

# Community Issues Require Community Responses: Coupling Creativity with Unlikely Collaboration

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Anyone in the nonprofit sector can tell you about the ongoing challenges of fundraising, particularly in a climate of limited resources, competitive funding, and increasing demands to demonstrate impact for donated dollars. For the past several years, funders have been encouraging nonprofits to collaborate to ensure services aren't being duplicated, preferring to support organizations that have proven records of successfully working with other nonprofits in their respective fields. This push has naturally led to some improved efficiencies, sharing of resources, and new innovative ideas in service provision.

At Bethesda Project, for instance, we partner with other homeless services and housing providers as part of the Philadelphia Partnership to End Chronic Street Homelessness. This collaborative has a mission to coordinate and share knowledge, resources, and services to help chronically street homeless individuals in Philadelphia find and maintain permanent housing. Through working together, we can collectively make a

greater impact and streamline service provision to those most in need. Likewise, we have formal and informal partnerships with other service providers who focus on serving the same target population, perhaps referring people experiencing homelessness for our housing or to whom we refer guests and residents for treatment, training, intensive case management, healthcare, etc. If others are doing specialized work, it makes best business sense to partner and ensure the best possible services are provided without expanding our mission into areas beyond our focus.

It's an exciting time to be in Philadelphia. We've recently seen a new trend emerge locally, which challenges us all to think about partnerships and collaboration in new ways. I have the honor of participating on two cross-sector workgroups, one is The Chamber of Commerce for Greater Philadelphia Roadmap for Group Action Team and the other is the Mayor's Shared Public Spaces Workgroup. Both of these committees are designed to bring together corporate, nonprofit, private and public leaders, to share ideas and develop strategies to achieve outcomes to benefit all. This cross-sector collaboration results in rich discussion, from multiple perspectives, which leads to a deeper understanding of the issues at hand and offers new ways of thinking about solutions. These formats bring together parties representing widely different constituencies, varying levels of resources, and a shared, hopeful vision for Philadelphia's future.

Using this same approach on the micro level, many nonprofits replicate the formula for utilizing cross-sector partnerships to advance their goals. In its simplest form, it's financial support; finding the alignment of values with partners in the private, business, and government realms to translate into monetary donations. It can also be applied to volunteerism and in-kind support. A large component of Bethesda Project's success formula hinges on our use of volunteers to help us in achieving our mission of *being family with those who have none*. Individuals and groups who come to share their skills, time, and talents enhance our shelter and residential communities by providing meals, completing cleaning projects, leading games or activities, or just getting to know the people we serve on a human level. These volunteers come from every sector, motivated for different reasons. We also actively engage communities of faith, from churches who host overnight shelter space, to congregations who regularly contribute financially or through donated goods. Plus, we've got generous corporate partners who donate computer and IT support, legal advice, advertising space, discounted food, and physical space for special events and staff trainings. These partnerships save us thousands of dollars annually, which means more of our resources can be allocated for direct service.

These unlikely partners and creative forms of support are undoubtedly critical to our viability and sustainability. But

how can this model be adapted large scale, to benefit not just individual nonprofits, but the sector as a whole?

Ideally, we can create a platform to pair nonprofit needs with corporate and private resources, to minimize overhead and streamline tangible support. Here are just a few ways to think about these pairings.

- *Buying Power.* Many service-focused nonprofits have ongoing expenses including office supplies, paper products, and cleaning supplies. However, given the size of their budgets, the rates they are offered -- even by longstanding vendors -- are far greater than the large corporation who purchases in far greater quantities. A corporate partner could identify a nonprofit whose mission they support, to help negotiate deeper discounts on their behalf.
- *Donated Goods.* For the same corporate partner, it would likely be a negligible expense to tack on an extra case of copy paper or a few boxes of toilet paper when placing their regular order for needed supplies. Donating those items could offset some ongoing overhead expense for the nonprofit partner, and simultaneously serves as a tax deductible in-kind donation. Donating branded items, like legal pads or pens for daily use or larger specialty items for staff appreciation gifts, further benefits the business through free publicity to new audiences.
- *Donated Services.* Many nonprofits require specialty services like legal advice or representation, financial

knowledge or audit services, building management, IT support, or marketing and public relations expertise. Linking a for-profit expert with a nonprofit in need can provide meaningful experience to employees, while raising the profile of the corporate partner through philanthropic support.

- *Volunteerism.* One of the ways that employers compete in today's job market is to offer creative perks to incentivize while creating meaning. By partnering with a local nonprofit in a more formal way to provide paid volunteer experiences for employees, the impact over time is more substantial than through one-off opportunities. Volunteers can deepen the relationship with the partner nonprofit, forming relationships and increasing knowledge around social issues served by the nonprofit sector. On the nonprofit side, long-term volunteers often translate into financial support.

While financial support is critical to nonprofit sustainability, writing a check is not always the most appealing option to business partners. Through the creation of a master match-making repository of needs and resources, finding the right match for nonprofits and corporate partners could be a click away. At Bethesda Project, we believe that community issues do require community solutions. It's up to all of us to figure out how to make the solutions within reach. *Start where you are, use what you have, do what you can.*