

Reaching Past Washington

Groups want to harness local power

By Mark Hrywna

06/01/06

The NonProfit Times

Robert Egger is mad and he's not gonna take it anymore. He's tired of nonprofits getting pushed around in Washington, D.C., getting short shrift in the media and of people in general just getting the wrong idea of nonprofits.

The founder of the D.C. Central Kitchen has teamed up to co-chair the Nonprofit Congress with Audrey Alvarado, executive director of the National Council of Nonprofit Associations (NCNA). The congress will convene Oct. 16-17, 2006 in Washington, D.C., with delegates gathering from around the nation to set an agenda and discuss issues relating to the nonprofit sector.

But between Independent Sector (IS), the Council on Foundations (COF) and other groups, some sector leaders are wondering if there are too many organizations claiming the mantle of leader and voice of the nonprofit sector.

"Maybe there's another agenda here. That's the issue in part to be sorted out," said Rick Cohen, executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP).

"Are there other institutional agendas playing out in terms of people trying to position themselves vis-a-vis Independent Sector, which has done quite well with its nonprofit process? As an organization strategy, you have to give Independent Sector great credit for cornering the market in terms of being the 'spokesentity' for nonprofits, addressing charitable accountability issues, vis-a-vis the Senate Finance Committee," said Cohen. "Organizationally, they've done

quite well. Maybe other groups having another agenda are reacting to Independent Sector's success."

Other organizations in Washington do a good job representing large nonprofits and foundations, but except for NCNA, small nonprofits lack representation, said Jane Van Buren, executive director of the Vermont Alliance of Nonprofit Organizations (VANO).

"Independent Sector's mission doesn't lend itself to representing community nonprofits. I think NCNA's mission does," she said.

The Nonprofit Congress is a one-time event that organizers hope will spawn additional events, she said, but she doesn't expect it to become an organization. "I see it as a celebration of the work we do and a call to action."

Cohen questioned whether the Nonprofit Congress is any more connected to small nonprofits than IS, or "that it's going to give a message that more authentically reflects nonprofits" than IS.

Alvarado described IS as "an important, vital voice," with a "very important role in the work that's been done on the Senate Finance Committee."

Egger doesn't envision the Congress as an alternative to IS or other groups, but said that it will "enrich the dialogue" they've been having. "My hope is an existing organization takes the leading role and uses the Congress to initiate a new, more robust role," and "empower what already exists," he said.

He drew a parallel to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, which he said tends to be viewed as having been homogenous, when it was not. While Martin Luther King Jr. organized the Mobile, Ala., bus boycotts and John Lewis and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee staged lunch counter sit-ins elsewhere in the South, the NAACP stood fast as the voice for equal rights in Washington, D.C.

The three were working almost at different means, Egger said, but provoked others to take a more aggressive stance, "almost to preserve their own stature." He likened IS to the NAACP and the Nonprofit Congress to King as analogous to the nonprofit sector today.

Leaders are divided on whether another voice for nonprofits in Washington will help or hurt the sector.

"We don't have the horsepower that the corporate sector does, specifically corporate industries. There's no question about that. We lack those resources," said Irv Katz, president and CEO of the National Human Services Assembly in Washington, D.C. "Beyond that, I don't know what messages another common voice could provide."

Washington, D.C, is a town of voices, messages and agendas. "I think there are a lot of different kinds of initiatives all the time...some work some don't," said Diana Aviv, president and CEO, of IS. As part of setting priorities, IS reaches out to its members, to come together to address issues, she said. "We're focused on our agenda and that's about it."

Aviv said IS is trying to fulfill a whole range of needs for providing a voice in Washington, whether on the federal budget, the ability of charities to do work, or ethics and accountability questions. Last year, the organization convened 15 field hearings across the country to find out what local and state leaders think about what's happening in Washington, Aviv said, "and we'll continue to do those kinds of meetings" while other groups are free to do the same.

IS receives numerous invitations to participate in various groups, Aviv said, and staff evaluates each one as to whether it advances IS's general mission. Any effort, she said, must have a long-term sustained plan of action, so it's not a single activity but part of a plan that allows goals to be achieved over time.

