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Cohoes Nonprofit Coalition

The ultimate goal of nonprofits is to benefit the communities that they serve in. However, within smaller communities it is imperative that the nonprofits both coexist and work together, instead of functioning as completely separate entities. As a result of this, nonprofit coalitions have been formed across the United States. The City of Cohoes believes that a well-structured nonprofit coalition will more effectively serve the population of Cohoes.

Scope of the Problem

Due to the devolution of social service provisions given to local communities from federal budgets, nonprofit advocacy has grown in importance over the past few decades to help those organizations fulfill the gaps that the lack of federal funding has left. This leads to the construction of coalitions designed to accomplish large goals using combined resources. A nonprofit coalition is a broad term with several different operating options, but ultimately they are all composed of individual nonprofit organizations that come together and work for a common goal. Organizations may form coalitions in order to obtain funding or resources, provide community services, and/or creating permanent social change (Kaufman 2011). Although there are huge potential benefits to

these coalitions, there are obstacles to forming and maintaining a sustainable coalition. Some of the key problems are a lack of clear leadership, lack of common goals, disagreement among member organizations, and a lack of participation (Grobman 2017).

The City of Cohoes, New York, is facing an issue of having several nonprofits who work to achieve the same goal, however, most of them do not have the resources to successfully help the community. There is currently a business coalition in Cohoes, but not one for nonprofit organizations. Nonprofits in Cohoes have looked into



creating their own coalition to improve revenue to their cause and overall help the community. The nonprofits in the City of Cohoes see the benefits of sharing resources and building a better community and believe it is worth it. This research will provide an outline for Cohoes to follow in order to launch a successful coalition.

Model Coalition: Cambridge, MA

After researching various nonprofit coalitions throughout the country, the Cambridge Coalition in Cambridge, Massachusetts emerged as the best model to replicate in Cohoes. The Cambridge Coalition is relatively new, but was formed in order to serve a variety of people and solve public issues that plagued the nonprofits in the area. The idea to form a coalition in Cambridge came out of a meeting held between 40 executive representatives from



Cambridge
Nonprofit
Coalition

the Cambridge nonprofit community.

The goal of this meeting was to determine the state

of the Cambridge's nonprofit sector and discuss the possibility of using a common voice to initiate change. The 40 representatives determined a coalition

between the nonprofit and public sector would be the best way to benefit the Cambridge population of their city.

Although the demographics of Cambridge are substantially different from that of Cohoes, we found that similar types of nonprofits were developed and tackled persistent



issues, such as homelessness, hunger, and poverty. The general composition of Cambridge is much larger than Cohoes; their population is six times greater and the city spans a greater area. The Cambridge Nonprofit Coalition also contains twice as many nonprofits than the amount of nonprofits in Cohoes. Typically, larger coalitions face more challenges in effective collective action, but the Cambridge Coalition has nonetheless been successful.

With a smaller community like Cohoes, the Cambridge model should be even easier to implement. In Cohoes, there is more room for compromise. This will allow for the leadership of the coalition and the general assembly of nonprofits to work closely and have more open communication.

The main focus for the coalition in Cohoes is to promote collaboration to meet the changing needs of their city and improve the overall quality of life in the community.

This is similar to Cambridge in that their vision was to enact positive change throughout their community. Also, the Cambridge Coalition incorporates a variation of nonprofit groups that work together to achieve a similar goal, which was one of the difficult aspects of building a coalition in Cohoes.

There are numerous coalitions throughout New York and across the country that are issue specific, but a coalition that incorporates many different nonprofits with different missions and goals cause other problems, such as complex organization structures and fair representation. Thus, Cambridge became the most feasible and effective option due to their thriving compilation of different nonprofits.

Our Findings from Cohoes' Nonprofits

To better understand the nonprofits in Cohoes we devised a survey which was distributed to 32 of the 39 known non-profits in the Cohoes. These nonprofits consisted of advocacy groups, direct service groups, community organizers, public schools, private schools, sporting leagues, hospitals, churches, public libraries and community centers. The seven uncontacted groups either no longer exist or a contactable representative could not be found. The

survey was useful to gauge leadership interest and the extent of commitment in a nonprofit coalition in Cohoes. It included 11 questions varying from name and best way to contact, to willingness to attend meetings and interest in leadership positions.

