

Effective Partnerships

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How local governments and nonprofits can work together for large-scale community change **BY SAPHIRA M. BAKER**

AS AMERICANS, WE LIKE ENTREPRENEURS—both in the business world and outside of it. In the public and nonprofit sectors, we enjoy reading about the savvy leader who turns a school around or brings about safe streets. And despite how many times these often humble leaders credit their staff or their colleagues in other organizations, we expect the hero to emerge.

As a consultant to nonprofit and public agencies and a former government administrator, I have witnessed how an emphasis on institutional leadership can get in the way of accomplishing major community change initiatives—initiatives so ambitious and broad in scope that they require engagement and ownership from all sectors. I also have seen how shared leadership and management strategies across local government and nonprofit sectors can bring about significant results.

When I served as a city administrator in Richmond, Va., from 2005 to 2008, the mayor's office got behind a citywide effort to help children get ready for school. As a consultant, I have worked with regional nonprofits that seek to improve after-school opportunities and to transition emergency shelters to Rapid Re-Housing Initiatives for families who are homeless. Like many comprehensive community change initiatives, these city and nonprofit efforts engaged leaders, staff, and organizations across sectors and were considered collaborations by all involved.

Within these initiatives, there were moments when the goals and timing of local government and nonprofits aligned and our reach and effectiveness were substantial. There were other times when the energy or ownership of one partner dwindled, and one organization shouldered the lion's share of the collaborative work. This experience led me to ask: "What is it that makes collaborative community change efforts involving nonprofits and local governments sustainable over time?" Although it may be impossible to formulate a perfect blueprint for sustained engagement, there are steps that nonprofit and local government institutions can follow to form effective joint ventures, while engaging residents, businesses, foundations, and faith-based and civic groups.

WHAT KEEPS NONPROFITS AND PUBLICS APART?

It is no secret among community activists and nonprofit leaders that involving local government can sometimes be the proverbial kiss of death. Having spent time in both worlds, I know that nonprofit executives are frequently schooled not to become over-reliant on government funds, both to maintain a diverse funding mix and to enable greater autonomy, flexibility, and innovation. Stereo-types of



local government leaders can range from being removed and quick to say no to embroiled in bureaucratic procedures and unproductive. City government leaders may also view nonprofits with suspicion. They may see nonprofits as continuously seeking local government funding, narrowly focused, or unable to set aside concerns about organizational survival to focus on broad regional or local community improvement goals.

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Yet much has changed over the last decade. Both nonprofits and local governments have seen pressures for services increase while their financial resources have not kept pace. It also has become more difficult for any one entity to focus on any one service. A 2002 Aspen Institute study found that nonprofits were being drawn to broader community improvement initiatives as a natural evolution of their work with residents.

The study noted that after-school and child care programs evolved into comprehensive neighborhood improvement initiatives, when parents became frustrated with the quality of public schools and parks and wanted more influence. Today as local governments handle multimillion-dollar deficits and nonprofits struggle to retain funding, it is even more crucial that resources are blended to maximize each dollar in a community and to tackle problems comprehensively.

The winter 2009 edition of *The Foundation Review* profiled several community change initiatives funded largely by private foundations. One of the lessons from the essays is to engage the public sector leadership early and often, and to obtain public funding commitments before receiving and spending private funding—combining public and private resources to create a package of investments in a neighborhood. This approach resembles more of a joint venture among private companies than a large-scale effort spearheaded by a single nonprofit. In short, with local efforts of this scale neither sector can do without the other to get the job done, financially or otherwise. The sectors are inextricably linked when the agenda is broad community change.

Yet structuring and sustaining public-nonprofit joint ventures is far from straightforward. By binding together the fates (and practices) of nonprofit and local government organizations more deliberately, communities have a better chance of engaging other private, foundation, and civic partners, sustaining improvements once initial foundation seed funding has been spent (or public dollars depleted), and leveraging their considerable resources more effectively.

STEPS TOWARD SHARED LEADERSHIP

To get to a place where nonprofits and local governments are working in tandem involves more openness and trust between the sectors, sharing credit and ownership for community improvement initiatives from the onset, and being jointly accountable for the results. It will require a form of entrepreneurship that is team-based and has more than one catalyst, champion, or identified lead. Ironically, it also will require that nonprofits are recognized for their leadership capacity and impact—that their clout and credibility make them a must-have at the planning table. Local government leaders must also be seen as players; they must demonstrate receptivity and inclusiveness and be perceived to have the capacity, will, and resources to work collaboratively on behalf of residents.

This approach also creates a path to new ways of funding collaborative community efforts. Funders would do well to put less emphasis on supporting a lead organization and more emphasis on supporting a joint venture—or set of results—whereby several organizations work with residents to bring about needed change. In my observation and advising of nonprofit and local government collaborations, I've identified the following five steps:

1. Develop relationships across sectors long before you need a partner. Just as nonprofits cultivate donors, nonprofits need to cultivate their relationships with public sector administrators, staff persons, and leaders across administrations early and often. Nonprofit staff and executives can serve on committees, share data, network with local and regional leaders, get on public boards and commissions, and attend joint conferences. Cultivate the trust that

is needed to prepare for tackling a common vision together and the credibility for getting things done.

2. Become a source of ideas for effective community improvements. Local governments need to see the community-based nonprofits as the assets they are—from their expertise about residents' needs to their networks of community and board members. This is not done necessarily by telling local government leaders about the nonprofit sector's economic impact (an approach frequently used), but by becoming known for reliable information and resourceful problem solving for the community at large. For local governments, these relationships with nonprofit staff and board members help public servants keep their ears to the ground, expand the reach of tax dollars, engage more diverse constituencies, and build the trust needed to manage and sustain complex joint ventures.

3. Seize a shared sense of opportunity. The timing for launching community-based initiatives has to be right for residents and the organizations involved. It is critical that the convening organizations share a sense of opportunity for action and an urgency to come together to bring about change. Sometimes a federal, state, or local grant opportunity can serve as that catalyst. Other times, a national movement or set of best practices can generate momentum. More often, it is the appalling state of a community or the expressed needs of residents that serve as a catalyst. Just as a joint venture is often formed among individuals seeking to create something new, public and nonprofit leaders must commit to creating value together and responding with a unified voice to stated needs and opportunities and then work in tandem to design and support an effective approach.

4. Have a financial and reputational stake in the initiative's success. Money and accountability are often the glue that keeps nonprofits and local governments working together. Having a shared leadership model means having mutually owned investments and merging funding sources. When all parties are responsible for accounting for money and results, their fates are bound together and commitment tends to stay on firm ground. When only one organization captures the results or reports on financials, that organization becomes the default leader in sustaining and representing the collaborative.

5. Define roles, responsibilities, and requirements. It is no accident that some of the most effective collaborations between local governments and nonprofits are in the area of emergency management. In addition to the built-in sense of urgency, well-organized emergency efforts have clear roles and responsibilities for all levels of staff. Most localities have developed emergency management agreements and have practiced drills for months, if not years. The players know, trust, and rely on each other. Clear joint agreements are not only good business for complex community improvement efforts, they also provide a compass when resources are short or a crisis hits.

Sharing responsibility, accountability, and leadership for addressing major collaborative community change initiatives is especially important as a counterweight to our tendency to extol the virtues of individual social entrepreneurs. By sharing leadership across sectors, social entrepreneurs will stand a better chance of transforming cities and towns long after the venture capital and the grant monies have run out. ■