



# Nonprofit Service Organizations **AND** Civic Engagement



Addressing  
Challenges  
and Moving  
Forward

## PLANNING COMMITTEE



Carnegie Corporation  
Rockefeller Brothers Fund

Alliance for Children and Families  
Minnesota Council on Nonprofits  
Nonprofit Voter Engagement Project

Building Movement Project



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# Executive Summary

In March 2007, a group of people from around the country gathered in Detroit to discuss how to enhance the work of nonprofit service organizations in building democracy in the U.S. The purpose of the meeting was to:

- Bring funders and practitioners together to advance the dialogue on how social service providers can strengthen their role as sites of democratic practice.
- Identify strategies to promote and support a larger proportion of nonprofit service organizations to invest in long-term civic engagement work with their constituencies.
- Develop specific next steps to broaden the conversation and move this work forward.

The day-and-a-half long meeting was sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and planned by a committee that included these two foundations, the Building Movement Project, Alliance for Children and Families, Minnesota Council on Nonprofits and the Nonprofit Voter Engagement Project.

The participants agreed that service agencies could be important sites of civic engagement based on their position as trusted institutions, their reach into communities, and their mission-driven work. We discussed a continuum of strategies for civic engagement that can be adopted by service providers and other nonprofit groups, especially in terms of how groups can significantly involve their client/constituents in their communities.

The participants agreed to the following three priorities that could be accomplished within a year. A small group volunteered to help accomplish the goal in each of the areas listed below:

1. **Outcome Measurements** – Individual, organizational, and societal benefits as a result of civic engagement can be difficult to communicate and evaluate. Nonprofit service groups rarely attract support for civic engagement efforts unless they

have concrete ways to measure outcomes and tools by which to communicate success. In the next year, both quantitative and qualitative measures of civic engagement will be developed for nonprofit service organizations.

**2. Branding Civic Engagement** – The term “civic engagement” is hard to understand and has little general appeal. Marketing experts are needed to help translate “civic engagement” into something that appeals both to a mass market and to targeted audiences. A small group of participants will explore whether there is interest from funders in conducting a branding campaign. If so, in the next year they will develop a set of recommendations on how civic engagement can be made more visible and attractive.

**3. Interactive Tools for Training** – Civic engagement practices need to be integrated into the training of nonprofit staff and boards. A new set of interactive civic engagement training techniques and tools will be created. They will be designed for wide distribution through nonprofit service networks.

In addition, participants made commitments to actions in their own areas such as:

- Integrating civic engagement into boards of directors’ activities.
- Finding ways foundations can encourage civic activities.
- Influencing nonprofit networks to promote this work.
- Identifying ways participants can share information.

At the end of the meeting people volunteered to work in certain areas and discuss which resources would be necessary to maintain momentum on this issue.



# Introducing Civic Engagement into Nonprofit Service Organizations

Nonprofit service organizations in the U.S. have contact with millions of people in need each year. As a result, local communities often view them as places where the neglected and forgotten can receive critical services.

In March 2007, there was a national convening on how nonprofit service organizations can support client and constituent civic involvement. The meeting was planned by the Alliance for Children and Families, Building Movement Project, Carnegie Corporation, Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, National Voter Engagement Network and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. Each organization had an interest in promoting constituent participation in community civic life. The six conveners, along with others around the U.S., have been exploring how different forms of civic engagement can be integrated into the work of the nonprofit sector, especially among those groups providing services.

There are several reasons why service providers play an important role in civic engagement:

1. Services groups have a substantial reach into low-income and other marginalized communities, especially with constituents who are left out of civic participation.
2. The nonprofit sector comprises 10 percent of the nation's workforce. Eighty-five percent of nonprofit organizations work in health care, education or human services. These organizations have an extensive infrastructure and base that can be mobilized in their communities and beyond.
3. Nonprofit groups are mission-driven; they care about the people they serve. Their connection to constituents allows them to have a powerful role in building democracy.

This report describes what took place during the convening. The program began with presentations of three different approaches to how service providers integrate civic engagement into their work. Following the presentation of these case studies, there was a discussion of both the levers for successful work and the barriers to implementation. Participants then focused on the key obstacles to civic engagement activities ranging

from fear of change to the need for identifiable outcomes. The next day, they took six key barriers and worked in small groups to identify solutions. The meeting ended with participants making individual commitments to actions that would promote service organizations as sites of civic engagement. The group as a whole selected three areas to work on together in the coming year.

