Keynote Address by CLPI President Elizabeth Heagy
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Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you all today. I'm thrilled that the Alliance for Arizona Nonprofits has declared 2007 **"The Year of Nonprofit Advocacy!"** You all have visionary leadership around nonprofit engagement in the policy process and I can say wholeheartedly that the Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest would love to do anything we can to support your unique efforts.

As many of you might know, a **Nonprofit Congress** convened in D.C. this past October after months of town hall meetings throughout the country. The purpose of the town hall meetings and the Congress was to identify the top priority issues for the nonprofit sector as identified by community-based nonprofits versus national groups out of Washington. CLPI was thrilled, when at the end of an extensive process, **Advocacy & Grassroots Activities** was selected as one of the top three priorities for the sector by delegates at the Congress. To launch my remarks as to why nonprofit public policy engagement is so critical, I want to start by reading why the delegates thought it should be a priority. Here is the list of responses to the question, "what are the long term implications of successfully addressing advocacy and grassroots activities?"

- Nonprofits will have a larger impact and be a powerful force to change public policy for the better
- Stronger relationships between nonprofits and our constituents
- Nonprofits will be on equal footing with government and business
- The face of nonprofits will change: organizations will have different skills sets, different types of supporters
- Nonprofits will be at the table when decisions are made
- Nonprofits will become a true partner with government
- The nonprofit sector will adopt a different way of thinking
- Nonprofits will have better visibility
- Communities will be stronger because nonprofits connect people to each other and help them to overcome a sense of powerlessness
- Increased civic participation will create social change
- Nonprofits have access to increased funding
- Better solutions to current problems
- Systemic change, rather than temporary band-aid solutions
- Nonprofits will no longer be needed because long-term issues are solved
- Government and the public will have realistic expectations of nonprofits' capacities and needs
- Root causes will be addressed
- Underrepresented organizations will have a voice

This list captures most of the "whys." Why nonprofit public policy engagement is critical and why it's a priority for this sector. To get into the "whys" in a deeper way, I want to outline the Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest's mission, as it serves as a good way to organize my comments.

CLPI's mission is to promote, support, and protect nonprofit advocacy and lobbying in order to: 1) strengthen participation in our democratic society and, most importantly, 2) advance charitable missions. I'm going to discuss these two "whys" in depth, the two "whys" that drive CLPI's work to encourage nonprofit engagement in the public policy process.

Strengthening Democracy

First, strengthening participation in our democracy. Nonprofit public policy engagement is a constitutionally protected right – under both the 1st Amendment right to free speech as well as the right to petition the government for redress of grievances. In order for these democratic rights to be meaningful, they need to be exercised.

Beyond exercising our constitutionally protected rights, engaging in the public policy process allows nonprofits to give voice to voices often not heard at the policymaking table. A true democracy includes all voices in the policymaking process. One of the key elements that distinguish public interest lobbying from special interest lobbying is that nonprofits lobbying for laws that support the public good are often representing the voices of their clients, the beneficiaries of their services, not the bottom line of a business or industry. Indeed, community-based nonprofits are the only institutions with a view of both the concerns most important to their constituents and the day-to-day realities of how government programs function and impact those constituents.

The most effective advocacy work occurs when an organization or coalition ensures that the under-represented voices of its program beneficiaries are front and center in making its case to policymakers. While hard facts can sell the need for a new law, personal stories are almost always as, or more, effective in making the case for change, especially if those stories and voices are those of constituents and multiplied many times over.

A quick story to illustrate this point … As shared in *So You Want to Make a Difference* by Nancy Amidei.

> Once upon a time, there was a fellow who was newly elected to the United States Senate. He was so pleased with himself after his election that the first time someone invited him to a fancy banquet he showed up early. In fact, he was so early he was practically the only one in the big hotel banquet hall. The only other person was the waitress, and she was doing her job: she was putting out the butter. Nothing else was going on so he watched her, and she went methodically about her work. Every time she saw a place, she put a pat of butter. Around the room she went: one plate, one pat of butter … one plate, one pat of butter … one plate, one pat of butter. Finally, she got to him. Giving her his best, most winning smile he said, "I really like butter. Think I could have another pat of butter?"

