

**2010 Calhoun County Legislative Breakfast Meeting Notes
March 26, 2010,
Burnham Brook Community Center, Battle Creek**

On March 26, over 120 nonprofit staff and board members and elected officials attended the 4th annual Calhoun County Legislative Breakfast at Burnham Brook Community Center. This year's table discussion topic was centered on "How nonprofits can enhance their communications with elected officials and strengthen partnerships. Below is the comprehensive summary of those discussions.

Mark your calendar for the 5th Annual Nonprofit Legislative Breakfast on March 25, 2011, 8 a.m. at Starr Commonwealth in Albion.

You are invited to participate on the breakfast planning committee. The next meeting will be held on September 28, 2010 at 10 a.m. Please contact Linda Wendt at linda@bccfoundation.org to get involved.

1. How can we enhance our communications regarding nonprofit issues to our elected/government officials?

- Educate officials on:
 - value and impact of nonprofits (2)
 - what nonprofits need (2)
 - how nonprofits work and their mission (3)
 - impact of their decisions on the nonprofit sector
- Get them information early to build a relationship with them
- Elected officials want more contact with constituents.
- Don't be afraid to contact elected officials directly, they like working with nonprofits (2)
- Hold officials accountable to understanding the issue vs. just using their experience to make decisions- get the "big picture"
- Recognize that elected officials are also people
- Don't look at your group as looking for money, but as a possible partnership with government.
- Know what to ask an elected official; in a collective/ collaborative package make a specific request to partner with an issue.
- Information for elected officials
 - Elected officials need constant barrage of information
 - Don't just bring critical information
 - Use numbers and data to tell your story
 - Share colored pictures, brochures, newsletters, etc (5)
 - Printed media is good so they can share with other officials
 - Share your contact information with officials and best way to contact you

- Keep legislators and their staff informed and up-to-date on what your organization is doing
- Bring supporters of your cause to public meetings, more voices = more power (3)
- Educate your organization on facts/trends. The TCC report is a great resource guide.
- Build a common agenda (priorities)/unified message (5)
 - Nonprofit Alliance would be good vehicle locally to gather nonprofits together to collectively arrive at the top 3-4 priorities.
 - Nonprofits should coordinate various activities (share calendars)
- Invite officials to events/to volunteer (6)
 - Home calendar of events would be useful for officials
- Put district office staff contact info MNA policy site.
- Battle Creek Enquirer should list emails not just phone numbers of elected officials.
- Engage social networks
- Nonprofit staff need to be visible to community and officials
- Go to Capitol every time votes are taken on an issue.
- If local gov't departments have a special need, they will search for an org that can meet their need. Otherwise they use NPOs that engage them.
- Nonprofits must drive outreach to elected officials & other potential partners
- Find the right aide/staffer to each official (5)
 - staff has generous input to official (2)
 - communicate often
 - establish relationships with staffers, the staff are do-ers (4)
 - often aides become next elected officials
- Develop relationships at local levels with staffers/representatives
 - Need venue to develop more personal and local relationships (like coffee klatches)
 - Get their local staffer on email/phone/in person to receive quarterly updates. Be timely (3)
 - Call local office: share personal experiences and explain its importance
 - Face-to-Face meetings with legislators with your program participants, e.g. youth)
- Establish and be open to conversations about how we can support each other (i.e. between schools and organizations and government)
- Use Online Resources
 - Visit Government websites
 - Follow Legislator's websites if they have their own
 - Sign up for Legislator's newsletters when available
 - Social Media
 - Follow blogs consistently (4)
 - Efficient if you cannot meet them face-to-face
 - Use Facebook- get elected official to sign on to your site

- Use social media to follow elected officials if they use it: Facebook, twitter, etc.
- Advocacy
 - Need whole association to advocate.
 - Get commitment of nonprofits to become more active in advocacy
 - Is your nonprofit well versed in organizing their membership?
 - Need to educate nonprofits about where the line is in terms of advocacy education vs. lobbying knowing the difference (3)
 - Advocate for the greater good, not just your organization
 - As a sector, we engage when there is an emergency but we need to develop ongoing relationships with elected officials.
 - Attend Advocacy Days in Lansing
 - Bring constituents with you on legislative visits
 - Learn to partner with other organizations other ways so it is easier when it comes time to advocate on an issue (2)
 - Get involved as an individual citizen - campaigning with them your own time (with caution)

2. What is the most effective way to communicate with our elected officials?

a. Examples: email, phone, fax, letter, face-to-face, frequency

- Communicate consistently (persistently) to legislation. Don't give up.(3)
- Tailor information to the official, personalize message (4)
- Ask official what their preferred means of communication to be most effective
- Use all ways- depended on circumstances
- Develop relationship with aide/local representative (9)
- Face-to-Face meetings (8)
 - Informal, e.g., coffee klatches (3)
 - Formal-Go to Lansing (not always necessary if reps come home to their communities)
 - Critical to meet with them to keep them informed
- Phone (4)
- Email/ENewsletter (10)
 - Good, short, catchy subject line in email (4)
 - Ask to put them on your distribution list to keep them informed
- Blog sites (4)
 - are efficient when you can't reach legislation directly (face-to-face)
 - Visit on a regular basis to establish relationships.
- Visit government websites
- Visit elected official websites
- Snail mail
 - Consumers/Clients can write letters on behalf of nonprofit to advocate and tell success stories
 - Some do like written materials so they can share with others

- Least favorite form of communication is fax
- To get hold of officials use Michigan Guide to Government- put out by clerk Calhoun county directory, state, local, and federal units
- Letters/phones are difficult to respond to b/c they are out of office a lot.

