

2004 TROPMAN REPORTS

Applied Research about the Pittsburgh Region's Nonprofit Sector

DO THEY SEE WHAT I SEE?

Public Opinion and the Human Services Sector



THE FORBES FUNDS

Envisioning Pittsburgh's nonprofit sector as innovative, informed, and engaged, The Forbes Funds advances capacity-building within and among the region's nonprofit organizations.

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- Applied Research Projects
- Annual Research Conference

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- Leadership Roundtables
- The Frieda Shapira Medal
- Alfred W. Wishart, Jr., Award for Excellence in Nonprofit Management

A 2003 national study by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change identified substantial discrepancies between the public at-large and nonprofit practitioners in assessing the severity of community problems. According to that study, public awareness of community needs differed significantly from the awareness of these same needs among nonprofit organizations and practitioners who address these needs through their services and programs. That is, the public generally does not see hunger, affordable housing, neighborhood safety, public education, and the eradication of illiteracy as severe community problems in the way that nonprofit human services providers do.

Underlying the current study is The Forbes Funds' desire to determine if discrepancies similar to those uncovered through the Pew Partnership study exist between the public and the nonprofit human services providers in Allegheny County. A significant issue is this: if the public doesn't see the problem, how will they support organizations that exist to address the problem?

But without an understanding of the public perception, nonprofit organizations cannot make the most effective policy and management decisions and cannot cost-effectively reach potential volunteers and contributors.

To address these issues, The Forbes Funds commissioned Campos, Inc. to use its "opt-in" Regional Opinion Panel to take the pulse of the public through highly controlled telephone interviews. Additionally, Campos polled nonprofit organizational leadership through online surveys.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study sought to answer the following questions:

- What is the public perception in Allegheny County of local problems, including hunger, affordable housing, illiteracy, neighborhood safety, and quality public education?
- What are the perceptions of nonprofit leaders about these same problems in Allegheny County?
- How do the perceptions of the public compare to the perceptions of human services practitioners?
- What are the existing attitudes among the public about the need for community support for nonprofit human services practitioners?
- What would the public need to know to become likely to support nonprofit human services practitioners?

| | EXECUTIVES | | RESIDENTS | |
|---------------------------|---------------------|------|---------------------|------|
| | VERY/FAIRLY SERIOUS | RANK | VERY/FAIRLY SERIOUS | RANK |
| Quality of Education | 86.8% | 1 | 27.2% | 2 |
| Hunger | 78.9% | 2 | 13.6% | 5 |
| Affordable Housing | 69.2% | 3 | 23.7% | 3 |
| Crime/Neighborhood Safety | 67.3% | 4 | 31.5% | 1 |
| Illiteracy | 66.7% | 5 | 17.7% | 4 |

METHODOLOGY

For the community survey, Campos conducted 300 telephone interviews among Allegheny County residents. Fifty-three nonprofit executives from human services organizations completed the online survey. The interview and survey were conducted between June 10 and 28, 2004.

With permission, Campos used the Pew Partnership survey to model questions for the surveys in order to compare responses to the national data. In addition, and with permission, a few questions from a recent study conducted by the Brookings Institution were included to gauge the public’s confidence of charitable organizations.

COMPARATIVE SUMMARY — NONPROFIT EXECUTIVES AND ALLEGHENY COUNTY RESIDENTS

When comparing the responses of local nonprofit executives with those of Allegheny County residents, some interesting differences — and a few similarities — come to light. Looking at top-two box scores (“very serious” and “fairly serious”), the table above compares the priority ranking provided by the executives with the somewhat different ranking provided by local residents.

Executives were asked to identify the single biggest problem they faced in accomplishing their mission. Lack of funding/resources was ranked first. When asked to identify the second biggest problem they faced, lack of funding was again first among all responses. Executives were also asked to choose from a list of actions that would do the most to solve their organization’s primary concern. More people donating money was the choice of over 50 percent of the respondents. When asked what business leaders could do to help, providing financial support/resources/supplies was the choice of over

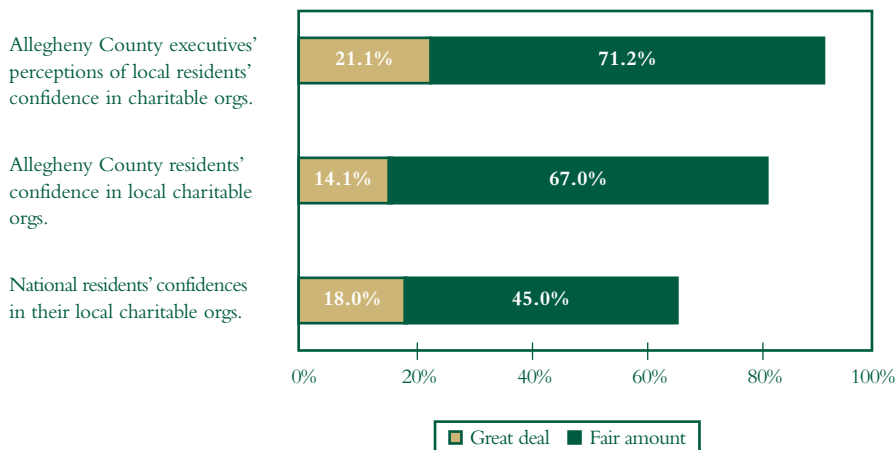
60 percent of the respondents. Similarly, when asked what government leaders could do to help, providing funds/grants was the choice of over 55 percent of the respondents.

