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The Power of Association

When a single voice speaking truth to power isn't enough to carry the day, it's time to tap the power that exists in community. Call it what you will – collective action, solidarity, grassroots mobilization - there is strength in numbers. Most types of advocacy rely on it, getting as many voices as possible promoting the same point of view to achieve a desired result.

The Power of Association in Action

When people know that your organization does good work for the community, they tend to stand up with you and for you. Nonprofits stand up for each other because they know the charitable nonprofit sector is united in their commitment to the community and that an attack on one can harm the whole community.

We're reminded of the time the head of a for-profit business appeared before a city council seeking the revocation of the property tax exemption of a charitable nonprofit. The business owner claimed the nonprofit was supposedly providing the "same" services as his business, and thus didn't deserve the tax exemption. The members of city council took his word for it and passed a measure imposing property taxes on the nonprofit's facilities. That occurred at the May City Council meeting.

In June of the same year, more than 250 people attended the Council's monthly meeting, all with one message: the local charitable organization was contributing

much more to the community by improving the lives of children and families at its facilities. In short, the voice of one influential business leader was drowned out by influential charitable leaders who came together – at the urging of the state association of nonprofits – to stand up, speak out, and demand support. The Council members voted to rescind their earlier action and expressed fond support for the obviously popular charitable organization at the center of the property tax question.

And here's a more recent example. The newest edition of the [Nonprofit Workforce Shortage Crisis Report](#) features insights from responses of more than 1,600 nonprofit professionals answering survey questions and providing testimonials of their real-world experiences. In this era of survey fatigue, the survey stands out for its outpouring of engagement and insights.

This did not happen purely out of right-issue-right-time serendipity, although the topic of nonprofit workforce shortages is at crisis level for well more than half of the responding organizations. Rather, the high turnout came about in large part because the network of state associations of nonprofits promoted participation in their respective states. They made the case to their members that previous survey responses regarding nonprofit job vacancies – and their adverse impact on people and communities – gained public attention, which in turn led to the adoption of policy solutions at local and state levels. Armed with the data from the newest report, state associations of nonprofits have already started the process of educating policymakers and promoting additional policy solutions.

Before Tapping the Power - Join and Engage

It's helpful to think of the Power of Association as having hundreds upon thousands of people engaged in their daily work lives, but always looking out for ways to help nonprofits as advocates. That can come in the form of them being attentive to items that might affect your mission and sharing relevant information with you. Or it can mean being in the right place at the right time to put in a good word – as seen above – to correct a misperception or standing up and speaking out to remind policymakers of the importance of your organization, another nonprofit organization, or even the broad nonprofit community.

Too often, large institutions with big staffs and large property holdings see themselves as the community and don't think to engage with others as fellow nonprofits. It's only when they face a policy threat or experience a crisis that they

suddenly realize their isolation has been to their detriment. They learn that the Power of Association isn't automatic; it must be earned.

As with most things related to nonprofit advocacy, impressive action today relies on conscious preparation and relationship building. That means engaging with other charitable organizations in your community across nonprofit subsectors, not just those doing the same thing your organization does. Museum directors benefit from knowing the needs of education-focused nonprofits and human services providers. Likewise, United Ways and community foundations have to have their fingers on the pulse of frontline charitable nonprofits to be effective. Faith-based organizations are most effective when they go beyond "preaching to the choir" and engage with other nonprofits to supplement services, promote volunteerism, and uplift the community in many ways.

It's no secret that we at the National Council of Nonprofits are biased in favor of promoting engagement in state associations of nonprofits. These organizations with whom we get to work most closely are dedicated to collaborations across nonprofit subsectors as they build capacity of nonprofits, exchange information with and between their members, and engage in nonprofit advocacy at the local, state, and federal levels. They are the place to meet other professionals through peer learning activities like attending sessions on board governance or volunteer management. State associations of nonprofits provide ample opportunities to work with others on panels, participate on state-wide public policy committees, and attend an annual "Nonprofit Day at the Capitol." The relationships developed through state associations create the shared knowledge of the concerns and expectations of the charitable community, plus give insights into the operations of others that can benefit your own mission.

And most importantly from our perspective, these relationships help ensure that you are not alone, that someone will speak up with you when you ask and for you and your mission even when you aren't there.

In short, the easiest way to tap the Power of Association is to join and be active in [your state association of nonprofits](#).



Publishers Note: This article is the fifth in an occasional series encouraging nonprofits to use the powers that they already have to advance their missions. See also, [Using the Powers You Have: The Power of One](#), [The Power of Three](#), [The Power of Perseverance](#), and [The Power of Follow Through](#).