NONPROFITS FACE SERIOUS CONSTRAINTS ON POLICY INVOLVEMENT
Charities widely engaged in advocacy work despite limitations, new survey finds.

America's nonprofit organizations are widely involved in efforts to influence the public policies affecting them and those they serve, but are constrained by tight budgets, limited staff time and confusing legal restrictions, according to a new survey by the Johns Hopkins University Nonprofit Listening Post Project.

Seventy-three percent of responding nonprofit organizations said they had engaged in some type of advocacy or lobbying in the year prior to the survey, with three out of five of those organizations engaging in public policy efforts at least once a month. The Johns Hopkins researchers found, however, that the depth of organizational involvement is often limited to the executive director and rarely engages the general public or even the organization's clients or patrons.

A major reason for this appears to be the limited resources nonprofits have available to support advocacy activities. Fewer than 15 percent of organizations that engaged in any lobbying or advocacy reported devoting as much as 2 percent of their overall budget to this function. Lack of time and lack of resources were the principal reasons cited by organizations that reported no advocacy or lobbying activity.

"Our nation's nonprofit organizations are widely expected to play a key role in helping to promote democracy and civic action, and our survey results indicate that they are making strenuous efforts to fulfill this expectation," noted Lester M. Salamon, study author and director of the Center for Civil Society Studies at the Johns Hopkins Institute for Policy Studies. "However, financial and other constraints are limiting their ability to do so."

“Nonprofit advocacy is a critical strategy for solving our society’s most challenging problems,” said Larry Ottinger of the Center for Lobbying in the Public
Interest, which partnered with the Johns Hopkins Center on this survey. “This important survey should serve as a clarion call to the nonprofit and philanthropy sector to boost the resources and training devoted to this crucial function.”

Additional findings from the survey include:

- Large organizations and those involved in family, children, and elderly services are most extensively engaged in policy advocacy. Arts organizations are least involved.

- About half of all responding organizations reported undertaking relatively limited forms of advocacy or lobbying, such as signing correspondence to a public official, responding to requests for information on policy issues, or distributing materials on policy matters. 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.

- State and local governments, not the federal government, are the principal focus of advocacy activity for most (two out of three) organizations.

- Receipt of public funding seems to encourage advocacy, but reliance on private philanthropy is negatively related to advocacy.

- Only a quarter of the organizations reporting no involvement in lobbying or advocacy cited worries about existing laws as a reason. Among the organizations that refrained from lobbying but not advocacy, however, nearly half cited worries about violating laws as a reason. This indicates a continued constraining influence of existing laws limiting nonprofit involvement in lobbying (expressing a position on a specific piece of legislation to a legislative official) as opposed to advocacy (conveying a policy concern or policy-relevant information without expressing a position on a particular piece of legislation).

- Associations and coalitions play a considerable role in nonprofit lobbying and advocacy, both as a substitute for the involvement of some organizations and as a spur to involvement by others. Nearly 90 percent of responding organizations reported belonging to at least one coalition or intermediary organization, and most of these had some involvement in advocacy or lobbying.
• 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."

• Reflecting the survey responses, the Johns Hopkins report suggests a number of steps that could help charities carry out what it describes as a critical democratic responsibility. Among these are increasing the resources available to field-specific intermediary organizations for policy advocacy work; expanding foundation support for nonprofit policy advocacy; encouraging greater board involvement in nonprofit advocacy; and providing more training and other assistance to encourage advocacy activity by small and mid-sized organizations.

The full text of the report "Nonprofit America: A Force for Democracy?" is available online 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, Lutheran Services in America, the National Council of Nonprofit Associations, Theatre Communications Group, 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 approximately 900 nonprofit children and family service, elderly service, community development, and arts organizations, of which 311 responded to this fall 2007 survey on advocacy and lobbying. 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. For this advocacy survey, the project partnered with the Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest, which promotes, supports, and protects nonprofit advocacy and lobbying in order to strengthen our democratic society and advance the missions of charitable organizations. Partial support for this survey was provided by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation.