Changing the Conversation

By Alison McCaffree, Executive Director of Washington Nonprofits

The nonprofit sector is not well understood. By emphasizing the following three things, we can increase the understanding, the respect and the influence of nonprofits. First, nonprofits are a huge part of our society both socially and economically and touch everyone. Second, nonprofits are responding to current times within creative and innovative ways. Third, the nonprofit sector is an economic engine that is helping to maintain our economy.

Large & Diverse
Nonprofits exist in every community throughout our State. They work on a wide variety of causes and include many staff and volunteers, including board members who care passionately about their mission. Sometimes I get a negative response to the fact that there are almost 55,000 nonprofits in our state. Someone will say, “Yikes, there are too many nonprofits.” I explain the strength and diversity of the sector and give a poignant example of why you would want an organization that is focused on the specific issue you care about most.

Resilient and Nimble
This latest recession has been tough for everyone, but the nonprofit sector has been particularly hard hit. Many organizations are seeing an increase in demand for their services at the same time their budgets are being cut due to decreases in government spending and donations. In a recent report called Resilient Nonprofits, the Nancy Bell Evans School at the University of Washington studied 37 nonprofits and reported three ways in which nonprofits are responding to this new economic climate. I have been talking to nonprofits all over the state and find that these three categories hold true for many nonprofits in all of our communities.

First, strategic repositioning is a concentrated and frequent effort to look at the scope and effect of an organization’s programs and adjust for greater impact. This appears to be happening more and at an increasing pace. For example: The Yakima Food Bank recently concluded that they were not just feeding low-income people in their area. They concluded that their goal is to teach everyone in Yakima how to eat a healthy diet. Among many things, this changes both who they choose as partners and what skills they need within their organization.

Second, nonprofits are concentrating on finding additional sources of revenue. It is more and more common for nonprofits to have earned-income projects that supplement contributed income from donors and foundations. An environmental education nonprofit on Bainbridge Island, Islandwood, has invested in sales and marketing of their conference facilities and has a strategic goal to be known as a conference space where great thinking and good solutions happen. The Resilient Nonprofits report also mentions an increased focus on individual giving and the use of volunteers as ways nonprofits are shoring up their resources.

Third, there is an increase in collaboration among nonprofits. Despite an environment of limited resources, organizations are changing their attitudes and seeing other organizations in their field as partners instead of competitors. In Chehalis, the Community Mediation Center realized that they didn’t have the resources to expand their mediation training on their own and made a decision to publish their training and partner with local libraries. Now library staff can use the curriculum and train patrons.
We don’t highlight enough how nonprofits are facing our current economic climate with innovation and adaptability. Many businesses could learn from these resilient nonprofits.

**Economic Engine**

Another poorly understood reality of the nonprofit sector is the direct impact these organizations have on the economy. Nonprofits are not only making our communities better places to live and work, they are actually a large part of what is keeping the economy going.

A study conducted by Johns Hopkins University’s Nonprofit Economic Data Project confirms that more than 211,000 people are employed by the nonprofit sector in Washington State. That is 9.3% of the workforce. Nationally, the nonprofit sector is the third largest sector behind retail and manufacturing and over 10% of the workforce.

Much like small business in the last couple of decades, the nonprofit sector needs to be recognized for its importance in our economy. Lawmakers at all levels (federal, state and local) need to understand that policies that increase the strain on nonprofits will have damaging repercussions throughout the economy. The nonprofit sector is a large economic engine that if properly recognized and supported can help the recovery and sustainability of our state and our nation.

**Conclusion**

We live in a world that underestimates the impact of the nonprofit sector and does not properly value the role nonprofits play in Washington’s economy. Too few lawmakers and too little of the general public understand the scope and size of the nonprofit sector.

Those of us who work in the nonprofit sector can change the conversation by (1) Emphasizing our size and diversity; demonstrating how nonprofits touch everyone, every day. (2) Showing how nonprofits are adapting to our times with creativity and innovation. (3) Showing how the nonprofit sector is THE economic engine that drives social good and our economy. If we change the conversation about the nonprofit sector, then nonprofit leaders will be at the table early in critical discussion about changes in our state, the value of contributing time and money to nonprofits will be increased, and the positive results our nonprofits can have on our communities will be tremendous.

How will this new conversation change the world?
Let’s find out.

**WASHINGTON NONPROFITS**

Bringing together nonprofits from throughout the state, Washington Nonprofits facilitates communications and networking, convenes regional and topical groups to share information to improve performance, and encourages nonprofits to become engaged in sector-wide policy issues. Washington Nonprofits connects other regional and national organizations to strengthen nonprofit organizations and to increase public understanding for the work nonprofits do throughout the state. Founded in 2009, Washington Nonprofits officially launched services in October 2011. By the fall of 2012, Washington Nonprofits had grown to include over 350 members and was recognized as an emerging statewide association by the National Council of Nonprofits, highlighting its commitment to serving nonprofits across all sizes, sub-subsectors and geography. Alison McCaffree serves as the Executive Director.

For more information on Washington Nonprofits, our State Nonprofit Association, please visit our website: [www.washingtonnonprofits.org](http://www.washingtonnonprofits.org) and check out the ways in which we are changing the conversation. Membership is open to all nonprofit organizations, for-profit business allies and individuals. Email us at [info@washingtonnonprofits.org](mailto:info@washingtonnonprofits.org) or call 253-330-8850.

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