3. What action can we take as a sector to grow our partnership?

a. Examples: status updates, committee work, identify and partnering with grant opportunities, policy decision-making

- Educate the Official
 - Convey how decisions impact the individual; personalize
 - Make them aware of the money saved through nonprofits and the amount of benefits nonprofits bring to our state.
 - Engage governments to tell our stories. They go a long way to show the difference our progress makes better incentives to support nonprofits (2)
 - Talk about all the volunteer efforts to show how much effect on our citizens (votes) our programs have
 - Send brochures with information
 - Give updates, quarterly, annually, semi-annually: who you are serving, data & anecdotal information.
 - Informational brochures and contact info is helpful
 - Define your issues-don't confuse officials with everything
- Network/Coordinate/Collaborate/Committees (10)
 - Make sure you know what's going on outside of your own organization
 - Ask for others if you help with collaboration
 - Coordinating groups-potential partners for grant opportunities (2)
 - Attend the The Coordinating Council meetings –TCC Represent nonprofits with status updates, good place to network, find potential partners (3)
 - Good idea for people to sit on each other's boards/committees so they know what other orgs do and who the other players are (3)
 - Need to get nonprofits together to talk and share activities and how we can get things done better (2)
 - Leverage resources
 - Join trade associations, alliances in some particular areas (2)
 - MNA (Michigan Nonprofit Association)
 - MML (Michigan Municipal League) who will advocate for you
 - Coordinated strategic planning
 - Learn to partner with other organizations other ways so it is easier when it comes time to advocate on an issue.
 - Distribute a master calendar of nonprofit activities & events
 - Need a clearing house for information -Nonprofit Alliance convene groups together during year to communicate?

- Participate in Project 20/20
- Events like this breakfast are a good way to get together and develop relationships. Share contact information of all participants.
- Know what is happening with like orgs in other communities.
- Make sure whole county is represented not just Battle Creek (2)
- As a nonprofit staff member or board member, go to other nonprofit events to network/ build relationships
- Events (3)
 - Have events with real stories/issues
 - Special events/award ceremony acknowledging/thanking official (2)
 - Meetings- coffee klatch etc. to communicate with officials
 - Invite officials to meetings, go on site tours, to meet your clients
- Grants
 - Follow all instructions
 - Re: Grant letters of support, letter should be tailored to contact person, grant, and provide an executive summary
 - Grants approved by legislature
 - Earmarks are not debated
 - Representative requests money at the federal level. No earmarks at state level.
 - Know the USDA grant cycles
 - CFDA- Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance
 - Listing of all grants available
 - Share info on grants (social media/blog)
 - Blog or social media page on grant collaboration opportunities
 - Nonprofit Alliance offers grant writing opportunities, workshops, and scholarships for members for organizational capacity building
- Invite legislator to be on nonprofit boards (2)
- Show how you are working towards sustainability
- Your mission in the key; have a consistent message ready
- Use social media to follow elected officials if they use it: Facebook, twitter, etc.
- Tell legislator-nonprofit stories. Creates incentives for donors to your nonprofit.
- Attend their (elected officials) hall meetings and forums.
- Be prepared and know the issues.

Suggestions for Elected Officials

- Hold monthly meeting with residents before commission meetings
- Email feedback to residents and welcome their comments
- More open communication during meetings
- Generally people ask questions but the answers aren't given publically and other people would like to know those answers
- FAQ section online for nonprofits to use as references
- Money and votes talk; nonprofits have votes
- Legislative visits to small villages from State Reps

- Need venue to develop more personal and local relationships (like coffee gatherings)
- Elected officials should be on various committees in the city, help them stay aware of community actions

Additional Resources

Calhoun County Government. Calhoun County's Reference Desk section available for your 24-hour convenience. Look up various committee meeting minutes; find a phone number; print forms, permits and applications; obtain driving directions, etc. www.calhouncountymi.org/ReferenceDesk/OverviewRefDesk.htm

Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance (CFDA). CFDA provides a full listing of all Federal programs available to State and Local governments (including the District of Columbia; federally-recognized Indian tribal governments; Territories (and possessions) of the U.S.; domestic public, quasi-public, and private profit and nonprofit organizations and institutions; specialized groups and individuals. www.cfda.gov.

Citizen's Guide to Michigan Government. Reference site that includes the Michigan Manual and the Citizen's Guide to State Government, along with many other resources. www.house.mi.gov/citizens_guide.asp.

The Coordinating Council of Calhoun County (TCC). TCC is the Community Collaborative Body of Calhoun County for the State of Michigan. www.tcccalthoun.org/

Government Directory <http://www.mnaonline.org/govdirectory.asp>

Michigan Municipal League (MML). The Michigan Municipal League is the one clear voice for Michigan communities. Through advocacy at the state and federal level, MML proactively represents municipalities to help them sustain highly livable, desirable, and unique places within the state. www.mml.org

Michigan Nonprofit Association. Michigan Nonprofit Association increases the capacity of Michigan's nonprofits to serve, strengthen and transform communities. www.mnaonline.org.

Nonprofit Alliance. Nonprofit Alliance is dedicated to strengthening and supporting the nonprofit sector of Calhoun, Barry and Branch counties. www.nonprofitalliance.org.

Project 20/20. Informing and engaging the Battle Creek area. www.bc2020project.com.