



Looking Downtown

HOW NONPROFITS CAN PARTNER WITH LOCAL GOVERNMENTS

BY MIKE ROQUE

Starting out as a community organizer and then working for a radical community foundation, I never dreamed I'd actually be a government insider. In most cases, the work I did targeted local government with a list of demands and criticisms. Surely, we knew better than government how to do our work, and we never even considered it possible to partner with the government to achieve our goals. They were the people we were fighting for change.

Five years ago, the city of Denver elected John Hickenlooper as its mayor. Prior to his campaign, he had

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been very involved in the nonprofit sector, starting local organizations and serving on many boards of directors and committees. I first met him almost 20 years ago when, as a member of the board of the Chinook Fund, one of the Funding Exchange network of community foundations, he hired me as executive director of the Fund. Once he became mayor, Hickenlooper and I had many conversations about how to effect social change, and we recognized that no one sector — government, for-profit, or nonprofit — can solve large social issues alone. Here in Denver, we felt that the mayor's new political status was the perfect catalyst to bring the sectors together. To help do so, we created the Denver Office of Strategic Partnerships (DOSPP) with the mission of helping the city partner with local nonprofits. I was appointed by the mayor as its director.

As the liaison between the City of Denver and local nonprofit organizations, the Denver Office of Strategic

Partnerships looks for opportunities to build these partnerships. In 2008, we brought an additional \$20 million in federal and national foundation grants to the city and local nonprofits by building partnerships between the city and nonprofits on issues such as youth mentoring, teen pregnancy prevention, affordable housing, and the environment.

Similarly, your nonprofit can look to partner with your local government for opportunities to work on issues of importance to your agency or group and constituency.

Partnering with local government and one or more nonprofit organizations will enhance your chances of winning a federal or private foundation grant. Many federal grants are only available to units of local government, but these units can then subcontract with local nonprofit organizations to get the project done. In this

win-win situation, the local government takes responsibility for the burdensome federal financial reporting and audit requirements while the local nonprofits carry out the on-the-ground work. Conversely, there are some grants that only a nonprofit is eligible to receive but that it is more likely to win if it proposes working in partnership with local government to carry out the work.

In looking at examples of other cities that were partnering with local nonprofit organizations, such as Seattle, New York City, Detroit, and Lincoln, Nebraska, we discovered that each sector has its advantages and drawbacks. For example, governments move very slowly, but they also have the ability to do large-scale projects, such as creating parks and building roads, and they have access to large sums of taxpayer dollars. The for-profit sector is amazingly versatile, fast, and innovative but not always the most socially conscious or accountable. The nonprofit sector can do more with less and addresses social issues

such as AIDS, homelessness, and domestic violence when no one else will. But as we all know, the sector is terribly undercapitalized and rife with overlap and duplication of services. We are learning that, by bringing these sectors together to play off each other's strengths, it is possible to create innovative, collaborative, and system-changing solutions to some of the toughest social issues.

Denver's Road Home, Mayor Hickenlooper's Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness, has been a great example of the three sectors coming together with tremendous results. The city of Denver has provided the leadership in bringing together the sectors, Mile High United Way is serving as the fiscal agent, 19 local funders have provided financial support, and dozens of homeless providers are working together as never before to ensure wraparound services for the homeless. In the first three years of this effort, chronic homelessness has decreased by 35 percent, while the public awareness of homelessness has risen substantially.

As governments cut back in providing direct services, they are relying on local nonprofits to do the work and helping them get the funds so that they can. Although organizing and activist groups have been less likely to seek partnerships with government entities, they may want to take another look at the opportunities that exist.

I realize that organizing groups may need to target government officials when conducting a campaign. But there are always opportunities to partner with govern-

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ment once the campaign is over. Often, in the midst of a campaign you will discover resources that the government may have that could be helpful to you, such as funding or technical resources. I have seen successful organizing campaigns end with the organization and government agency jointly seeking and receiving funding for affordable housing development. Just because the government may be the target of your organizing doesn't mean they can't, at the end of your campaign, be an ally in your work.

FIVE TIPS

In this article, I offer five practical tips from an outsider-turned-insider on how to put your group in a position to partner with your local, state, or federal government to achieve your goals.

1. Research Your Local Government Operations

First, find out how your local government operates and where it gets the money to pay for everything it does, besides all your parking tickets. Because local governments utilize taxpayer dollars, this information is readily available. Budgets are a matter of public record and can be accessed at government offices; most are also now available online. These budgets tend to be large documents of

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well over 100 pages (the City of Denver 2009 budget is more than 600 pages), but most are broken down by city agency or program categories. It is important to know which programs most directly affect your constituency and where the funds for those programs come from.

Knowing where the money comes from will help you discover how flexible these dollars can be. With a little bit of research or by asking the local program director, you can get a copy of the program guidelines for a particular program. For federally funded projects, you can also get program guidelines by going to the federal agency that administers the funds. Most local governments have discretion about how federal money gets spent and can often transfer dollars from one program to another.

