

“Listen and Learn” Nonprofit Convening Report 2015

In the summer and fall of 2014, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving held a series of 12 convenings by sector to learn more about what our nonprofit partners are seeing as trends in the field, challenges, potential opportunities, and gaps in service. Staff also asked for feedback and ideas about how we could provide better service and prioritize grant funding. Over 120 agencies and 150 individuals participated in the dialogues (see participant list at the end of this document). The information will help us to respond to identified gaps and create opportunities where our funding can have more impact for nonprofits and their clients. The following is a summary of the key themes heard across sectors followed by a short summary of issues expressed by each sector.

In general, participants noted that demand for services is higher than ever and there is a general climate of uncertainty concerning both funding and policy. Some of the key themes discussed include:

- The economy is still taking its toll on communities with concentrations of low- to moderate-income households, and poverty is a fundamental issue impacting the overall well-being of families and children.
- Significant progress will not be made in these areas without coordination of and changes to systems and policies.
- Many nonprofits cite employment as a critical barrier for clients. The lack of entry-level jobs and the lack of skilled workers affect the clients of agencies whether the agency provides basic human needs, literacy instruction, or housing.
- Nonprofits themselves have difficulty finding a sufficient number of trained employees, as wages for nonprofit staff have stagnated and talent is lost to the private sector or the State.
- Community-wide planning is critical to success in creating lasting outcomes. While effective community-wide planning models were discussed in areas such as housing, participants would like to see more planning across sectors.

Overview of Key Themes

<p>Funding</p>	<p>Funding is a primary concern for the sustainability of the nonprofit sector. State budget cuts mean agencies are being asked to do more with less and often are asked to take on work formerly performed by the State. The State, a primary funder of many organizations, provides modest overhead for programming and often requires nonprofits to spend dollars first and be reimbursed later. Participants emphasized that advocacy for the nonprofit sector is badly needed at the State level. Corporate funding is down and most local businesses cannot afford the major community investments they have made in the past. Funding from foundations is uncertain as funders change priorities, reduce grant sizes, or limit when agencies can request continued funding. Fewer unrestricted dollars are available although this is the type of support that is needed to maintain operations. Sustainable funding is hard to find in this environment and agencies encourage local funders to collaborate more to sustain quality programming.</p>
<p>Collaboration</p>	<p>Nonprofits are increasingly willing to collaborate, but collaborations present a number of challenges. The Coordinated Access Network model was cited as a positive example on how this can work; however, this type of activity is expensive, and many funders do not pay for the true cost of collaboration. Small, largely volunteer organizations can work more efficiently by collaborating. Participants noted that collective impact is needed to address systemic issues, but it may take years and may never be self-sustaining. Leadership and ongoing investment by many funders is needed to support these types of projects.</p>
<p>Leadership, Staff, and Volunteers</p>	<p>Leadership across sectors is aging and there is concern about who will take over once current leaders retire. Organizations want to develop talent within their agencies but are not able to offer competitive pay or benefits. They train good people and then lose them to higher paying jobs offered by the State or the private sector. Wages in the sector are stagnating, creating an underclass of staff that would be eligible for the social services many of their organizations provide. Some of the same issues apply to volunteers and board members. Volunteers are aging and participation in voluntary activities is declining. Some agencies have been successful in recruiting and retraining younger volunteers but this requires new models of engagement.</p>

Communication and Marketing	<p>Some sectors have formalized channels of communication to share best practices and resources, but most do not. In addition to the need for greater communication with each other, the marketing of individual agencies or of whole sectors is another key gap. Some agencies feel that the public, legislators, and donors do not know enough about their issues, and they struggle to determine how best to get the word out. Marketing of programs and events is a critical need for most agencies but is also something that is not in their budgets, particularly for small agencies. While using social media is affordable, organizations are still figuring out how to most effectively reach different audiences.</p>
Outcomes and Data	<p>Funding is increasingly data-driven and funders require data rather than observations to identify problems. Much nonprofit work is difficult to measure, and outcomes may take years to materialize. Without sufficient technology, it is also hard to know if cost efficiency is being achieved or if outcomes are being met. There is a concern that measurable outcomes are being focused on to the detriment of programs. For example, for many funders academic outcomes are becoming the only measure of success of youth programming, leaving out the social/emotional competencies that are critical to successful youth development. Numbers do not always show the real impact of their work.</p>

