This case study highlights a way to boost your organization's impact.

Meeting Community Needs:
Nonprofits & Government in Partnership

By Erica Greeley

> **In some cases, nonprofits have increased their collective power – and impact - by collaborating with government entities to achieve common goals.**

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of the relationship between nonprofits and government. A strong, functional relationship between the two sectors is critical to the success of nonprofit missions, good government, and the standard of living in local communities.

The relationship is also complex. The nonprofit sector holds the government responsible for its actions and educates the government about community needs while relying on government for funding. The government holds the nonprofit sector accountable to the public trust and relies on nonprofits to deliver a vast array of programs and services.

All too often, minimal communication between government and nonprofits can lead to inefficiencies and missed opportunities. However, many nonprofits have taken the initiative to improve their relationships with local government in order to better serve their communities. In some of the most successful cases, nonprofits have increased their collective power – and impact - by coming together in coalition and then collaborating with government entities to achieve common goals. One notable success story is the Prince William Coalition for Human Services.

In Prince William County, Virginia, public agencies and local nonprofits have been working together for over 20 years. The 41 members of the Prince William Coalition for Human Services share information, coordinate services, and play a proactive role in solving local problems. The Coalition also keeps members informed of the area's political, social, and economic trends, and holds public forums on issues of community interest.

Among the Coalition's most notable accomplishments is the pivotal role it played in establishing accessible public transportation in the region. The Coalition became aware of groups within the community that needed public transportation, including seniors, people with disabilities, and residents employed by the local service sector. The Coalition conducted comprehensive needs assessments and transportation studies before advocating for a local bus system. Community members and those involved with the project are quick to credit the Coalition for its leadership. Alfred Harf, executive director of the Potomac and Rappahannock Transportation Commission, says, "The Coalition played a pivotal role in coalescing support for the start of the local public transportation service, and the quality of life in the area is much richer for it."

The Coalition has also:

• developed a comprehensive directory of local services at the

request of an elected official
- offered childcare training for human service providers
- played an instrumental role in establishing a Housing Advisory Council
- conducted annual community needs surveys
- ensured the inclusion of human services goals in the county's strategic plan.

Given the breadth of the Coalition's work, members join and remain involved for different reasons. Brenda Knowles, the City of Manassas Housing and Community Partnerships manager, stays involved because, "many a time the ability to reach a wider population is limited in the government sector; the partnerships formed with local nonprofits allow a flow of services that serves the citizens. It is my hope that, as a government representative, I can support the work of nonprofits in return."

David Narburgh, executive director of the Prince William Speech

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and Hearing Center and a long-time coalition member, appreciates the professional development and networking opportunities. "When the coalition began to form I was still relatively new to my position, the agency, and the area. For me it was a great opportunity to learn from folks far more experienced," he says. Narburgh remains involved in the coalition "in part to give back and ensure that the Coalition continues to support others. It is a huge asset to new leaders of human service agencies."

The Prince William Coalition for Human Services was born 20 years ago as a result of the efforts of a respected community volunteer who believed in the potential of bringing public agencies and

nonprofits together. The Coalition established a schedule of monthly board meetings, quarterly lunches for members, and a dynamic committee structure that has remained consistent over the past two decades. More importantly, the coalition has produced meaningful results and has confirmed the potential – and critical need – for nonprofits and public agencies to work together to identify and meet the needs of the local community. ■
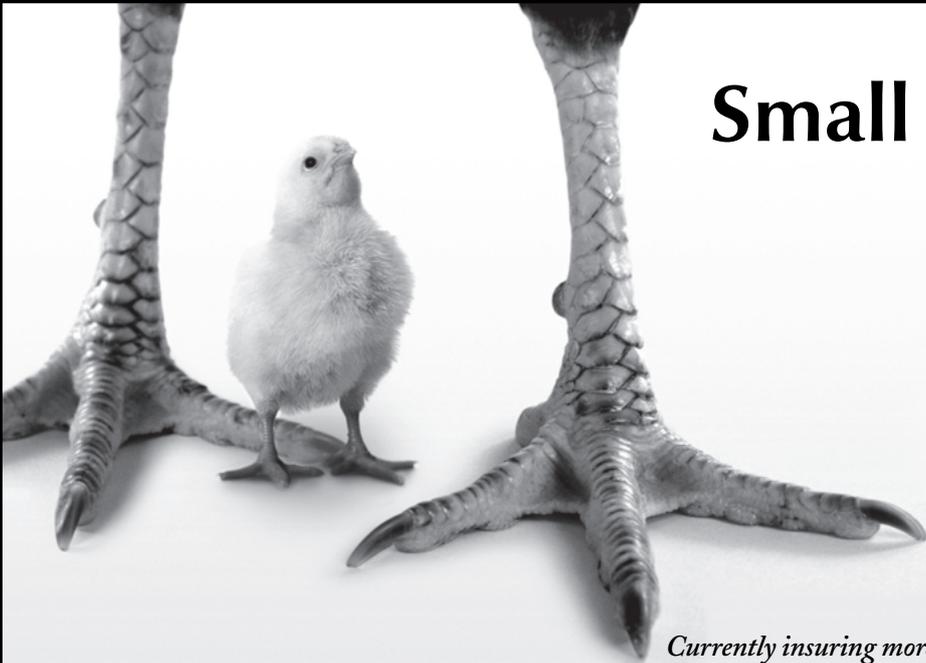
Resources

Hoffman, "A New Benefit to Offer Your Employees: Access to Housing," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 24, No. 4.

Lies, Valerie, "How Nonprofits Can Partner with State Regulators," *Nonprofit World,* Vol. 24, No. 3.

These resources are available at www.snpo.org/members.

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