



WASHINGTON NONPROFITS

WE MAKE SURE NONPROFITS HAVE WHAT THEY NEED TO SUCCEED.

2022 Listening Project Summary Report

April 2022

During February and March of 2022, Washington Nonprofits staff members reached out to a cross section of our members to ask for input via a structured interview. We are very grateful to the 26 nonprofit leaders who took the time to visit with us and share their perspective and ideas to guide our direction. The organizations interviewed spanned many mission areas, including human services, arts, housing, environmental, economic development, education, community building, healthcare, legal aid, and service to specific ethnic and immigrant communities. This report summarizes the major themes and opportunities for us to improve our service to members.

Current Challenges

COVID fatigue is a big deal for a number of organizations. As one organization said, “All our staff is experiencing burnout and fatigue and decision makers are super tired.” Related: mental health issues for staff and clients, difficulty of working remotely and online service delivery, internal disagreements about when it is time to return to the office/in-person services, confluence of COVID and racial reckoning = disproportionate impact on Black, Indigenous, People of Color staff.

Strategic issues include figuring out how best to meet the mission and improve programs, building a new program, determining how to move forward with purchasing property/building a new facility, changing organizational culture, responding to changing community demographics, growing strategically/sustainably and managing boom and bust funding cycles.

Funding challenges are significant—general difficulty of raising sufficient funds but also dealing with unpredictable revenue streams that can change substantially from year to year. One person spoke about startup funding expiring. Elected officials are not understanding and supporting their work, and government funders having less time for relationships right now.

Capacity building challenges including building a good database, finding or growing our own grant writers, tech support. Smaller organizations need help finding ways to purchase a small share of professional services.

Increased demand for certain services ranging from increased domestic/child abuse to an influx of new bicyclists during the pandemic.

Staffing and volunteer shortages include recruiting the right board members, coordinating diverse volunteers, recruiting enough volunteers to handle the work, and figuring out how to pay a living wage.

Community issues

Due to an effort to reach people throughout the state, the majority of interviewees live and work in rural parts of Washington state. Many people talked about having strong roots in their community and feeling a strong sense of community (“We raised our kids together.” “People here know each other.”). One noted that doing outreach in their community requires putting a lot of miles on your car.

Rural communities across Washington are experiencing change and report inadequate affordable housing, rising property values, low vacancy rates. Working class people such as folks working in the service industries are being squeezed and sometimes forced to live in outlying areas with long commutes. Broadband/internet access is a big issue in some communities. One person commented that poverty in her area is hidden, with small town downtowns looking good, but struggle under the surface.

Most communities are experiencing demographic shifts, including increases in the Latinx and other immigrant communities. One person reported that the white and Latinx communities in his area are not well-integrated, with the exception of the schools. Another indicated that there are problems with emergency messages not being translated into multiple languages in her community.

Communities as varied as Yakima, Gray’s Harbor, and Tri-Cities report partisan divides that impact people’s ability to work together as a community. One person mentioned “polarization on every issue of importance: needle exchange programs, health mandates, political positions.” She continued, “The scariest thing I’m seeing is an escalation in dehumanizing language and a decrease in the ability to have conversations and move through difficult topics.”

Some issues are specific to or more notable in certain regions: wealth inequality in the Methow Valley, economic distress following decline of the timber industry in Gray’s Harbor, high land prices due to farming and development in the Skagit Valley, the rise of data centers in the Quincy area. Some communities such as Ocean Shores are impacted by the seasonal influx of tourists.

Communities like Port Townsend, Ocean Shores, and the Columbia Gorge have a high number of retirees (many of whom volunteer). Several leaders we spoke to are retirees who moved to their smaller communities when they retired and got involved.

The biggest message from our rural members: you need to be here, spend time in our communities to understand us. Also, create points of access like the rural gatherings, and consult rural folks when policies are being developed to understand how they might work on the ground in rural areas.

A statewide group noted that there are special challenges with having regional staff who may feel more isolated, and also that the funding available and funder attitudes in different communities impacted what was feasible for them in different places, accelerating collaboration in some cases while retarding it in others.

Nonprofit serving immigrant communities reported cross-cultural communication issues and generational differences within their organizations. Poor experiences of being misunderstood by authorities, or not having government representatives from or familiar with their culture, lead some to avoid seeing medical care, vaccination, police assistance, etc.

Wishes for the nonprofit sector

If I had a magic wand...

More/enough funding

- Fix foundation grants—they are broken. We are put through hoops for such a small amount of money—it is shameful.
- Endless donors willing to let the nonprofit decide how to use the money
- Foundations throwing money at us with lower barriers
- More operating grants
- Consistent lines of funding
- Adequate/sustainable/unlimited funding
- Less complicated, more responsive grant system, with more focus on smaller groups/projects and rural areas
- Financial sustainability
- More access to capital campaign and improvement funds
- Diverse funding to ensure sustainability
- Brand new laptops for everyone
- Funds to different communities to create the unique kind of help they need: “Imagine if everyone from the Somali, African American, Latinx communities had access to every fund in their own language without having to know what to say in their applications.”