Adult Literacy and Workforce Organizations

Trends in the Field	Strengths	Challenges	Gaps in Service
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employers realize that they need a trained workforce and are looking to train people they might otherwise have turned away. • Digital literacy is now a key component of adult literacy programs. • Programs are serving older workers, including the long-term unemployed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contextualized learning is gaining traction. • Communication and collaboration among providers has come a long way, still more work to do. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adult students come with multiple challenges. • The new online GED is more difficult for students. • Staffing is fragmented, can't offer benefits to staff that work 4 hrs/week. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The most successful programs include wrap-around services, however these services are not typically available with current funding. • Adult literacy programs are very career-focused, there is a need to balance this focus with the need for family literacy. • Need some sort of marketing. People don't know about this issue and the best ways to address it. • Need greater connections to the business community.

Advocacy and Legal Organizations

Trends in the Field	Strengths	Challenges	Gaps in Service
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding is increasingly data-driven and funders require hard data to identify problems versus on the ground observations. • Federal and State funding is flat. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is progress in the area of collaboration. Organizations notice a greater willingness to work together on common goals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy is difficult to measure and outcomes may take years to materialize. • Working with the State and the schools is necessary, but these entities move very slowly. • It is hard to keep staff when agencies can't offer competitive salaries. • Sustaining projects is difficult. • Client issues are complex and time-consuming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding for advocacy and policy work is hard to find. • Policy capacity in the state is poor in general. There isn't a single statewide policy center like many other states. • Policy focus tends to be on the city/regional level versus the state level.

Arts Organizations (Medium and Large)

Trends in the Field	Strengths	Challenges	Gaps in Service
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some arts organizations have closed in the past few years due to the economy. • Subscriptions are down and organizations rely more on single ticket sales. • Many funders emphasize education and STEM which has led to a change in arts education programming. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The region has many arts organizations that are recognized nationally for their quality programming. • The arts are an economic driver for the region. • There are efforts to make arts accessible to more audiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is little collective advocacy on behalf of the arts. • The perception of Hartford as unsafe means many will not travel into the city. • Being in constant survival mode limits creativity. • There is financial pressure to focus on attracting larger audiences; this sometimes leads to programming that strays from mission. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collective marketing of the region's arts and culture resources is important yet lacking. • The opportunity for innovation is often lacking because funding to go above and beyond regular programming is not available.

Arts Organizations (Small)

Trends in the Field	Strengths	Challenges	Gaps in Service
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education has become a major focus for funders, and therefore a focus for arts nonprofits. • Funders are looking for greater collaboration and greater evidence of community impact, which can be difficult to measure. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audiences for the most part have grown over the past few years. • Organizations are beginning to align themselves with the Common Core. There is now more data to show that the arts can have an impact on kids' test scores. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff feel stretched thin, stressed and overwhelmed. • Patrons often have trouble paying for the services of small arts organizations. • Working with the schools can be a challenge, transportation in particular is difficult. • Volunteers are declining. Young volunteers often lack the skills needed to be effective. • Lack of funding and staff capacity hold organizations back from starting new programs or implementing new ideas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marketing of programs and events is a critical need for most agencies. Most do not have marketing dollars in their budget. • Organizations need help with audience and donor development.

Community Development Organizations

Trends in the Field	Strengths	Challenges	Gaps in Service
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Families are struggling to make a living wage. Employment is still a critical issue, and barriers such as a criminal record, housing and transportation are difficult to overcome. Corporations can't afford major community investments in this economy. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The nonprofit community is better about coming together on one sole big issue, ex., homelessness. Organizations are working to build off of existing assets in the community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scaling up great programs so that they can have a greater impact is difficult. The community lacks an overall plan. Need to be connecting the small individual projects to an overall sustainability plan and build on the assets already there. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuals need more services focused on developing and maintaining credit. Collaboration around community development is needed but a backbone organization and leadership are missing. More efforts to engage residents in community development work are needed.

Environmental Organizations

Trends in the Field	Strengths	Challenges	Gaps in Service
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Environmental organizations are making efforts to link their work with economic development projects. Nonprofits are increasingly being asked to pick up the work of the State. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Land trusts are finding more ways to collaborate. Volunteer coordinators have been critical to the success of many organizations. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many organizations are finding it hard to attract leadership, board members and volunteers, particularly young people. Environmental nonprofits are competing for the same individual donors. Many rely on State funding, which is decreasing. It's harder to get funding for prevention, even though remediation costs more. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Other states have had great success with land conservation by funding capacity building of land trusts. The CT DEEP is drastically underfunded. Greater collaboration can increase efficiency and grow impact, particularly for small organizations. There is a need for more nonprofit voices on legislative issues.

