

## Commentary-Nonprofits Need to Flex Their Political Muscle

*By Greg Werkheiser*

On Feb. 12, 2008, Virginians statewide cast their vote in the Republican and Democratic primaries. The political fervor of this historic presidential election is inescapable to folks living so close to the nation's capital. Meanwhile, in Richmond the General Assembly is entrenched in its business. Giving full-throated voice to their opinions to the presidential candidates and to state senators and delegates are private corporations, professional associations, single-issue advocacy groups and passionate individuals by the truckload. Who is largely absent from the dialogue? Our nonprofit organizations.

There are three main reasons most nonprofit organizations shy away from the political process. First, they fear engagement will endanger their nonprofit status. Second, they choose to spend their few discretionary hours serving one more client presenting immediate needs at their door rather than advocating for policies that may have a more delayed impact. Third, they are shy about asking the foundations that fund them to support political advocacy.

All three reasons miss the mark with serious implications for the effectiveness of the sector. Let's take them in turn.

First, nonprofits have substantial leeway under current law to advocate for laws and regulations that will positively impact their organization and their clients. They can opt for an expenditure test permitting them to spend up to 20 percent of their annual budget on lobbying activities. That means for an organization with a \$500,000 annual budget, \$100,000 can be spent paying staff or professional consultants to meet with legislators, printing and distributing persuasive materials and educating their constituents about pending legislation. The only clear no-nos are formally endorsing a particular candidate, although comparing the records of candidates on critical issues is just fine. Want to make your organization's research and studies on important issues available to public officials? Great-that doesn't even count toward your 20 percent expenditure cap for advocacy, because it is considered educational.

Second, nonprofits ask, "Why should I spend four hours a week lobbying for improvements to public policy affecting environmental degradation that may not ever get adopted, when I can spend those hours cleaning a green space and seeing immediate results?" Because if you don't change the game, you will always have another space to clean, and your job is to eventually put yourself out of business.

Third, sophisticated philanthropists, including foundations, individuals and corporations are now coming around to supporting advocacy efforts by nonprofits. As former Gov. Mark Warner noted at an event hosted by the Phoenix Project last year, "Nonprofits can provide critical cover as policy makers struggle to enact important legislation. But nonprofits and foundations must be willing to be bolder. Our nonprofits should be our leading social innovators. But too often nonprofit funders are willing to fund the good idea, and not willing to take the next step and allow their nonprofit leaders to engage with policy makers on how to take this good idea and build it into a public policy framework." Push your funders to be bolder by making the case that you will need fewer dollars in the future if you can deliver policy change now.

The nonprofit sector comprises at least 10 percent of the American economy and employs many of our nations' most talented citizens. If the U.S. nonprofit sector were its own country, it would be among the ten largest economies on the planet. Yet each year, as corporate America spends millions creating a policy environment hospitable to its coffers, merely 1 percent of nonprofits nationwide report to the

IRS that any of their annual budget is used for political advocacy. It's time for America's nonprofits, serving on the frontlines of hundreds of battles to sustain and improve the quality of our citizens' lives, to raise their well-informed voices and use the rights Congress has granted them.

Several Northern Virginia nonprofits model the counsel in this column. Voices for Virginia's Children is a statewide, privately funded nonprofit organization that builds support for practical public policies impacting the lives of children around the commonwealth. With offices in Fairfax and Richmond, they are wholly unafraid to delve into the fray and are respected by both sides of the aisle for their courage and professionalism. In addition to sending their clients and supporters regularly to meet with legislators before and during the Virginia General Assembly session, they provide numerous advocacy tools on their Web site ([www.vakids.org](http://www.vakids.org)) for others who want to champion the causes important to Virginia's youth.

Nonprofits that seek a lasting impact on the lives of those they serve will consider how and to what extent they should become vocal participants in the political process. Their hard-won wisdom and entrepreneurial ideas will be welcomed at the table.

Greg Werkheiser is founder and executive director of the Phoenix Project.