"There are many organizations that are part of NCNA that are members of IS, so we work very closely with local members, regional members; there are many different vehicles through which to do that, our annual conference in October being an extremely important vehicle for our congress," Aviv said.

Gathering nonprofit leaders together to talk about issues might be all well and good, but some in the sector are unsure what the purpose will be otherwise.

"It's not clear to me the message is there as to what they're trying to get groups to say, and without that kind of message formulation it's a little bit hit or miss," said NCRP's Cohen.

"One reason why we have at this point not signed on is because we can't quite figure out what exactly the agenda really is. And who's shaping that agenda. It's hard to sign on to a grab bag where you don't know quite what the political and policy agenda is," Cohen said.

"There's a very narrow sponsorship, basically the NCNA and basically, that's it. ... but you don't build a real coalition or congress by being the only organization," said Pablo Eisenberg, a former NCNA board member. "You need to invest people with broad constituencies from the very beginning."

Other than getting together -- "which I think is important for the nonprofit sector" -- Eisenberg questioned what the agenda of the Congress would be.

"It's very difficult to get a sense of what the issues are," he said. "It's fuzzy."

"We didn't want to come out and say, 'This is where we are,'" said Egger. Instead, it will be a deliberate process of listening and hearing from those who work every day in all communities. By the time the Nonprofit Congress convenes, delegates will discuss the ideas that have risen to the top. The events leading up to the Nonprofit Congress have been purposely designed to solicit ideas. Egger said he has seen organizations lobbying elected officials, purporting to speak for groups around the country but have not invested in long-term, open dialogue with nonprofits and the issues they deal with daily. "That's what we've tried to invest in," he said.

"We all basically recognize, for all our great intentions, we're not where we want to be, collectively or individually," Egger said.

The Congress "is building and complementing a lot of our sister organizations," said Alvarado. This effort, she said, is to hear from folks in the field and at the national level who can amplify and promote what they want. "They have a lot to say; we're trying to make a mechanism to make sure we're hearing what's coming from the field."

Alvarado and Egger started meeting in the fall of 2004, and in April, 2005 hosted numerous nonprofit leaders in Washington, D.C., seeking feedback. That's where the idea of town hall meetings came from. It was suggested that if the Congress is to be a grassroots movement, it needs to go to where people are. There have been 60 town hall meetings so far, with events planned in at least 30 states. Almost 2,000 people have signed on to the Nonprofit Congress' Declaration of for America's Nonprofits, the first phase of the project.

The second phase of the Congress is town hall meetings and the third is the event this fall in D.C. The fourth phase is to promote the message, with delegates taking the message back to local communities.

Common denominators

There are three common traits among nonprofits, according to Egger, and "we have to counter all three together."

First, nonprofits are all subject to regulation by state or federal government, with no real say in the process. U.S. Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, chairman of the Senate Finance Committee "for all intents and purposes, can do what he wants, and all we can do is get mad," said Egger.

The sector's "collective might" would make it the sixth largest economy in the world, Egger said, "yet few, if any, nonprofits have a say even in the smallest town budget process." Historically, nonprofits are reactive to budget cuts and scramble to make them up. "We can't continue to just be mad about what happens to us...we need to take a proactive role," he said.

"We're not interested in a spokesperson. We're interested in an organization that doesn't walk the line," Egger said. Too often, nonprofits are threatened with their funding, or confused or

intimidated and unable to advocate effectively, he said. Other industries would not be as acceptable or as flexible as nonprofits have been with respect to the Senate Finance Committee. Instead, Egger said, the sector's response has been, "How high should we jump?"

Nonprofits need to take a different role in these public debates. Too many nonprofits, too often, understandably, are afraid to speak out in a way that might frustrate corporate sponsors or leadership, he said.

Nonprofit leadership might want to take a more vigorous stance, but membership is very cautious and worried because the sector is so overwhelmed by its day-to-day survival that it cannot begin to think collectively or strategically about its shared future, including political stance by leadership, Eggers said. "That puts us in a position where we're very acquiescent."

Copyright 2006 *The NonProfit Times*