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This paper examines the opinions of state legislators concerning the advocacy role of nonprofit organizations. Nonprofit organizations seek to be influential in their advocacy role on behalf of their clients and community. Faith-based nonprofit organizations have entered into the political arena. Term-limits have changed the political advocacy environment. These two issues are paramount in future strategic planning for community-based nonprofit organizations in their political advocacy role. This study reports the findings from interviews and a mailed survey to all Michigan legislators.

“Advocacy Role of Nonprofits: A Legislative Perspective”*

By Deborah Sturtevant

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Preface

The following are highlights of survey research regarding nonprofit and state legislative relations conducted by Dr. Deborah Sturtevant of Hope College. Funded by the Aspen Institute, and supported by the Michigan Nonprofit Research Program, the data reported here are results of interviews/surveys from 55% of the Michigan Legislature.

Introduction

Stimulated by de-institutionalization in the 1980's and welfare reform in the mid 1990's, Michigan's nonprofit organizations exist within an increasingly complex and devolved public policy context. Devolution refers to the shift away from government's direct delivery of social services to contracts with nonprofit organizations for implementation. The enactment of term-limits added a new dynamic that combined with devolution to create a dramatically changed political environment. Nonprofit organizations must now evaluate their strategies to maintain an effective advocacy role.

This current research focuses on the policymakers themselves, Michigan legislators, asking for their perceptions about the nonprofit/government relationship. In a 1997 study, nonprofit executives were interviewed about their relationship with government policymakers - both elected officials and political appointees. These two studies demonstrate that government and nonprofits are entrenched in a public policy “partnership.”

Purpose

The goal of this research is to answer the broad question, “How can the Michigan nonprofit sector be more effective at influencing social policies?” And, in particular, “What do state legislators recommend?”**

Method

There are two parts to the current study. In Part I, 31 Michigan legislators participated in interviews and in Part II, 49 legislators returned a mailed survey. This resulted in a total of 80 respondents, representing 55% of those serving. Legislators were asked about their relationships with both secular and faith-based nonprofits and about their perceptions of nonprofits' ability to influence social policies. The effects of term-limits on policymaking and resulting changes in the government structure were considered.

Key Findings

- *The partnership between government and nonprofits should be stronger.* Consistent with the findings from nonprofit executives in 1997, legislators understand that the partnership is an interdependent one that should be stronger yet more egalitarian, "we need each other." Legislators recognize the important role that nonprofits increasingly play as implementers of public policies. While most legislators support the trend to sub-contract with nonprofits, citing increased

- efficiency and improved quality of services, more Democrats than Republicans support public delivery of social services.
- *Nonprofits are dependent on government funding.* Some legislators were surprised to learn that, on average, nonprofits receive more than 50% of their funding from government sources. In 1997, nonprofit executives talked about government funding as more stable than most sources, yet recognized that government exercised control because it “held the purse strings.” Consistent with concerns expressed by nonprofit executives, some legislators expressed concern that nonprofits should limit over-dependence on government dollars and continue to seek funding from a variety of sources including foundations, churches, and individual donors citing the leverage that these sources of funding provide.
 - *There is an increasing role in public policy for faith-based services.* Broad support comes from those who agree faith-based nonprofits can deliver “holistic” quality services yet decrease costs. Even so, both Republicans and Democrats express concerns about constitutional issues of church/state separation and concerns about ensuring accountability. With some notable exceptions, Democrats tend to be concerned for the autonomy of the state while Republicans tend to be concerned for the autonomy of the church/faith-based organizations.
 - *Legislators describe nonprofits as “effective” advocates for social policies and report frequent interaction with nonprofit executives and lobbyists.* Legislators prefer face-to-face contact suggesting site-visits in their districts at local nonprofits or suggesting nonprofits come to visit them at the state capitol. They report a preference to speak with their own district nonprofits but also other nonprofits whose interests are related to their committees. Most legislators do not like mass mailings and complained about emails clogging their systems. Democrats are more supportive of nonprofits' use of lobbyists than Republicans but both recognize the need for nonprofits to hire lobbyists as part of their overall advocacy strategy.
 - *Legislators want to hear more from nonprofit board members.* In 1997, nonprofit executives reported that few board members are willing or prepared to participate in lobbying. Many nonprofit executives expressed reluctance to engage their boards in lobbying. Contrary to that finding, legislators would like more interaction with board members citing their legitimacy as volunteers.
 - *There exists a strong, bipartisan consensus for changes in term limits.* In 1997 nonprofit executives reported that trusting relationships with legislators were the most important vehicle for success in their advocacy efforts. The overriding concern expressed in that study was the impact that newly enacted term-limits would have on relationship building. In this current study, legislators agree with nonprofit executives and do not favor the restrictive terms of the current law. Democrats prefer eliminating term-limits while Republicans prefer extending term-limits. Negative effects of term-limits are reported on professionalism, policymaking, trust, and relationships. Legislators report a power shift away from the legislature towards increased influence of lobbyists, special interests, staff, and the Governor.

Learnings and Best Practices from This Study

These survey results provide insight into several best practices and learnings:

- Nonprofits need to be mission driven organizations seeking to balance resource dependence with multiple funding sources for autonomy, strength, and stability.
 - More research needs to be conducted to establish a benchmark for a healthy funding mix for nonprofits.
- A more proactive comprehensive strategy for lobbying should be conducted by Michigan nonprofits than most are currently engaged in. Legislators desire enhanced leadership by board members of nonprofits.
 - A board-led strategic plan, with a Board advocacy committee, would enhance the effectiveness of nonprofit advocacy.
- As devolution of public policy continues, a term-limited legislature would benefit from more nonprofit expertise in legislating social policies. A formal mechanism for involving nonprofits in policymaking would assist legislators in their public policy role.
 - Issue roundtables of nonprofit experts are recommended for legislative committees. A nonprofit liaison to legislative committees is an alternate strategy.

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** In addition to Dr. Sturtevant's prior research, this study builds on the interest group politics research of Judith Sidel (1994) and the nonprofit advocacy work of Richard Hoefer (1995) and Susan Rees (1997). It also incorporates the nonprofit/government "partnership" research of Lester Salamon (1995) and the studies by Elizabeth Boris and Carol DeVita from the Urban Institute on Michigan nonprofits and devolution (1999). Recent work on term-limits includes the study by Carey, Niemi, and Powell (2000).