Nonprofits Seek Increased Support for Advocacy

Concerns over offending donor base and board members also barriers.

Supporting a cause is central to the mission of most nonprofit organizations in the United States, but a lack of resources often forces lobbying and advocacy to the backburner, according to a roundtable of leaders and experts gathered by the Johns Hopkins University Nonprofit Listening Post Project.

Besides having limited funds and small staffs to devote to lobbying, nonprofit leaders also worry that taking strong stances on the issues will offend their donors and board members.

"Nonprofits are supposed to be the agents of democracy and give voice to the powerless," noted Lester M. Salamon, director of the Center for Civil Society Studies at the Johns Hopkins Institute for Policy Studies. "But their ability to do this is hampered by limited funding."

The roundtable brought together experts in nonprofit advocacy and practitioners representing both service organizations and intermediary organizations. Participants explored nonprofit involvement in the policy process and identified steps that might be taken to boost the scope, scale, and effectiveness of policy advocacy.

Issues raised by roundtable participants included:

- A lack of funding for nonprofit advocacy and lobbying efforts.
- Concerns among nonprofits that policy advocacy efforts would be frowned upon by their local community, offend their donor base, or encounter board disapproval.
- The need to strengthen and underwrite the activities of advocacy coalitions and intermediary groups, which are increasingly important in nonprofit advocacy efforts.
- Concerns that while nonprofits can be somewhat effective in "playing defense" by responding to a proposed policy or legislative cut, they often lack the resources or sophistication needed to develop new policy proposals.

Participants also identified steps that might be taken to boost nonprofit policy advocacy including:
Taking a more strategic and inventive approach to advocacy by encouraging board members to tap into their own social networks or by bringing the people organizations serve directly into lobbying efforts to build greater credibility.

Integrate advocacy into all aspects of an organization by including it in mission statements, strategic plans, staff job descriptions, board job descriptions and budgets.

Encourage foundations to support nonprofit policy advocacy and invest in local, state, and national nonprofit advocacy coalitions and intermediary organizations.

Learn to act strategically and build long-term positive relationships between nonprofits and government officials.

Rely on a wide range of tools, not just e-mail but also blogs and social networking sites such as Facebook.

Educate legislators and the public about the nonprofit sector’s critical role in public service and advocacy in order to build recognition of the value of engaging nonprofit organizations in the policy arena.

A survey conducted by the Listening Post Project in 2007 found that:

- 85 percent of responding organizations spent less than 2 percent of their budget on advocacy or lobbying.
- Nearly three-fourths of all responding organizations reported undertaking some form of advocacy or lobbying, such as signing correspondence to a public official.
- However, when it came to more involved forms of participation, such as testifying at hearings or organizing a public event, the proportions reporting any involvement fell to about a third.
- The vast majority (90 percent) of surveyed organizations agreed that "nonprofits have a duty to advocate for policies important to their missions;" a comparable proportion also agreed that organizations like their own should be "more active and involved."

The full text of a report summarizing findings that emerged from the "Roundtable on Nonprofit Advocacy and Lobbying" is available at ccss.jhu.edu.

The Listening Post Project is a collaborative undertaking of the Center for Civil Society Studies at the Johns Hopkins University Institute for Policy Studies, the Alliance for Children and Families, the Alliance for Nonprofit Management, the American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging, the American Association of Museums, Community Action Partnership, the League of American Orchestras, Lutheran Services in America, the Michigan Nonprofit Association, the National Council of Nonprofits, and United Neighborhood Centers of America. Its goal is to monitor the health of the nation’s nonprofit organizations and assess how nonprofits are responding to important economic and policy changes. The project maintains a nationwide sample of over 1,000 nonprofit children and family service, elderly service, community development, and arts organizations. Support for the project has been provided by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, the Kresge Foundation, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and the Surdna Foundation.