Pay equity/improved compensation

- Address the myth that you are doing the work because you have a good heart, and won't be compensated at the same rate as other sectors. “Nonprofit is our tax status, not our business plan.” “[People say] ‘That’s so nice that you work at a nonprofit.’ They don’t say that if you work in the for-profit sector.”

- Better understanding and transparency around salaries across the sector, real conversations to bring it up to par
- Access to healthcare
- Student loan forgiveness
- Compensation and care for our folks
- Shared healthcare option for nonprofits
- Adequate staffing

Respect for nonprofit work

- Equity in pay and in recognition, respect.
- Help nonprofits feel worthy to ask for what they need and deserve it
- Increased awareness of nonprofits and the work that is being done
- Appreciation for our work
- We need a lobby that speaks for nonprofits broadly. There is strength in numbers, and we don't have a way to garner that.

Volunteers

- More volunteers who get behind the work and recognize the value of nonprofits
- Open people's eyes and help them understand that they can help their neighbors
- Reliable volunteer base
- Good, strong board leadership
- Ability to recruit, train and maintain volunteers, and opportunities for volunteers to grow and have more impact and ownership
- All the volunteers you could use

Gatherings

- Ability to come together quarterly on a regional or statewide basis to have meaningful conversations (no worries about money, time, and resources)
- More statewide stuff in Spokane/Eastside, Spokane conference
- Conditions allow for us to gather in person
- Space to reunite in person again
- Committed communication so we can move through as a collective. Together, we make up the fabric of the community.
- Keep each other accountable and maintain connections

Learning and Growth

- No stagnation. Pandemic has taught us to be flexible and nimble.
- Ability to embrace change and equity while preserving parts of who we are and who we love/our rural character
- Monthly training to build our skills and knowledge
- Affordable training

Wellness

- Collective wellness within the nonprofit sector/promote mental health, wellness, paid time off
- Self-care real and discussed regularly
- Abundance not scarcity thinking
- Offering support when needed, being able to adapt
- “Own our culture, even the toxic and bad parts. Not in a way of holding a grudge, and remembering pain, but using it to improve all of our relationships. Understanding our past traumas in a way we can live with no trauma. Nobody has to be harmful to their neighbor just because they don’t have enough food or money.”

Meeting people’s needs

- People get what they need/are seeking from their nonprofit
- Service provided at 100%--community getting what they want

Equity and inclusion

- Everyone vigilant around anti-racism—understand and act
- Tolerance and acceptance across cultures

Public policy concerns

Nonprofit Compensation: The most often mentioned issue was nonprofit staff compensation, with folks mentioning pay equity, living wages, and pay equity with foundations. In addition, interviewees are interested in healthcare and benefits for staff, a pooled retirement plan option, and Public Service Loan Forgiveness.

The following advocacy issues were raised by a single person:

- news coverage of the sector is not positive
- changing the liquor and gambling rules affecting nonprofit fundraisers
- taxation

One person noted that we might find common cause with small businesses who face similar issues

A number mentioned issues that they work on related to the organization’s mission (housing and homelessness, child abuse, transportation, universal healthcare, etc.). Many respondents indicated that they participate in advocacy via their subsector coalition or association (Inspire WA, WA State Workforce Association, WA Association of Land Trusts, BIPOC ED Coalition, etc.)

Washington Nonprofits strengths and weaknesses

Strengths

- Washington State Nonprofit Conference
 - Keep doing the conference, getting people together. Get people talking to one another. I like table talks, getting together with peers. We need connection—we are our greatest supporters right now.
 - Loved the in-person conference in Bellevue
 - Conference: “The conference is amazing, being able to share the experience with our whole staff and use resources gained there internally is great.”
 - “That conference should be required for every ED, development person, board member. It opens our eyes and gets us out of our silos.”
 - “Great experience. Cool and reminded me why I like being in the nonprofit sector.”
 - “A lot of the people who help us right now, like 501 Commons, I met through the conference. I’m looking for organizations that do tech support, cyber security, because we’re all vulnerable. That platform you created is great for that.”
- Learning events
 - “I’ve been absorbing as many trainings as I possibly can and shared opportunities with our board and opened up a lot of good conversation with our board! Wonderful thing! Particularly the recordings being accessible afterwards and refer to. I want to highlight that!”
 - “My first year, I relied on Boards in Gear a lot.”
 - “Conversations about distributed decision-making and shared leadership are great.”
 - “The education I’ve gathered since taking this job is dramatic—because of Washington Nonprofits!”
 - Online resources and trainings are very accessible.
 - I loved the old “lunch and learns” in Spokane.
 - Good information and training
 - Good: trainings in my area and remote access
 - Loves Washington Nonprofits’ trainings, workshops, coaching, and attending ED coffee hours.
 - Finds our events and resources to be good quality and relevant, and always walks away with something useful.
 - The ability to stream classes is very beneficial. Going out to things is harder.
- Generally, a great resource
 - You all have been a resource in so many different ways.
 - Washington Nonprofits is a total resource hub for the nonprofit sector.
 - Examples and templates such as sample policies: “When I need something, it’s nice to log in and find what I need.”
 - We use member discounts, including Zoom, Spark grant writing, and more.
 - One-stop shop
 - Resource sharing is important.

