

HARTFORD FOUNDATION FOR PUBLIC GIVING

NONPROFIT SUPPORT PROGRAM

April 2011

Assessment and Evaluation:
Executive Summary



Nonprofit Support Program

Hartford Foundation for Public Giving



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The following is a summary of findings and recommendations from TDC's assessment and evaluation of the Nonprofit Support Program of the Hartford Foundation. TDC's working hypothesis was that over time, organizations that elect to take advantage of multiple NSP resources build their organization's capacity in significant ways. The organizations selected for in-depth interviews reflected this bias as did the literature review.

Methodology

TDC conducted in-person or telephone interviews with the following stakeholders:

- All NSP staff
- HFPG President and VPs
- 26 Executive Directors of organizations that have accessed multiple NSP resources
- 8 Executive Directors of organizations that are “too small” or “too large” to access most of NSP's resources
- HFPG strategic planning consultant from OMG
- 5 Peer Programs/Field Leaders (as part of best practice research)

In addition, TDC facilitated 4 focus groups:

- NSP consultants – 3 groups
- HFPG Program staff

TDC also undertook a literature review on best practices in organizational capacity building.

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Overview of Findings

- NSP is doing a wonderful job. The complement of NSP's programs are, by and large, having their intended impact and making a significant and positive difference in the organizational capacity of the Hartford region's non-profit organizations
- All **stakeholders had high praise for NSP**, offering consistent appreciation for the universe of NSP offerings and respect for the thoughtful and committed staff.
- **Access to NSP was lauded as easy and inviting**; staff were described as honest, approachable partners. Grantees felt comfortable being candid with staff, feeling confident information would not be used against them. They also valued staff's ability to be thinking partners (when asked), as well as their candor in assessing an organization's situation and a suggesting a course of action. Consultants who have developed relationships with NSP staff describe the interaction as highly beneficial for their client.
- **NSP's offerings are wide and varied and staff are flexible**, leaving few if any gaps for eligible organizations committed to building their capacity (although NSP budgets do not always cover the full cost of what is needed)
- **Organizations that elect to take advantage of multiple NSP resources build their capacity in significant ways**; the impact is more limited when the intervention has been more limited. Without an intimate working relationship with NSP or a required comprehensive assessment, **organizations sometimes select inappropriate programs, choose programs in the wrong order, or overlook relevant programs.**
- In general, those organizations that developed trusted relationships and open, frequent communication with NSP staff were the least likely to report challenges or missteps
- The operating environment for non-profits is extraordinarily challenging right now, and capacity building is needed more than ever, but the resources to devote to capacity building are hard to come by, even for the larger budget organizations
- **NSP is a mature and thoughtful provider of capacity building**, in the context of its own marketplace as well as in the context of the larger arena of capacity building providers across the country
- Additionally, **staff within the Foundation deeply appreciate NSP's work and collegiality**. NSP is recognized as a valuable internal resource as well as garnering much goodwill for the foundation in the community, creating access for virtually all organizations in one way or another. Colleagues envision NSP being able to do more, recognize that doing so would require additional investment, and hope that needed support will be provided.

Recommendations

NSP has had a **consistent, significant and positive influence on the capacity building of the region's non-profits**; this was highlighted in the LaFrance evaluation in 2005, and TDC's evaluation reaffirmed this. Now, the question is, **how to take NSP to the next level**, in the context of the work that the program has been doing all along as well as in the context of helping to support the priorities that are emerging from the Foundation's strategic review.

In TDC's opinion, NSP can keep delivering its current complement of programs and continue to make a significant and positive difference in the organizational capacity of the region's nonprofits. We also believe that at this stage in NSP's evolution, as a mature and leading provider of organizational capacity building programs, there is an opportunity to think about how the program might do its work differently. NSP has provided services in a value neutral way within budget and geographic parameters – are there priority values which would guide a focused application of resources?

The Foundation's current planning process will help guide and shape NSP's role going forward, however in the interim TDC believes there are several opportunities NSP might explore in the next several years, as detailed below.

NSP PROGRAM COMPONENTS

1. Organizational Assessments

TDC's interviews with grantees, consultants and program officers revealed two major reasons for the underutilization of this resource: confusion and reluctance. Many organizations which did undertake an organizational assessment came to appreciate the value of this exercise as a starting point for organizational capacity building.

Suggestions for NSP to consider that emerged from TDC's conversations include:

- Promote increased use of the organizational assessment. Rebrand the organizational assessment as “organizational discovery,” with a more positive connotation.
- Explore and refine the best way to undertake organizational assessment, including exploring whether to encourage this assessment be undertaken at key points in an organization's life cycle (e.g. executive turnover, senior staff turnover, major funding/financial issues, etc.), how the approach to assessments might vary by size, and the best blend of written tools and in-person discovery.

2. Technical Assistance Grants (TAGs)

TAGs were praised as one of the most flexible and useful components of the NSP tool box, and organizations greatly appreciate the ability to receive consultant and implementation support tailored precisely to their needs. TDC recommends that NSP:

- **Continue to offer TAGs in a** flexible and responsive manner, as these represent one of NSP's most adaptive tools.
- **Consider using TAGs** to enable organizations to plan for multiple capacity areas based on the results of a recent strategic plan (similar to the Foundation's Multi-Service Agency Initiative)
- **Consider re-branding TAGs** to eliminate the confusion between “technical assistance” grants and “strategic technology” grants.