Health Organizations

Trends in the Field	Strengths	Challenges	Gaps in Service
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Affordable Care Act has created uncertainty for all providers. • With more hospitals merging and for-profit health providers entering the state, nonprofits are waiting to see how all of these changes will affect them. • Organizations are serving an aging population with changing needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More organizations are beginning to look at health care holistically and use multi-disciplinary models. • There is a desire among many health nonprofits to work together. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Availability of health services for low-income populations is still a critical issue. • Most organizations do not have coordinated electronic medical records, do not know other services a patient is accessing. Hard to know if costs are being reduced. • Current workforce lacks diversity (ex., there are few bilingual clinicians). • It is not easy to partner with hospitals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health navigators and health literacy are needed as the system becomes more and more complicated. • There is a need for more care coordinators, but most funders do not want to fund this. • While there has been a huge shift in the number of insured, the provider network has not expanded. • Few staff have the skills to work in a multi-disciplinary model.

Historical Societies and Museums

Trends in the Field	Strengths	Challenges	Gaps in Service
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looking at the work with community and economic development in mind, not just preservation. • The work used to be about preserving objects, now more about education using those objects. • Latest social studies framework is focused on inquiry-based learning, which is what museums promote. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audiences are up due to more engaging exhibits. There is some worry that while fun, these activities may dilute the mission. • New local leadership is thinking about communication and engagement in different ways. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Membership is down; many are rethinking old membership and fundraising models. • All agencies depend heavily on volunteers but the volunteer base is declining and aging. • Funding collections and maintenance of facilities is difficult. • It is hard to measure results of programming accurately. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizations are still figuring out how to use social media to reach different audiences. • While the communities they serve are diverse, audiences still are not. Organizations need to think about programming differently to bring in new audiences.

Human Service Organizations

Trends in the Field	Strengths	Challenges	Gaps in Service
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is decreased funding from the government and an expectation for nonprofits to do more. Human service nonprofits in particular carry a large burden of state cuts. • Increased credentialing is required for staff. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a greater tendency for more authentic collaboration. • Organizations are forming coordinated access networks (shelters are an initial model of this work). This type of works costs more money and many funders do not want to pay for the true cost of collaboration. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most nonprofits rely on government funding, which is structured poorly. Overhead levels are very low and nonprofits must often spend the dollars first and then be reimbursed. • Wages in the sector are stagnating, despite increased credentialing requirements, creating an underclass of staff that would be eligible for the social services the very organization provides. • Getting staff with the skills needed is difficult. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration is key to providing great services and more coordination is still needed. Funding for collaboration is lacking. • Organizations wish there were better technology systems to track clients across different services. • Advocacy is needed on the State level as the government seems to be getting more punitive in its oversight.

Multi-Service Organizations

Trends in the Field	Strengths	Challenges	Gaps in Service
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funding is increasingly uncertain, funders are changing priorities, and nonprofits are being asked to do more with less. • Fewer unrestricted dollars are available. Not all quality work is new and innovative. • More middle class people have fallen into poverty and have different issues. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The multi-service agency initiative was critical and many organizations are still reaping the benefits of increased capacity. • The Coordinated Access Network has increased collaboration among agencies and improved services in the region. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There are new requirements for State grants, but funding has not gone up to allow agencies to meet the requirements. • Multi-service orgs get hit on many different fronts. They do not have the resources or infrastructure to be at all tables at all times. • Funders look for sustainability but there really isn't a channel for sustaining programs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jobs require more credentialing and the talent pool is small. • There is a need to build talent within as leadership is aging. • There is a need for better technology to help measure outcomes. • Organizations suffer when most grants have limited overhead allowances.

Shelters and Housing Organizations

Trends in the Field	Strengths	Challenges	Gaps in Service
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The economy is still having an impact on housing. Employment is still difficult to find for many. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Veterans are being served better due to increased advocacy and funding. • Increased collaboration and effectiveness in the sector (ex., State Department of Housing created and new funding brought in). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serving ex-offenders is challenging; they do not always receive the services they need from the public sector. • It is difficult to provide services in towns outside of Hartford. • Services to 16-21 year-olds are lacking. This age group has specific needs that hard to address. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a need to reach out to older youth that don't utilize the shelters. • Lack of affordable housing in our region. • Children and families are underserved in general. • Organizations can't afford employment counselors.