- I think of you as a resource for nonprofits, kind of like our coalitions that help us with programmatic things.
- “I appreciate that you are there and keep in contact with us. You offer things for us. A good resource when we need it.”
- Having you as a central hub is very helpful.
- “Continuous awareness and information sent to my email on a consistent basis is beautiful.”
- People/customer service
 - “I appreciate conversations like this.”
 - “Someone seeking us out to have a conversation like this, that is very profound.”
 - The organization is responsive—people are good at getting back to me.
 - “The people—everyone I’ve met and everyone I’ve talked to has been so dedicated.”
 - Professional/positive experiences
 - “professional, capable, informative, valuable”
- Public policy work
 - Good job of advocacy
 - “I’m excited to hear about the policy work. We got a federal grant...it was very time-consuming, with arduous reporting requirements.”
 - “Good policy information. It is very helpful to know a group is paying attention to what’s happening in the legislature.”
- Misc./general comments
 - Free executive coaching
 - Good job providing for smaller nonprofits, more in common with smaller nonprofits than larger nonprofits.
 - “You’ve done a good job of a diverse group of people together. Learning from each other has been crucial. Scanning the membership list, it isn’t just focused on one tiny sector. There is diversity.”
 - Communication, information that you send out.
 - “The network and connections, especially in person.”
 - Communications

Weaknesses/Concerns

- Virtual webinars are not as personal, but easy to connect.
- “You exist in the virtual world, but you don’t exist in the real world. We don’t know as members how to connect.”
- Some offerings are expensive
- Brand recognition in their area
- “We need you to be stronger. You go get money and spend to find support to the community who can’t normally reach out to you. We file 501c3 and don’t know what the heck is going on. There is a lot of money during the COVID19 but we didn’t have the expertise to get it, you do. Or you get it and come back to help us.”

- “I think I’ve underutilized our membership in the past. Something you can do is make sure your offerings are front and center. I and my team don't really use it because it doesn't occur to anyone there is something to use for this problem.”
- “You really are a Seattle organization. I mean, I know you want to serve the state, but I don't think you understand the issues we face out here. We are small, rural, and volunteer-run, but we are also complex and tied into the politics of our region. It's not worth the time to just meet everyone who works in a rural organization in Washington State and commiserate. What can we do to fix things is the only conversation worth my time right now.”
- Several people indicated that they really didn’t know that much about us and couldn’t comment.
- “I have chosen not to renew my organization's membership. I was the only one using it and I am so overworked, I don't have the time for the training. I also think there is this view that all rural organizations are the same because we're "rural." Most of us at more organizations are relatively affluent and come from decades working in higher-level positions. I was going to gatherings where a Washington Nonprofits representative is telling me how to run a meeting or host a fundraiser, it was almost insulting. I need people who are from here who can bring more people to help us build something. I need help bringing us to the next level and bringing people into our work. I just don't think there is alignment right now between where we are and where the Association is. I'll still try to attend regional meetings and I'll ask if I have questions, but that's all the capacity I have right now.”
- I've never gotten anything with our membership. I read your policy emails, but they don't apply to us.

Opportunities for Improvement

Interviewees offered the following advice for us to improve our service:

- “Learn about who we are, sit at our table, eat at our table.”
- More partnership between WN, AFP and Puget Sound Grantwriters Association, Young Professional Nonprofit Network, etc. “It seems like everyone’s doing a version of training and capacity building. [You are] the right organization to bring these groups together to advance the cause sector wide. Perhaps host collaborative workshops or think creatively to leverage the power of all these groups together.”
- Expand on successful ED Coffee Hour. Create Development Director, Communications Director gatherings, too.
- Consider a mentorship program similar to the one AFP offers, matching new and established professionals
- Provide additional resources online.
Reach out to board members—talk with board members—both active and those who are not showing up. Find out why they aren’t participating.
- Meet and greet for board members.
- Short video overview of what WN does.

