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Influencing Social Policies: Legislators Speak to Nonprofits

Highlights of Research Findings

By Dr. Deborah Sturtevant, Hope College

Introduction

Michigan's nonprofit organizations have long operated within an increasingly complex public policy environment. This environment was further complicated by devolution in the 1980's and welfare reform in the mid 1990's. Devolution refers to the shift away from government's direct delivery of social services to contracts with private and nonprofit organizations. The enactment of term limits for state legislators added a new dynamic, that combined with devolution, created a dramatically changed political environment. Nonprofit organizations must now evaluate their strategies to maintain an effective advocacy role.

In a 1997 study, "Spectator or Participant? A Study of Charitable Nonprofits' Political Advocacy," nonprofit executives were interviewed about their relationship with government policymakers — both elected officials and political appointees. This new study, conducted in 2002, complements the earlier research by asking Michigan legislators about their perceptions of the nonprofit/government relationship. The 1997 study and the current research demonstrate that government and nonprofits are engaged in a public policy partnership.

Purpose

The goal of this research was 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.

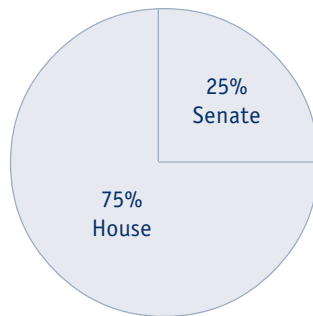
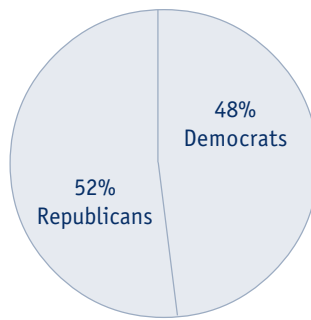
Key Findings

- ***The partnership between government and nonprofits should be stronger.***

Consistent with the findings from nonprofit executives in 1997, legislators understand that the

EXHIBIT 1

Sample	Population
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“There are holes in the safety net of services the government provides and that is where the nonprofits step in and lots of times we aren’t aware of those holes until the nonprofits come and tell us about them. That is their role and they do us a great service.”

—A Michigan Legislator’s comment on state and nonprofit partnerships.

Contact Information for Author:

Dr. Deborah Sturtevant
Associate Professor, Social Work
Hope College
41 Graves Place
P.O. Box 9000
Phone: 616/395-7916
FAX: 616/395-7506
E-mail: Sturtevant@hope.edu

partnership is an interdependent one that should be stronger yet more egalitarian, that is “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, human service 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 noted that nonprofits should limit over-dependence on government dollars and should 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 worry about constitutional issues of church/state separation and have concerns about ensuring accountability. With some notable exceptions, Democrats tend to be apprehensive about the autonomy of the state while Republicans tend to have misgivings about 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 such as site-visits in their districts at local nonprofits or suggest nonprofits visit the state capitol. They report a preference for speaking with their own district nonprofits and other nonprofits whose interests are related to their committees. Most legislators do not like mass mailings and complain 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.

EXHIBIT 2

Rank order for legislators' preferences for lobbying:

1. Face-to-face contact
2. Association lobbyists
3. Multi-client lobbyists
4. Phone calls
5. Letters/emails

■ **Legislators want to hear more from nonprofit board members.**

In 1997, nonprofit executives reported that few board members were willing or prepared to participate in lobbying. Many nonprofit executives were reluctant 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 was 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 cited regarding 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.

EXHIBIT 3

Legislators views on term-limits:

Support	10.2%
Eliminate	40.8%
Change	49.0%

(change was defined by most legislators as an increase to twelve years)

Best Practices Learned from This Study

The 1997 and current research results provide insight into several best practices:

■ 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.

■ A board-led strategic plan, with a board advocacy committee, would enhance the effectiveness of nonprofit advocacy. Legislators desire enhanced leadership by board members of nonprofits.

■ 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.

Resources for More Information

Michigan Public Policy Initiative (MPPI)—The Michigan Public Policy Initiative is a program of the MNA and is affiliated with the Council of Michigan Foundations. The overarching goal of MPPI is to promote the involvement of Michigan's nonprofit community in public policy through training its community leaders, building the capacity of its organizations, and encouraging its collaboration with public policymakers. The activities of MPPI help to position the nonprofit sector as a partner with public and private leaders in working on pressing social issues facing Michigan residents. Specifically, MPPI works to:

1. Educate policymakers and the media on issues impacting Michigan nonprofits;
2. Act as the advocate for the Michigan nonprofit sector on public policy issues that impact all nonprofits;
3. Engage nonprofits in advocacy by providing organizations with the tools and resources necessary to be effective advocates and lobbyists; and
4. Promote research relevant to the sector.

www.mnaonline.org/mppindex.html

Charity Lobbying in the Public Interest (CLPI)—CLPI exists to be a voice for nonprofits' lobbying role and to help organizations find their own voice and power through public interest lobbying. Specifically, CLPI provides tools, strategies, training and networked resources to help nonprofits learn how to lobby and fully engage in the public policy process. www.clpi.org

Alliance For Justice (AFJ)—AFJ's Nonprofit Advocacy Project works to strengthen the voice of the nonprofit sector in important public policy debates by giving tax-exempt organizations a better understanding of the laws that govern their participation in the policy process. www.afj.org



MNRP Background

A distinctive partnership among one national and two statewide partner organizations, The Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership of Grand Valley State University (Johnson Center), the Michigan Nonprofit Association (MNA), and the Aspen Institute Nonprofit Sector Research Fund (Aspen), brings to the State of Michigan a fund to support strategic research about philanthropy, volunteerism, and nonprofit leadership. With the assistance of a grant from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, the partners will make the Michigan Nonprofit Research Program (MNRP) a significant force to improve understanding about, and performance of nonprofit organizations.

MNRP Contact Information:

Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership at Grand Valley State University

Contact: Donna Van Iwaarden, Director

401 W. Fulton Street 288C

Grand Rapids, Michigan 49504

Phone: 616/ 331-7585 FAX: 616/ 331-7592

www.michnpresearch.org

Michigan Nonprofit Association

Contact: Erin Skene, Michigan Public Policy Initiative Director

1048 Pierpont, Ste. 3

Lansing, MI 48911

517/492-2400 FAX: 517/492-2410

www.mnaonline.org

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Donna VanIwaarden
Dorothy A. Johnson Center for
Philanthropy and Nonprofit Leadership

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Alma Young
Wayne State University