Allegheny County residents listed donating money to charity **last** among various ways that people like themselves could help. Instead, they said that some form of personal involvement or volunteering would have the greatest impact, while nonprofit executives listed those activities in sixth place.

Allegheny County residents indicated that word of mouth was one of the most effective ways of learning about the needs and opportunities for involvement with nonprofits. Over 94 percent of the local executives confirmed that they relied on word of mouth to inform people in the community about their organization’s needs, in spite of the fact that 81 percent said they regularly sent newsletters to their various constituencies and also relied on newspapers. Over 86 percent said that word of mouth was the most useful method of volunteer recruitment.

Over 70 percent of the nonprofit executives perceived local residents to have a “fair amount of confidence” in community charitable organizations, and another 21 percent thought the public had a “great deal of confidence” in them. Allegheny County residents however, expressed slightly lower levels of confidence (67 percent and 14 percent, respectively).

In terms of helping people, executives rated the perception of nonprofit performance at 100 percent, while Allegheny County residents rated it at 88.6 percent. For delivering programs and services, executives rated the perception of nonprofit performance at 94.3 percent, while residents rated it at 84.9 percent. And in terms of spending money wisely, executives rated the perception of nonprofit performance at 79.2 percent, while residents rated it at 63.3 percent.



| | VERY/SOMEWHAT GOOD JOB | |
|----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------|
| | EXECUTIVES | RESIDENTS |
| Helping People | 100.0% | 88.7% |
| Delivering Programs and Services | 94.3% | 84.9% |
| Spending Money Wisely | 79.2% | 63.3% |

COMPARATIVE SUMMARY — DEMOGRAPHIC SEGMENTS IN ALLEGHENY COUNTY

Suburban dwellers tended to perceive a better **quality of life** than did urban dwellers by a 20 percent margin. Over 68 percent of those who live outside of the Pittsburgh city limits responded “excellent” or “very good,” while less than 49 percent of City of Pittsburgh residents gave those responses.

Local **optimism** about the community drew much lower ratings. Among all residents, only 50 percent felt that the region’s best years still lay ahead. Those with incomes under \$35,000 were the least likely to feel optimistic (only 34.2 percent), while those with incomes over \$75,000 felt the most optimistic (59.6 percent). The survey revealed that those with higher incomes and with more education **volunteer** at higher rates than those with low incomes or no college training. More than 80 percent of respondents in the upper income bracket of the study volunteered, while only 45 percent of those in the lower income bracket did so.

Among respondents who do volunteer, those in the lower income bracket (58.8 percent) were somewhat more likely to be regular volunteers than those with incomes in the highest bracket (50.0 percent). Those with children were also more likely to be regular rather than occasional or one-time volunteers.

Among respondents who do not volunteer, lack of time was the most common reason given.

When asked about the most direct way for individuals like themselves to find out about volunteer opportunities, members of every demographic group cited “word of mouth or neighbors” as their first response — and they did so by a wide margin.

Various demographic groups tended to identify quite different **issues** as “very serious” or “fairly serious” among the five areas of need discussed in the survey. Affordable housing was cited most often by city dwellers and by those with incomes under \$35,000. Crime and neighborhood safety was also cited frequently by city dwellers and those with incomes under \$35,000. City dwellers saw illiteracy as much more of a problem than any other demographic group. Quality of education was substantially more serious an issue for city dwellers than any other group, and those with no college education were least likely to see education as a serious issue. Hunger was cited least often as a major problem and quite evenly so across all demographic groups.

THE NEED FOR COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The results of this survey suggest that the general public supports the work of the local nonprofits and believes that

community involvement and volunteerism are good, beneficial, and should be practiced by more of their peers.

Among the general population, an assumption persists that nonprofits need more volunteers far more urgently than they need additional contributions. While the leaders of the nonprofits would be pleased to have more volunteers, their most urgent need is for additional funding to cover the costs of goods and services that volunteers cannot provide.

The fact that public levels of confidence are somewhat below those expected by the organizations’ executives suggests that the urgency of their mission and the critical need for funds — or the success of their work and the need to expand it — has not been communicated to the local populous. In an era of information overload, when mailboxes and e-mail inboxes are full of junk mail and requests for contributions, local charities face a tremendous challenge to make their voices heard.