Youth Serving Organizations

Trends in the Field	Strengths	Challenges	Gaps in Service
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic outcomes are becoming the only measure of success. Leaves out social/emotional competencies. • Funding direct service is difficult as funders are focusing more on systems change and policy. • Funders are changing priorities rapidly and nonprofits can no longer count on annual grants. • Funders are looking for new programs versus sustaining good ones. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation capacity is now stronger in most agencies but the emphasis on the use of RBA is a challenge. Numbers don't always show the real impact of their work. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Funders require different data and often different tracking systems. • Outcomes are often long-term, can't be demonstrated in annual reports. • It is difficult to get data on individual students from the schools. • Finding sustaining funding is an increasing concern. • There are fewer volunteers available, long-time leaders are aging, and there is a need to think about staff development. This is difficult when nonprofits aren't able to provide competitive pay. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to think about creative ways to engage families and to track that activity. • Greater emphasis and training on child safety and procedures around crisis management are needed. • Transportation costs are rising and are hard to fund.

Thank you very much to the nonprofits that participated in the convenings and shared their experiences...

1199 Training and Education Fund	Connecticut Voices for Children	Land Trust Alliance
AIDS Connecticut	Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund	Leadership Greater Hartford
Alcohol and Drug Recovery Centers	Cornerstone Foundation	Legal Assistance Resource Center of Connecticut
Amistad Center for Art & Culture	Cultural Dance Troupe of the West Indies	Literacy Volunteers of Greater Hartford
Andover, Hebron, Marlborough Youth Services	Educational Resources for Children	Local Initiatives Support Corporation
Artists Collective	Elizabeth Park Conservancy	Malta House of Care
Ballet Theatre Company	End Hunger Connecticut!	Manchester Adult Education
Billings Forge Community Works	Families in Crisis	Manchester Area Conference of Churches
Blue Hills Civic Association	Farmington River Watershed Association	Mark Twain House
Boys and Girls Clubs of Hartford	Farmington Valley Arts Center	Mercy Housing and Shelter Corporation
Bushnell Memorial Hall Corporation	Foodshare	MoveUP!
Capital Community College	Gifts of Love	My Sisters' Place
Capital Region Education Council	Girl Scouts of Connecticut	Noah Webster House
Capitol Council of Governments	Hands on Hartford	North Central Regional Mental Health Board
Capitol Region Mental Health Center	Harriet Beecher Stowe Center	Northern Connecticut Land Trust
Catholic Charities	Hartford 2000	Nutmeg Big Brother Big Sisters
CBIA Foundation	Hartford Adult Education Center	Open Hearth
Center for Children's Advocacy	Hartford Behavioral Health	Organized Parents Make A Difference
Center for Latino Progress	Hartford Communities that Care	Our Piece of the Pie
Center for Urban Research, Education and Training	Hartford Food System	Partnership for Strong Communities
Charter Oak Cultural Center	Hartford Gay and Lesbian Health Collaborative	Planned Parenthood of Southern New England
Children's Law Center of Connecticut	Hartford Performs	Real Art Ways
Chrysalis Center	Hartford Preservation Alliance	Riverfront Recapture
City of Hartford	Hartford Public Library	Rivers Alliance of Connecticut
Community Partners in Action	Hartford Stage Company	Salvation Army
Community Renewal Team	Hartford Symphony Orchestra	South Park Inn
Community Solutions (Northeast Neighborhood Partnership)	Hill-Stead Museum	Southside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance

COMPASS Youth Collaborative
Connecticut Association for Human Services
Connecticut Association of Nonprofits

Connecticut Choral Artists
Connecticut Coalition for Environmental Justice
Connecticut Fair Housing Center
Connecticut Forest and Park Association
Connecticut Historical Society
Connecticut Housing Coalition
Connecticut Land Conservation Council
Connecticut Landmarks
Connecticut Radio Information System

Hispanic Health Council
Historical Society of Glastonbury
Hockanum Valley Community Council
Immaculate Conception Shelter & Housing Corporation
Integrated Health Services
InterCommunity
International Institute of Connecticut
Jewish Family Services
Journey Home
Judy Dworin Performance Project
KIDSAFE CT
Knox Parks Foundation

Theaterworks
True Colors
Unified Theater

Urban League of Greater Hartford
Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art
West Hartford Art League
Wethersfield Historical Society
Wheeler Clinic
Winding Trails
Windsor Historical Society
YMCA- Read to Succeed
Youth United for Survival
YWCA Hartford Region