Try to find out how other cities and counties are using the types of funds most relevant to your group and let your local government know about what others are doing.

You might help spur your local government agencies to explore new ways to use funds by telling them about Harvard University's annual Innovations in Govern-

ment Awards, which recognize governments for innovative approaches to governance.

See how you can get involved in your local government's process for developing their budget. Often, it takes several months, many public hearings and meetings, and various revisions before the final budget is approved. To get your programs supported, your organization wants to be in the process as early as possible. You need to be in discussion with your political leaders when preliminary budgets are getting put together. The budget will go through many revisions before it is finally approved, and if you are not at the table during these discussions you will be left out.

Many nonprofit groups have conducted successful organizing campaigns around getting Community Development Block Grants (CDBG) and Temporary Assistance

to Needy Families (TANF) dollars, both of which are federal pass-through programs in which federal dollars are given to states or counties for distribution. CDBG funds have been used by nonprofits to purchase and renovate buildings, spur economic development efforts, and build neighborhood infrastructure such as roads and parks. TANF dollars can be used for preventive efforts such as preventing teen pregnancy, youth mentoring, and afterschool programs.

But there are many other pots of money that cities and counties get that can be used to support your work, whether it is providing direct services to the needy or building infrastructure such as roads, parks, or businesses in your communities. It is important to know where these funds come from, how much your local government gets (they are often distributed by formula), what projects are eligible under each program, and when and how decisions are made.

Another thing you want to learn is how your local government works: how decisions get made and who makes those decisions. What agencies make up your city, county, or state government? Who hires or appoints the agency managers? Do you have an elected mayor or city supervisor? How are city council or county commissioner seats selected — by district or at-large or a combination of both? Again, you can find most of this information at your city or county's website. Often city councils have work groups that meet to discuss specific functions of the city, such as youth development, parks, and city infrastructure. All regular meetings of public officials are open to the public. In addition, most of these meetings are now accessible via public access television or through your local government's website. In Denver, you can view the meetings live over the Web or access the library of public meetings on the city's website. You should plan to be present for the meetings that are related to your issues when they allow for public input.

Once you find out what agencies comprise your local government, you want to get a list of all the agency managers and deputy managers and plan to meet with those most relevant to your issues. You can usually find managers' names on the government website as well.

Try to get as much information about the managers and deputy managers as you can before meeting with them: What are their backgrounds, where did they go to school, where did they come from? Many of these managers have nonprofit backgrounds. Find out if they serve on any nonprofit boards of directors.

2. Begin to Make Yourself Known to Your Local Government

Now that you know what agencies comprise your local government and who the agency heads are, you want to look for allies in your constituency. You may not

have any agency managers or deputy managers in your constituency, but there may be someone who works for the city or county government who will likely know others in the bureaucracy. Ask them to walk you through their agency and name the higher-ups. Ask them if their agency has a strategic plan, organizational chart, or agency roster that will give you insight into how it works. Ask them for their feelings about the agency, their supervisors, and the local government. This will give you a good sense of morale and other issues in the agency.

When you have this information, set up a meeting with the appropriate agency managers or elected officials

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to introduce your organization, let them know about the good work you do, and explore ways you might help them meet their goals.

These people are experts in their given fields but they are not always comfortable meeting with the community. You want to ask them for their thoughts and plans for their agency and let them know that you are more than willing to work with them to ensure public input into their agency. Let them know about the needs of your constituency and neighborhoods. Show them pictures of your parks and roads and compare them with those in other neighborhoods.

These managers control their agency budgets and are the ones who will be making decisions about who they will work with. If they don't know your agency and its work, your group will not be built into the budget. Often times, agency managers or elected officials will send a representative to meet with you. Do not be offended by this, just see it as an opportunity to educate another person in the government about your work. Always have a packet to send back to the manager or elected official and ask for a formal meeting with the person in the future.

Next, get a list of all the public forums being held by agencies and start attending the meetings that pertain to your issues and giving input. Many public forums have very few members of the public showing up, but those who attend help shape public policy and/or funding decisions. Many local governments now conduct public input meetings on budgets, parks, infrastructure, business development, police, zoning issues, animal control, and many other topics. Determine the meetings that most affect your constituency and plan to have representatives attend. Often boards and commissions are formed to oversee the development of policy around specific issues. Make sure that your organization is represented on these boards and commissions. Find out the process for nominating people to these boards and commissions.

You should also attend relevant city council and county commissioner meetings. Most meetings are a matter of routine business and proclamations, but if you get the meeting agenda in advance you can see if there are items that might affect your agency or constituency. Final funding decisions often must go through this process, and you should be there to comment or make sure changes aren't made that remove needed funding at the last minute. You can also find out if items are being considered that may have dramatic consequences for certain communities, such as zoning changes or opening or closing parks or recreation centers.