The fact that respondents found word of mouth to be the most effective way of learning about the needs of charities — and the fact that nonprofit executives recognized this — suggests that this communication vehicle may need to be tapped in new and creative ways. It appears that messages traveling by word of mouth are heard above the din of other high-tech media and are given greater credibility.

ADDITIONAL POINTS OF INTEREST

In terms of specific **community involvement** by Allegheny County residents, suburban dwellers are more active than urban dwellers. Local residents are more active and involved in every area surveyed than are their national counterparts. Church activities were the number one area of involvement, with school and youth/children’s activities in second and third places.

Happily, over 90 percent of volunteers believed that the work they did for their nonprofits made “some difference” or “a great deal of difference” in **solving the problem** the nonprofit was addressing. This was true locally and nationally.

When reviewing **perceptions** of the relative seriousness of five potential community problems, it is interesting to note that the two that received the lowest rankings, illiteracy and hunger, are problems least likely to directly affect the survey respondents personally, while crime/neighborhood safety, quality of education, and affordable housing — those problems that received the highest rankings — might directly affect most respondents in some manner. Ironically, illiteracy and hunger were the two areas that respondents thought they could do the most to help solve.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The nonprofit organizations that serve Allegheny County in the human services sector have the broad support of the community. Nonetheless, this survey suggests that they are faced with two urgent challenges that are very closely linked:

- First is the need for improved credibility with the local community, which needs to more accurately understand the severity and seriousness of the issues that face the

region and the achievements of local nonprofits in addressing those issues.

- Second is the need for increased donations, which is tied to the community’s misperception that nonprofits are adequately funded but need more volunteers in order to fulfill their missions.

Thus, Campos, Inc.’s recommendations suggest ways for the nonprofits to communicate their issues, needs, and successes and to increase their grassroots fundraising with the help of loyal volunteers and targeted communications via the Internet.

• **Create a Social Services Needs Index.** In order to address the information or perception gap that exists between nonprofits and the local community, we recommend the creation of an Allegheny County Human Services Needs Index. This index should be used to track and publish local social services trends, show improvements (or declines), and demonstrate relative priorities. This will require the cooperative efforts of various agencies and organizations in the social services to share information. The index should:

- Measure the depth of need in the five major areas of concern noted at the beginning of this study;
- Track the dollars spent addressing these needs and the hours invested (both professional and volunteer); and
- Measure and report the successes of nonprofits in addressing these needs.

The relevant data will need to be tracked and published regularly for such an index to be meaningful. A comprehensive index of this sort will demand new levels of accountability on the part of nonprofits. For those that are achieving results it will provide new levels of credibility; for those that are failing, it may provide motivation to improve or risk being replaced by other more effective agencies. Foundation funding for such an index would spotlight the importance of communicating this information to the community and the donor constituencies.

• **Create Volunteer Challenge Campaigns.** Executives indicated a much greater need for financial contributions than for additional volunteers, though County residents perceived the opposite to be true. We believe this disparity of perception arises, in part, from the fact that fundraising and volunteer recruiting are most often disconnected from one another. We recommend addressing this problem at the grass roots level by developing challenge campaigns that actively involve volunteers in small donation fundraising:

- Develop innovative approaches that directly link volunteer efforts with word-of-mouth campaigns to increase the numbers of small contributions received.

- Take advantage of established, casual “friends and family” information networks and “grapevine behaviors” to communicate specific needs and to actively encourage volunteers to be ambassadors for the organizations they already believe in.

- Build broader community support by encouraging volunteers to periodically seek small contributions from their personal networks — contributions that will help fund the program areas in which they are volunteering.

- Expand volunteer recognition programs — based on aggregate donations of time and money — that showcase them on a par with large donor recognition programs.

- Recognize the size and value of cumulative volunteer-raised contributions in ways that express genuine appreciation and motivate continued efforts.

- Recognize the scope and value of cumulative volunteer hours in ways that inform area residents about the efforts of their neighbors.

• **Create Internet-based Fundraising Campaigns.**

We note the recent success of political action committees and national candidates to raise large sums of money from a great many small donations. They did so by asking for contributions to fund very specific activities and by making it possible for individuals to make small contributions via the Internet (in addition to traditional methods). We recommend that local nonprofits take a similar approach:

- Identify specific funding needs and seek to meet those needs through the collection of small donations via the Internet.
- Encourage those who can make only small contributions to do so. These are donors who might otherwise contribute nothing at all.
- Rely on e-mail communication to create a regular channel of communication that will keep small donors interested and involved. This will increase the likelihood that they may make several small contributions over the course of a year.

This approach enables contributors to connect regularly and somewhat informally with the nonprofits that interest them and, if done well, will let them know how their money is being used. This can create a sense of ownership among small donors who can then say with pride, “I helped fund XYZ project!” The success of this approach for political fundraising suggests that it overcomes resistance to the traditional appeals for money. It may also encourage the involvement of a great many interested citizens who may be intimidated and embarrassed by appeals that ask for donations beyond their means.



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