> "Sorry sir," she said. "I treat everyone the same: one plate gets one pat of butter." She went on about her work. He was not pleased (that is the polite version). He sat there for a minute, thinking about this, but when he looked around the room there was still hardly anyone in the place. So he got up and *he followed her* – she was working on another table by now. "Hhummph," he said, clearing his throat and looking straight at her, "maybe you don't know who *I* ***am*** - I'm a ***United States Senator!***"
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> "Maybe you don't know who ***I*** am,' she replied. "***I'm*** the one who gives out the butter."
> The moral of this story is that **Votes are like butter –** and ***we*** are the ones who give out the **butter!** As citizens, we have something every candidate and every elected official wants, from school board to president: they want our butter. They *want* a cholesterol hit! Every time we shake an elected official's hand and say where we live (I'm Nancy A., and I live in your District") they hear a little voice saying, "Butter, butter." And if we can identify with a coalition of organizations representing hundreds (or thousands!) of voters, that little voice turns into a veritable roar.
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> Ask elected officials which is more important to them, money? Or votes? And the answer is always the same: **votes.** The reason is also the same: they can always go outside of the District (where their voters live) for money, but they can never go outside of their District for votes. To get and stay in office they have to win over 51 percent of the people with the butter. That's us. Which is why each of us can be so powerful."

Quick question: How many letters or calls do you think it takes to get a legislator's attention on an issue? 500? 100? 50? 10? It's 10 at the federal level – for a member of Congress to start to pay attention to an issue, it takes 10 calls or letters (or visits) from constituents. Now, that is only to pay attention, and of course, if the constituent is a high level gatekeeper (a donor or person with access to a lot of votes) that might be all that's needed. But, to get action on that issue, it will take more. More pats of butter.

Nonprofits are well suited for this organizing of voices around critical community issues. It is what they are already doing every day working in coalition with others to deliver services, sharing your and your beneficiaries' stories, making decisions about priority issues and how they must be addressed. The translation of these skills to the policy arena is not a difficult one, especially when a strong foundation is laid.

The Arkansas affiliate of Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters ("HIPPY") laid such a foundation and was able to defeat proposed budget cuts for early childhood education. HIPPY strives to prevent academic underachievement of children when they enter school by increasing the degree and variety of literary experiences in the home. It is labor intensive and requires a significant investment of money, but study upon study show the tremendous return on investment for early childhood development programs. Arkansas HIPPY was armed with these studies, and had for years developed relationships with state policy makers, as well as an active network of other children's advocacy groups, to focus the state's attention on early childhood development. A major

budget cut would be disastrous. But, as soon as the organization got word about the proposed budget cuts, they were able to activate their networks and those relationships and blanket the legislature with contacts and specific asks not to cut early childhood programs. They did not wait for a crisis to hit to establish first-time contacts and go on the defensive, but instead spent time laying a foundation of relationships – media, policymakers, their own members, and coalition partners. When the time came, instead of being on the table, HIPPY was at the table and the proposed budget cuts were defeated.

Beyond budgets, importantly, when we look back at every social movement in this country (civil rights movement, child labor laws, women's suffrage), each began with broad advocacy and organizing efforts (more often than not, led by nonprofit organizations) and ended with the passage of specific legislation aimed at righting wrongs. We could add more recent changes – stricter laws against drunk driving and smoking, requirements for safe drinking water and clean air, civil rights, and many, many more. A just democracy DEPENDS on nonprofit engagement in public policymaking.

Advancing Charitable Missions

The second part to CLPI's mission – to the "why" we encourage nonprofit engagement in the public policy process, is to advance charitable missions. For most organizations, their mission and vision statements envision social change – be it a better, healthier environment, alleviation of homelessness or hunger, or equal opportunity in education, to name a few. Advocacy and lobbying are vehicles to these changes.

Let's think about this. Many organizations provide direct services to meet needs and advance their missions. For example, a food bank's mission might be to feed the hungry but the vision statement under which it operates will likely envision the alleviation of hunger. To meet their mission, they will provide certain direct services such as an accessible food bank to ensure the hungry in the community are fed. However, is this direct service likely to fully achieve the organization's mission and vision? It will help for sure, but as individuals are fed, more with that need will appear because there will still be hunger in the community. But, what if the group also focused on the passage of a law that targeted the root causes of hunger in that community? Root causes witnessed first-hand by the organizations serving those needs. In addition to dealing with the issue person-by-person, a law could potentially address the root of the problem – truly advancing the organization's ultimate vision to alleviate hunger in the community.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving provides many services to the victims of crashes caused by drunk driving, including accompanying them to court, providing resources, helping families to get counseling. As important as these services are to individual families, they don't attack the cause of these tragedies – drunk driving. That is why MADD also has worked to change laws – helping raise the legal drinking age, lowering the amount of alcohol drivers can have in their bloodstream, getting bars to close earlier, and much more. As a result, MADD has helped bring about a dramatic change in attitudes about drinking and driving – leading to changes in laws. Since 1980, there has been a 44 percent reduction in alcohol-related traffic deaths and more than 300,000 lives have been saved.