- Ask Eds: do you share this with your board? What could we change to engage them? Content is valuable, but ability to contact later is important as well. Board members need to get connected to other board members.
- Have supports for BIPOC board members. Racism is a dynamic in the boardroom.
- Reach out more to us small, all-volunteer organizations.
- Specific focus on smaller communities
- Reach out to Elks, other civic groups and encourage greater community service/involvement
- Make your resources cleaner and more streamlined, especially for volunteer stuff like boards. It is harder to convince board members to participate. Digital resources that are self-paced is helpful. Down and dirty foundational training sounds good.
- Offer templates, boiler plate language to help with board structure and policies.
- Explain very briefly how members can help in policy & advocacy. How can we comment and help? BRIEF - articles and to the point!! POINT first, not a long essay.

How Washington Nonprofits can support our members

Many indicated that they appreciate our existing supports, calling out in particular the conferences, workshops, and policy work (comments integrated with strengths above).

Recommendations/Requests:

- Learning events
 - More training on staff management
 - Workshops on different approaches to budgeting with peer sharing, and membership recruitment, retention, and support
 - Sharing of best practices and lessons learned
 - Quarterly board coffee hour to make resources more approachable
 - Consider a certification program
- Information
 - Information about legal changes to we should be aware of
 - Info about fiscal sponsorship
 - Funding/info about funding opportunities
 - Bank of sample policies
- Return to in-person events
 - “Get back to the business of in-person events—we need it.”
 - “The real value is talking to other organizations. I just don’t get that out of a Zoom meeting.”
- More connection:
 - Peer to peer engagement
 - Opportunities to connect with other nonprofits, e.g. rural gatherings
 - Help nonprofits connect within smaller communities

- Connection to other nonprofits, e.g. lunch and learns, bring folks together to discuss a topic
- Combat loneliness
- Individualized technical assistance
 - “We need someone to meet with us, learn with us, work with us. We try to go to a training, but everything is so fast. We can’t explain our problem and learn how it applies...In the bank community, they have a loan officer with a customer portfolio. They know who you are, your strengths and weaknesses and can help when you call. Something like that.”
 - One-on-one coaching/access to consultations
 - “We have a soccer program that supports over 140 boys and girls out of our own pocket. We don’t have money to sustain that. It would be nice if the coaches had support from you to start their own nonprofits. I still do not know how to become a nonprofit.”
 - Access to a grantwriter
- Invest in educating executive leaders: “I spent eight years in a labor camp. I have never been to school, now I am leading an organization that is growing. I can’t just walk away. That’s the type of capacity building I don’t see in grants. Invest in me.”
- Access to capital
- Assist us in understanding how to purchase a building and establish a center in our community that will not be vulnerable to rising costs and gentrification
- Help with scaling up and/or scaling down. We are dealing with unreliable funding.
- Advocacy about government funding processes
- Connection to grant funders and policymakers

Several people also noted the difficulty of engaging with Washington Nonprofits (due to factors outside Washington Nonprofits’ control):

- “Since COVID, it is hard to stay engaged.”
- “I have yet to make an ED coffee hour.”
- “You have good resources. My problem is that I am so busy that I don’t take the time to wade into it. I get so many emails that I can’t read them all. It’s hard to keep up with the training options.”

Conclusion

The feedback offered here is very valuable to our organization as we work to implement “Washington Nonprofits 2.0.” While there are some clear messages and areas of broad agreement, the input also reflects the diversity of our constituents and the difficulty of pleasing everyone in a very large and diverse sector. Our board and staff will take this information into consideration as we begin development of our new strategic plan and as we plan for programs in the coming months and years.

We will share this report back with our membership as well, because we are committed to “learning in public” and being accountable to our member nonprofits. Ultimately, we are an

association made up of our members, and our success truly depends on continuing participation by the nonprofit community of Washington State. We invite those who see opportunities for improvement to engage with us and assist us in evolving Washington Nonprofits to be the best nonprofit state association we can be. The nonprofit sector needs a champion and a hub for information and connection, and we are glad to be building an ever stronger organization.

Gratitude

We very much appreciate the input of leaders from the following 26 member organizations: Benton-Franklin Workforce Development Council, Children's Institute for Learning Differences (CHILD), New Hope, Children's Advocacy Centers of WA, Cambodian American Community Council of Washington, Community Partners of Bingen-White Salmon, Congolese Integration Network, Cowiche Canyon Conservancy, Dispute Resolution Center of Grays Harbor and Pacific Counties, Friends of the P.O.C. Library District, Leadership Spokane, Legal Counsel for Youth and Children, Lynden Community/Senior Center, Ocean Shores Food Bank, Pend Oreille Region Tourism Alliance, PT ReCyclery, Room One, Safe Harbor Free Clinic, Skagit Habitat for Humanity, Skamania County Chamber of Commerce, Somali Health Board, Spokane Jewish Family Services, Town Hall Seattle, Vancouver Farmers Market, WA State Native American Coalition Against Domestic Violence and SA, Whitman Hospital Foundation.