Most meetings also include a public comment section on certain items under consideration or just take general comments. You often have to sign up in advance to speak; speakers are sometimes limited in time and/or agency or neighborhood representation. When speaking at these meetings, remember that you are often on television; always address elected officials with formal titles, such as Mr. or Madame President, Councilman Juan Smith — not Juan or Mr. Smith, even if you are personal friends with those you are talking to.

3. Relate to Government People with Respect

The number-one rule about politics, like fundraising and movement building, is that it is all about relationships. As much as politicians may annoy you or move too slowly for you, do not put them on the spot or try to embarrass them. This will only get them upset and get in the way of building a trusting relationship. No one likes to be made a fool of, and if you want to work with people on an ongoing

Be sure, too, to acknowledge support you get from government people. For example, if a manager or elected official attends one of your functions, such as a fundraiser or other public event, make sure to identify them and thank them for attending. When doing an event where

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you are expecting an elected or appointed official to attend, assign someone to let the MC know that they are in the audience and where they are seated so that they can be properly acknowledged.

4. Understand How Decisions Are Made

In the best of circumstances, major government decisions are made with lots of community input and deliberation. But sometimes, decisions need to be made quickly in response to unexpected dollars or changes in rules. In these cases, your good relationships with city or county officials will pay off. The more they know about your organization and its good work, the more likely they are to give you funding when it unexpectedly becomes available. I have seen situations where one organization was awarded funding for a project but due to unforeseen circumstances was not able to receive the funds. The funds needed to be spent down or contracted by a certain time or they'd be lost, so we quickly reached out to some familiar nonprofits to award the funding. An organization that had spent time getting to know their local government officials received \$250,000 to install a new elevator that made their office fully wheelchair accessible.

It is not uncommon

for the federal or state government to tell a local city or county to come up with ideas for

Knowing how your local government works and where it gets its funding will help your organization serve its constituency.

basis you must build that trust. If you are trying to build relationships with your local government and figure out how to create mutually beneficial partnerships, then you should treat them as you expect them to treat you: with honesty and respect. There are times when a politician or government official may be the target of your organizing campaign, but always try to be respectful. Even though you may disagree on an issue, do not make personal attacks. At the end of your campaign, you may gain a big ally for your work in the future.

Another thing bureaucrats hate is when you go around them. If you are working with someone, don't go around them to their supervisor or someone else whom you see as more powerful. You may get what you need in the short term, but you will break that trusting relationship you worked so hard to build.

projects they would do if several million dollars became available. You need to be ready to seize that kind of opportunity and react quickly and boldly. Think right now about what you would do with an additional \$500,000 or \$1 million. Do you have three or four projects at the ready that you could put into a two- or three-page proposal and implement within one to three months? If you do, tell your friends in government about your ideas. Give them a tour of your organization. Keep your organization and its good work on their minds and they will be more likely to contact you in situations like these.

5. Take Advantage of Resources Other Than Money

We would all like to receive an additional \$1 million quickly, but that kind of windfall may be the exception. However, governments have other resources that nonprofit

organizations can take advantage of. They often make meeting and training space with ample parking and LCD projectors available to nonprofit organizations. They might have surplus computers and office furniture that they could donate to local nonprofits. They have experts on issues such as environmental health, zoning, parks and recreation, finance, economic development, and other issues who are willing to share information and help your organization develop policy positions.

Seek out the people in your local government agencies who are responsible for proposal writing and ask them to keep you in mind for grant opportunities. Also, consider asking the local government to partner with you on a grant proposal for your organization. Often times, having a local government involved in your project adds credibility to your proposal.

Find out what other resources your local government has to offer and start using them. After all, you and your neighbors are paying for them.

CONCLUSION

There are many opportunities to work with your local government. Make sure you know what your government agencies are up to and see to it that they know about your work. When funds become available for a specific project, or a big, government-driven initiative comes on the drawing board, your organization will be well placed to have an inside track to the funds that could help you achieve your mission while working with the government agencies to achieve mutual goals.

That these ideas may not work for every organization, but many nonprofit organizations are losing opportunities

by not even considering the possibility of working with their local government. Even if you decide not to work with your local government, knowing how it works and where it gets its funding will help your organization serve its constituency better. For better or worse, local

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governments have lots of control over the lives of most people. From developing zoning policies that affect your neighborhoods and deciding where to open or close parks and recreation centers to determining which communities get designated as enterprise zones or business improvement districts, learning how your government works can help your organization achieve its goals.

Don't be afraid to meet with local political leaders, share your work with them, and explore partnership opportunities. At one time, governments were seen as allies in the fight on poverty, racism, and other social ills. With new leadership in Washington and more progressive leaders at the state and local levels, nonprofit organizations once again have the opportunity to work with governments to tackle some of the most intractable issues of our day. Let's show that governments can once again be instruments of good and can partner with local organizations to build a just and equitable society. **GF**

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