

Commentary-Northern Virginia Nonprofits Face Leadership Gap

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Fairfax County nonprofit organizations do a great job for Virginians, tackling hundreds of issues from health care to child protection to environmental preservation to education. But over the next decade those organizations will face a challenge to their survival unlike anything they have faced before.

Some telling statistics paint the picture. The nonprofit sector has grown nationwide by an amazing 40 percent in just the last 15 years. This growth is due to a number of factors, chief among them the reduction of government involvement in many pressing social challenges, the individualistic idealism of baby boomers who prefer to devise their own solutions to their concerns and the role of technology easing the path to starting new businesses.



In Virginia, the sector has grown by an incredible 71 percent, probably the fastest expansion of any state. This phenomenal growth is attributable to a number of factors as well, including Northern Virginia's economic growth, our proximity to the halls of power on Capitol Hill and the high education levels and professional experiences of Northern Virginia residents.

Seventy-two percent of all nonprofits in the country are run by boomers, the majority of whom say they want to retire in the next three years. Their exodus from leadership is creating a massive demand for their successors, so great, in fact, that in a few short years, 64,000 executive-level positions will be open every year. To give you an idea of how big a leadership gap that is to fill, consider that even if half the students in every graduate business program in the nation every year for a decade were to commit to filling nonprofit leadership positions, it would be insufficient.

What are our higher education institutions doing to prepare a new generation of social entrepreneurs? Not enough. While 66 percent of undergraduate students say they would consider jobs in the sector, only 7 percent say they have any idea how to land such opportunities or to be successful in them over time.

What does all of this mean for our neighborhood nonprofits? For some, it will mean closing their doors. Certainly, there are inefficiencies in the sector, just as there are in government or the private sector, and frankly, some organizations should close up to make room for more effective organizations. However, there will be hundreds of organizations that provide essential leadership on issues critical to our quality of life throughout the commonwealth that may not survive, and this concern should be shared by all of us.

Our Northern Virginia nonprofits can foresee a vicious cycle; this challenge will arise because only those organizations that are the best funded will have the resources to compete for the very limited number of qualified replacements for their leadership.

Money follows leadership. So the cycle will replicate itself until smaller and some medium-sized organizations acting as sole providers of certain essential services will fade away.

In certain places in Northern Virginia, the impact of the leadership gap could be devastating. Even in southern Fairfax County, in the wealthiest congressional district in the nation, as many as 10 percent of our children live in poverty, and this unacceptable statistic is even higher in communities along the Route 1 corridor. These kids' prospects too often depend on the good work of nonprofit organizations. Folks from elsewhere in Virginia who think every street here is paved with gold have not been to neighborhoods in these areas.

So, what to do? There are several strategies that nonprofits and even municipal agencies can employ to ride out the leadership gap. One strategy is social entrepreneurship-devising earned income-generating businesses to support their nonprofit organization. A second is consolidation, or the merger of two organizations into one, creating an effort that, if done right, will be greater than the sum its parts. The third is succession planning, or identifying now the people to be hired or groomed to replace key leaders long before current leaders anticipate turning over the reigns.

There are other strategies that smart nonprofits will employ to ensure that they live to fight, for their missions and for us, another day. Space permitting, the Chronicle Newspapers, through future appearances of this column, will profile neighborhood nonprofit organizations that are pursuing such strategies and demonstrating the entrepreneurial spirit that mark social progress. By celebrating the good work of our neighbors, for our neighbors, we also hope to shine a small light on the charitable efforts that make us feel blessed to live in Northern Virginia.

If you lead or know of such an organization, please email me at Greg@phoenixproject.org.

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