The meeting was kicked off with three examples of how organizations or networks had integrated civic engagement into their service work.

## Three Case Studies

### Working in Coalitions (Michael Weekes and George Pillsbury)

George Pillsbury from the Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network talked about their model of working with nonprofit service groups to encourage staff members and constituents/clients to vote in local elections. After seven years, they have a proven track record of engaging large numbers of residents who participate in the electoral process through their nonprofit networks. They begin by knocking on doors of nonprofit groups, asking for their participation, and giving them tools (information, support, methodology) and confidence (evidence of impact) that they can make a difference.

Michael Weekes from the Massachusetts Council of Human Service Providers (MCHSP) talked about how to overcome the disconnect between the human service sector and government. He found that organizations need to see and value the importance of their own engagement as well as the engagement of constituents.

Michael—whose organization supports the Voter Engagement work in Massachusetts—emphasized the importance of giving back the work. That meant making sure that organizations' staff, board and constituents met with policy makers on issues such as budget allocations and policies rather than relying on experts. He did this by:

- Organizing people around the values of their work;
- involving all levels of the organization including the board of directors;
- helping to strengthen the relationships between different types of nonprofit organizations; and,
- recognizing results.

### Family and Children Service Organizations (Molly Greenman and Linda Nguyen)

Molly Greenman and Linda Nguyen talked about integrating civic engagement into an

organization's operations and culture. Molly directs Minneapolis' Family and Children's Service, which has a long history of involving constituents. They place the emphasis on allowing clients to have real input in the direction and activities of the organization. Thousands of their constituents have been involved in various issues through popular education and organizing.

Family and Children's Service is one of the sites for New Voices at the Civic Table run by the Alliance for Children and Families. They used the funds to extend their work with the Hmong community on issues that are important to them. The Hmong New Voices effort had community members engaged around public benefits and ESL resources. Molly talked about the overall challenge of linking the work—between service, organizing, policy/advocacy, and civic engagement—so all departments were strategically aligned in their work for change and increased constituent power.

Linda Nguyen from the Alliance for Children and Families explained in more detail the New Voices at the Civic Table program where groups from the Alliance membership applied for small grants to involve constituents in democratic process skills-building and civic participation. Linda found that of the organizations that expressed interest, many were not yet able to engage constituents. In addition, groups had trouble integrating this work because of already overstretched organizations and staffs, the need for training, and the lack of a process or methodology to identify the right issues/clients to engage. Additional resources did seem to help groups move through these challenges.

## Looking at Organizational Change (Brother Ray Stadmeier and Linda Campbell)

Brother Ray works at the Capuchin Soup Kitchen in Detroit, an operation that takes no public funds and runs on \$8 million per year. He discussed how the Soup Kitchen, founded on a charity model in the Depression, began to wonder how they could change their approach in order to help people become independent. Linda Campbell from the Building Movement Project worked with the Soup Kitchen on thinking about this change. She met regularly with a group of lay and religious staff members to discuss why there was so much hunger in Detroit. Through these learning sessions the staff members began to think in new ways about their work and the people that used their services.

As the staff members looked at their values, such as compassion, hospitality, and “justice for all creation”, they began to change how they approached the soup kitchen's activities, finding ways to give their clients more ownership. The result was to move from seeing clients as “them” to seeing them as part of “us”.

The process of involving Soup Kitchen clients has required new skills such as offering support to a group of homeless men who started a bakery and integrating social change values into the organization. Now the Soup Kitchen is considering what it can do on a policy level. Brother Ray and Linda pointed out that not all staff members working at the kitchen have embraced this model, especially those wedded to a more traditional social service model.

## Common Themes

Common themes that emerged from the case studies included:

- Values are at the core of the work.
- There is a continuum of how groups can be involved in civic engagement and the role staff/constituents can play.
- Leadership is needed at many levels, including on the part of the executive director and the boards of directors.
- People need to have a belief that change is possible.
- Organizations have to overcome fear (legal, financial, sharing power, etc).

