtables, and case studies. The overall goal is to speed the generation and diffusion of practice-relevant knowledge in this increasingly demanding

field and get the cutting-edge insights of practice more effectively disseminated and more thoroughly integrated into nonprofit teaching and research.

Initially, the project focused on four key fields of nonprofit activity:

- ▶ Children and family services;
- ▶ Elderly housing and services;
- ▶ Community and economic development; and
- ▶ Culture and the arts

Now the effort is being expanded into other fields. In addition, regional Listening Posts are being developed that will make it possible to compare the performance of nonprofits in particular states or locales to their counterparts nationally.

DISSEMINATION TOOLS

Dissemination is a central part of the Listening Post Project and the project's results are being communicated to other practitioners, researchers, educators, and the media through a series of dissemination vehicles including:

- ▶ A Communiqué Series providing summaries of the Sounding results;
- ▶ A regular series of Innovators' Roundtables to explore in greater depth some of the innovations uncovered by the Soundings;
- ▶ Case studies capturing some of the identified innovations in a form that can be used in nonprofit training;
- ▶ A website (www.ccss.jhu.edu) to which results of the Soundings are posted on a regular basis.

BENEFITS

In addition to providing crucial information for the nonprofit sector, participation in the Listening Post Project brings added benefits, including:

- ▶ Customized reports e-mailed to participants soon after each Sounding that provide a snapshot of how their organization's responses compare to our national sample and to other organizations in their field and size class.
- ▶ National recognition through the "Featured Listening Post" section of the Project's popular website.
- ▶ Exclusive free access to Project Roundtables.

- ▶ Networking opportunities with other organizations and experts.
- ▶ Local publicity through customized press releases on Project results.
- ▶ Early access to Project reports.