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3. Financial Management

The opportunity to take on ‘nuts-and-bolts’ financial system work was viewed as very valuable by participant organizations; the significant time commitment required was seen as worth the effort and program consultants were perceived to be knowledgeable. Grantees also appreciate being able to pay for staff through this grant. Organizations that completed the program also expressed an interest in an opportunity to engage in a higher-level, more tailored financial management program. In the coming year, TDC recommends that NSP:

- **Conduct an assessment of the financial management program** to explore what else might be added to complement the very solid program elements already in place, either for first-round participants or to expand to include a second-round experience

4. Strategic Technology

NSP’s strategic technology program format works well, NSP’s technology consultants received high grades, and the required time investment was viewed as worthwhile. Organizations and consultants noted that the technology arena is continually evolving and they are deeply appreciative of the opportunity NSP affords them to continue to learn about and implement new technology applications. Given this evolution, TDC recommends that in the coming year, NSP:

- **Convene the technology program consultants** to explore how to ensure that the program’s structure and guidelines keep pace with recent and ongoing developments in the field.

5. Other NSP Learning Opportunities

NSP’s *Executive Management Institute* and its *Leaders Circles* were both praised as being extremely helpful to participants. Grantees and consultants expressed a need to build the leadership capacity of organizations by engaging next-generation senior or mid-level staff. TDC is aware that **NSP is currently working on the development of some new programming for emerging leaders and we encourage this effort.**

ADDITIONAL AREAS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. Consultants as NSP Partners

A number of consultants who frequently work with NSP grantees do not have an in-depth knowledge of NSP resources and eligibility guidelines. At the same time, they expressed a willingness to serve as NSP ambassadors. Consultants also expressed an interest in providing more feedback to NSP about their engagements, believing it could help some organizations to build their capacity in a more strategic manner.

Looking to the future, TDC recommends that NSP **enhance its already solid working relationship with consultants.**

- Continue to build consultant capacity to serve as NSP’s ambassadors, as well as to deliver a broader and more sophisticated complement of services.
- Continue to have ongoing dialogue with consultants on how NSP can continue to support them in building their skills to serve the evolving needs of the region’s non-profits.

2. Consider Expanding Eligibility

NSP is an extremely valuable and unique resource in the region, and some observers suggested that it might be helpful to expand the program's reach. TDC recommends that **NSP pilot and explore ways to make its resources more broadly available to smaller and/or larger organizations, particularly if these organizations are a priority to the Foundation.**

3. Measuring NSP's Impact

Demonstrating that capacity building programs have managed to spur organizational improvements that lead to more effective nonprofits is a challenge widely acknowledged in the literature. Truly meaningful changes in organizational culture and program quality do not lend themselves to straightforward measurement. As the largest provider of these services in greater Hartford, NSP has a unique opportunity to track the effects of its capacity-building services on its grantees. By doing so, the program can demonstrate its impact, building on its own, and the field's, growing knowledge of what works in capacity building. Therefore, TDC recommends that NSP **revise its current outcomes measurement approaches.** Over the coming year, NSP should refine its reporting system so that it is tied to the priorities of participating organizations, is not unduly burdensome for these organizations, and enhances both organizational and NSP learning.

4. Concentrating Resources and Relationships

The NSP program is currently designed to support the Greater Hartford nonprofit community in general, electing to serve more organizations well over serving a few perfectly. To date, NSP has worked hard to strike a balance between customization and partnership (necessary for effectiveness) and access (necessary for HFPG and NSP's broad-ranging mission). It is the quintessential breadth versus depth trade-off; historically NSP has provided breadth, therefore the impacts of its efforts are necessarily more limited.

TDC recommends that in the next stage of its evolution, NSP explore and pilot how it might concentrate some of its resources and relationships to reflect and support the Foundation's priorities. The Foundation's strategic review should ultimately inform how this concentration of resources might be structured. Preliminary thinking about how NSP might approach this shift includes:

- **Explore piloting a deeper and more intentional relationship with some priority organizations.** NSP currently offers organizations an opportunity to seek depth in the working relationship, but the extent to which the organization pursues this depth is ultimately driven by its Executive Director. TDC found support for our working hypothesis that organizations that elect to take advantage of multiple NSP resources build their capacity in significant ways. NSP should experiment with being more pro-active in building this relationship with organizations that reflect HFPG's priorities. NSP's core belief in the importance of the Executive Director's commitment to this work should be reflected here as well – if a concentration of effort is to be pursued, it should be a priority to both HFPG as well as to the Executive Director and Board leadership.

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- A core component of this deeper relationship should be the **nurturing of a “relationship management” model of technical assistance, matching the long-term timeframe of capacity building with a consistent long-term relationship** with an NSP staff member. Some mature capacity building providers utilize this approach, with significant results. Rather than being created anew, this can and should build on the staff’s existing thoughtful partnering with non-profits.
- TDC envisions a few different possibilities for how NSP might pilot exploration of this deeper relationship:
 - Explore pairing the deeper NSP relationship with a commitment to operating support, through the work of the Operating Support Committee.
 - Deepen the NSP commitment for a select cohort of organizations that are identified as addressing a HFPG priority area through the strategic review process.
 - Pilot a deeper relationship with a cohort of small, grass-roots groups that are identified as addressing a HFPG priority area through the strategic review process.

Ultimately, **this approach is likely to require additional staff and/or consultant resources**. NSP should use the coming year to explore how the pilot might be structured, and then clarify the resource implications of the emerging structure.

Conclusion

Being mindful that the Foundation has not yet completed its review process, it is clear that there will be a role for NSP. NSP has an opportunity to position itself to do more and to begin to experiment with more targeted approaches to its work. Ultimately, the key question for NSP and the Foundation is the depth vs. breadth trade-off. Based on TDC’s conversations with internal stakeholders, it appears that the time is right to test the Foundation’s appetite for a limited expansion of and/or a deepening of NSP’s approach to capacity building.