# Getting to Civic Engagement

In small groups, participants were asked to list what is needed for service organizations to become involved in civic engagement. Each group looked at *what has to change for an organization to be able to do this work?*

Some key issues that were identified included:

- The whole organization needs to be involved, including boards and staff members, volunteers, and clients.
- Work in this area must complement what an already stretched staff is trying to accomplish.
- Outcomes are important both to find funding and to understanding the strategies and goals.
- Civic engagement should be institutionalized; it takes several years to build a culture of civic engagement and a much shorter time to dismantle it if it's not woven into the fabric of the work.
- Groups need help in addressing issues of power, including who gains and who loses in our society and why.
- Organizations should be offered many ways to enter this work.



- Partnerships with other organizations help to build civic engagement and reduce the fear of isolation.
- In addition to service providers, different types of groups like arts and education, organizing groups, churches, and environmental organizations, can participate in civic engagement.
- Certain types of groups have experience in integrating service, advocacy, and organizing such as those serving immigrant populations. We can learn from their experiences.
- Funding and other resources give organizations the space and support to figure out ways to integrate civic engagement into their work.
- Civic engagement needs to be packaged in a way so that (1) we understand what it means and (2) it is more appealing to a wider group of people.

## Barriers for Service Organizations Promoting Civic Engagement

Participants were asked to discuss the various difficulties that groups faced in adopting civic engagement strategies and practices. A long list was developed. These were then grouped into six major barriers, including lack of vision and leadership, a resistant organizational culture, the need for outcome measures and viable partnerships, and the importance of addressing fear. Small groups met to present ideas to overcome these barriers. The results are described below and included looking at the barriers through a race/ethnicity/immigration status and economic/class lens.

### 1. Vision

To integrate civic engagement into their work, nonprofits need to have a vision that gives the organization a clear sense of where civic engagement leads and why it is important. Here are some ways to develop and integrate a civic engagement vision into service organizations:

- Understand that civic engagement is both a means and an end.
- Recognize the ways that nonprofits are already using civic engagement, and highlight and build on that vision.
- Encourage risk-taking to broaden the existing vision in the organization.
- Acknowledge and seek to understand the role of power in the vision and how to support and expand the power of constituents.
- Identify structural barriers to moving towards the vision, especially as they relate to constituent participation.

## 2. Leadership

Expanding service work to include civic engagement requires leadership, including the willingness to move staff and board members, and integrating civic engagement into the core work of delivering services. Actions to encourage leadership in this area include:

- Incorporating civic engagement into the mission of the organization, add it to job descriptions, and get buy-in at all levels including the board, CEO, staff and volunteers.
- Providing staff members with training and case studies of how to incorporate civic engagement into their daily activities.
- Having foundations take leadership by emphasizing the need to include and support civic engagement activities and practices for themselves and their grantees.
- Integrating civic engagement into CEO tracks at major conferences and gatherings.

## 3. Organizational Culture

Groups need to learn how to weave civic engagement into the fabric of their organizations. It was recommended that groups could accomplish this in several ways:

- Educate staff and board members on the value of longer-term systemic change and the importance of constituent involvement in making that change (e.g. higher return on investment).
- Integrate civic engagement into existing organizational values and build on what is already being done—no matter how small—in this area.
- Examine how race, ethnicity, and economic background affect civic engagement work, especially shifts in power to constituents.
- Articulate results and measure how the organization is progressing and reward and recognize the process.

## 4. Outcomes

For service organizations to be able to embrace and support civic engagement, they need to define outcomes for both the process and results. This includes the following activities:

- Develop a shared language and understanding of civic engagement, and the domains through which change can occur, such as personal, community, policy, practices, public institutions and so on.
- Build expertise and tap into existing work using case examples of different models. Look for evidence of success, such as before and after perspectives.
- Articulate the structures (as a measure of success) that need to be in place for civic engagement to be sustained outside of a single individual or organization.

- Obtain support of funders to help groups develop, implement and modify qualitative and quantitative outcome measures.