Sometimes providing services and operating programs is not enough. Sometimes, lobbying for the people and causes you are serving can be a nonprofit's best and most effective service. As the noted church leader Paul H. Sherry has pointed out: "The primary role of voluntary associations in American life is to continually shape and reshape the vision of a just social order, ...to argue for that vision with other contenders in the public arena, and to press for adoption and implementation. For voluntary associations to do less than that is to abdicate their civic responsibility."

Public policy engagement can also advance charitable missions by leveraging dollars to a greater good. When the Alzheimer's Association of the Greater D.C. area received an unexpected $140,000 gift, the initial reaction was to dedicate the money to direct services and research. A few board members, however, advocated dedication of the gift to fund a government relations position at the chapter to educate policymakers on their issues. The decision was made to hire a part-time person to lobby at the state level in MD and D.C. This decision saw tremendous long-term impacts – the most concrete of which was the passage of a law to subsidize respite care for Alzheimer's patients' families. The law provided about $1 million a year in respite care subsidies for families who could not otherwise afford it. In other words, investing some of that $140,000 in lobbying produced much more in services for Alzheimer's families than if all of that money had been put into direct services.

The George Gund Foundation in Ohio has invested in its grantees by providing grants to identify and train public policy staff. The Foundation is currently funding 25 to 30 such positions. For food banks alone, the funding of a staff position at Second Harvest resulted in a $6 million budget line item for food banks in Ohio. The Foundation estimates that the public policy positions have resulted in about $100 million in new funds for human services by the Ohio General Assembly in the last biennium.

We have spoken quite a bit about the why – but there are two additional major points to emphasize, **the law** concerning nonprofit public policy engagement and then, **how to get started** or strengthen your current efforts.

Not only is nonprofit public policy engagement critical to strengthening our democracy and advancing charitable missions – it's LEGAL! Absolutely, 100% legal – whether you call it advocacy, educating, or lobbying. All that is required is that you track your activities in this arena and report actual lobbying expenditures on your annual 990. 501(c)(3) organizations are somewhat limited in how much they can spend on actual lobbying (work on specific legislation), but those limitations are extremely generous for the vast majority of organizations. So, the law should never be an impediment to advancing your mission through public policy engagement.

An additional barrier to nonprofit engagement is lack of capacity and a skills set to get started. With stretched budgets and staff, it is understandable that organizations are reticent to take on another component. However, one of our favorite sayings at CLPI is "making the extraordinary ordinary." Public policy engagement does not necessarily mean a full time staff person and a sophisticated public policy agenda. There are three

primary infrastructure pieces that should be in place for an organization to get started and develop a strong foundation:

1) A **Board policy** on how issues are selected and prioritized. This can be a short or extensive policy, but should outline criteria for the policy issues your organization will address and a process for Board approval.

2) A **Public policy agenda or plan**. How will your organization address these issues? What are the priorities and who is responsible? This can be done in conjunction with other planning processes such as strategic planning. And, as we all know, while planning can take some time, it is always worth the up front investment. And, your public policy plan might be as simple as laying out one policy issue in which your organization will engage and could be as simple as joining an already established coalition, or as extensive as mapping out a leadership strategy.

3) **A Tracking system.** Once you have decided who is responsible (this could be a full time position, part of an existing position, a volunteer, a Board committee), make sure there is a system to track their work, especially when it is lobbying. This can simply be done by adding a lobbying section to timesheets and ensuring the tracking of actual expenditures.

Three infrastructure pieces: a Board policy, a public policy plan, and a tracking system. There will be some upfront work in putting these pieces in place, but it will pay off in a well-thought out commitment to advancing policy change, and thus your mission.

Advocacy and lobbying by nonprofit organizations strengthens our democracy by ensuring that voices not normally represented have a seat at the table. Engagement by nonprofits advances charitable missions beyond what direct services alone can do – and leverages dollars for the greater good. It's legal and a little planning can put your organization on the path to effective engagement. But, above all else: if not us, then who? Who's going to give voice to voices not often heard at the policymaking table?