

Institute for Policy Studies

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Center for Civil Society Studies

NONPROFIT LISTENING POST PROJECT

An "information platform" for the nation's nonprofit organizations created by the Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies in collaboration with leading nonprofit umbrella groups to spot developing challenges to American nonprofits and disseminate promising responses.

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.

The Listening Post Project

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:

- ▶ Family, children, and youth 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.



Among the topics addressed by recent Soundings have been nonprofit capital needs, health benefits costs, and governance and accountability practices. Future work will focus on staff and volunteer recruitment and retention, partnering, fee income, and performance measurement, among others.

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 *Web site* (www.jhu.edu/listeningpost) to which results of the Soundings are posted on a regular basis. This site is already receiving an average of 23,000 hits per month.

Benefits

Through this initiative we are:

- ▶ Improving the ability of nonprofit managers to understand and cope with the changes affecting their organizations;
- ▶ Speeding the diffusion of innovations in the nonprofit field and thereby improving the effectiveness of nonprofit organizations;
- ▶ Better equipping management consultants and technical assistance providers to serve their nonprofit clients;
- ▶ Creating more practice-relevant teaching materials in the nonprofit field;
- ▶ Providing a more systematic basis for public policy toward the nonprofit sector and alerting policymakers to the consequences of their actions for the nation's nonprofit organizations;
- ▶ Increasing public and media awareness of the challenges confronting the nonprofit sector and of the sector's efforts to respond.

For More Information

For further information about the Listening Post Project, please contact Nicole Feldhaus, Center for Civil Society Studies, Institute for Policy Studies, Johns Hopkins University, 3400 North Charles Street, Baltimore, MD 21218-2688, USA; phone: 410-516-4363; fax: 410-516-7818 e-mail: listeningpostproject@jhu.edu.

To subscribe to our Listening Post Project distribution list, visit our Web site: www.jhu.edu/listeningpost.

Project Participants
<p>Steering Committee</p> <p>Chair: Peter Goldberg President and Chief Executive Officer of the Alliance for Children and Families</p> <p>Partner Organizations: Alliance for Children and Families Alliance for Nonprofit Management American Association of Museums American Association of Homes and Services for the Aging Council on Foundations Independent Sector National Council of Nonprofit Associations Theatre Communications Group</p>
<p>Project Staff</p> <p>Lester M. Salamon, Director Stephanie Geller, Research Associate Nicole Feldhaus, Project Assistant</p>
<p>Funders</p> <p>Support for the Johns Hopkins Listening Post Project has been provided by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, the Surdna Foundation, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.</p>

The Center for Civil Society Studies (CCSS) of the Johns Hopkins Institute for Policy Studies seeks to encourage the development and effective operation of not-for-profit, philanthropic, or "civil society" organizations. The Center is directed by Lester M. Salamon and carries out its work through a combination of research, training, and information-sharing both in the United States and throughout the world. Web site: www.jhu.edu/ccss.