## 5. Partnership/Collaboration

Civic engagement goes beyond a single organization or approach. It requires a whole infrastructure that links on-the-ground engagement with policy and advocacy where different groups take on different roles. People need to work across sectors and silos to:

- Develop incentives to build this infrastructure and make sure that partners reflect the race, class and cultures of those that need to be engaged.
- See poverty not as individual responsibility but a systemic issue. Use a theory of social change to identify what needs to be addressed.
- Find time and resources to develop relationships and trust and find appropriate roles for different groups.
- Develop clear expectations and goals.

## 6. Fears

Service organizations are not always seen as risk-takers and may fear integrating civic engagement into their work because of perceived legal, funding and other possible consequences.

- Civic engagement should be “normal” behavior of nonprofit service groups. Groups need simple tools describing what they can (rather than cannot) do.
- Funders, elected officials and business leaders should model and embrace the work of civic engagement assuring providers that it does not deter from their work. For example, funders could encourage legal advocacy and engagement in their grant letters.
- Groups should address legitimate fears, especially in communities of color where fears of negative repercussions run strong.
- The process needs to be demystified using examples such as service learning, mentoring relationships, etc. Develop new and innovative ways to train people.

## Outcomes for the Next Year

The meeting ended with participants making individual commitments and with the group selecting three outcomes they would work on together in the next year. Some examples of individual commitments were:

- Working with the National Council of Nonprofit Associations to integrate civic engagement more clearly into their policy work.
- Meeting of service providers and funders in Minneapolis/St. Paul to talk about ways to move the work forward in the next six months.

- Inviting United Way to reconsider its outcome measures to include civic engagement.
- Finding ways to train Catholic Charities affiliates on Social Service/Social Change.

Three major commitments embraced by the full group are listed below.

**1. Outcome Measurements** – Individual, organizational, and societal benefits stemming from civic engagement can be difficult to communicate and evaluate. Further, nonprofit service groups can rarely attract support for civic engagement efforts unless they have concrete ways to measure outcomes and tools by which to communicate change and success. By next year, participants will have both quantitative and qualitative measures of civic engagement for nonprofit service organizations.

**2. Branding Civic Engagement** – The term “civic engagement” is hard to understand and has little general appeal. Marketing experts are needed to help translate “civic engagement” into something that appeals both to a mass market and to targeted audiences. A small group of participants will explore whether there is interest from funders on a branding campaign. If so, in the next year they will come up with a set of recommendations on how civic engagement can be made more visible and attractive.

**3. Interactive Tools for Training** – To integrate civic engagement practices into the training of nonprofit staff and boards, a group of participants will develop strategies and tools for interactive trainings that can be widely distributed through nonprofit service networks for their organizations’ staff, board and other volunteer members, and program participants. This will be done in the next year.

The meeting ended with participants remarking on what they would take away. They praised the caliber of the discussion, what they learned, and the inspiration from hearing other people’s stories and commitment.

To continue the momentum generated by the meeting and to move forward on the individual and group outcomes, the planning committee was charged with finding the needed resources for continuing this work for the coming year.

## Attendees List

**Marcia Avner**  
Minnesota Council of Nonprofits

**Ben Biswanger**  
Case Foundation

**Linda Campbell**  
Building Movement Project -- Detroit

**Lisa Carr**  
Lutheran Services of America

**Amy Crawford**  
The Jay and Rose Phillips Family Foundation

**Christine Doby**  
Charles Stewart Mott Foundation

**Jeannie Fox**  
Minnesota Council of Nonprofits

**Chris Gates**  
PACE

**Peter Goldberg**  
Alliance for Children and Families

**Molly Greenman**  
Children and Family Services

**Candy Hill**  
Catholic Charities

**Frances Kunreuther**  
Building Movement Project

**David Lagstein**  
Michigan ACORN

**Kate Levin Markel**  
MacGregor Foundation

**Geri Mannion**  
Carnegie Corporation of New York

**Linda Nguyen**  
Alliance for Children and Families

**Lisa Oliver-King**  
Our Kitchen Table

**George Pillsbury**  
National Nonprofit Voter Engagement Project

**Brenda Price**  
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation

**Taleb Salhab**  
ACCESS

**Ben Shute**  
Rockefeller Brothers Fund

**Erin Skene**  
Michigan Nonprofit Association

**Brother Jerry Smith**  
Capuchin Soup Kitchen

**Brother Ray Stadmeier**  
Capuchin Soup Kitchen



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