The Results

We received responses from 11 of 32 groups contacted, which is a 34% response rate. The majority of the responses were from direct service groups and 10 out of 11 respondents were willing to attend monthly meetings. 100% of the respondents were willing to host monthly community events and 8 were willing to accept leadership positions within the coalition. From this survey, we can conclude that there is high willingness to participate among a core group of community leaders. With 72% of respondents willing to accept leadership positions, it can be presumed that these respondents can play focal roles in the establishment of a nonprofit coalition in Cohoes.



Implementing Successful Aspects in Cohoes

Our research yielded a heavy emphasis on three building blocks that helped Cambridge create and maintain their nonprofit coalition. These three aspects are leadership, communication and sustainability. Although the Cambridge Coalition does not currently have a constitution set in place, we evaluated some of their informal policies put in place until they convene to draft an official constitution. These three core aspects are the initial steps that we propose Cohoes to begin developing because they were the policies that Cambridge abided by for the first four years of their existence. This section analyzes successful steps taken by Cambridge that will be beneficial to Cohoes as they begin this process.

Leadership

A large portion of the Cambridge Coalition's effective leadership comes from the steering committee. This is an 18 member, flat committee, which means that there are no officers and members have equal decision power. This committee acts as the decision making body of the coalition. The main goal of the steering committee is to create a common agenda and strategies for future action plans. A majority of the work is done through subcommittees that sit under

the steering committee. These committees are focused on different aspects of what the whole body plans on accomplishing. While the steering committee is flat, each subcommittee has a chair, which acts as the leading body for the subcommittees. Several representatives from 55 Cambridge nonprofits are present at these subcommittee meetings.

Initially, the eight Cohoes community members who indicated that they were interested in leadership roles would be the steering committee, which would be mainly in charge of organizing and laying the groundwork for this coalition to come into fruition. Also, there will need to be additional correspondence to the other nonprofits in Cohoes to make sure that everyone has equal opportunity to partake in the basic foundation of the coalition. There should be open communication between the steering committee and the nonprofits to indicate initial meetings to gain a better understanding of their mission and vision. This includes, but is not limited to, having the steering committee calling, emailing and visiting nonprofit locations within Cohoes until there is a response from everyone. Some nonprofit leaders respond better to face to face interaction and this will increase the attendance of the members. After the general assembly is contacted and created, the

committee will be responsible for developing a common agenda and creating strategies for future plans of action. There would be no hierarchy and every vote would have the same weight similar to the flat committee in Cambridge. Lastly, the creation of subcommittees for specific projects would be the most effective way to accomplish the community engaged events that the general assembly agrees upon.

Communication

Cambridge coalition communicates mostly to the members of the coalition and the outside community through their website and a monthly newsletter. Due to the vast size of the nonprofit coalition, the steering committee hosts a summit every year to outline the goals and plans that have been set forth by the leadership. Each summit has a theme related to what the coalitions need at the time. The four summit themes have been; purpose of a coalitions and its benefit to the community, action planning for the coalition, Collective model impact, and system leaders presentation. The summits are used a tool to engage members by giving them updates on the progress of current projects, and to lay out the next steps of current projects.

First, it is important that the coalition has a strong mission and vision because this will unite everyone and create a clear direction. Goals should be created and

be designated into short and long term. Separating these goals will help with the morale of the group when they achieve one of the goals that they set. Members will feel as if their work has meaning and value, which encourages the leaders and other members to donate more time to the coalition. Also, it is necessary for the leadership to clearly communicate the goals to the whole committee. Certain aspects of this communication system would be useful in Cohoes. The formation of a website and the monthly publication of a newsletter could begin to establish a relationship between the coalition and the community and keep less-involved coalition members up to date. This is a cost effective option to keep people engaged in the work that the leadership wants to initiate. Also, the nonprofit members who go out into the community can encourage other members to come out help foster a sense of community within the city. Gaining broad acceptance of the Cohoes coalition during events like these will not only increase publicity for each nonprofit, but also increase the amount of revenue that the nonprofit could pull in. While a summit appears to be one of the most effective methods in Cambridge, this would take planning and resources that Cohoes currently does not have. This would be a lot of additional work and stress that the steering

committee would have to dedicate time to and that could possibly take away from the work being put into reaching out to the other nonprofits and community members. This could be a useful tool for Cohoes, but it would have to be something that is installed later on in the coalitions life span.

Sustainability

The coalition has been successful because of the clearly stated mission, consistent communication, and effective leadership. However, the Cambridge Coalition was also initially funded by their founders, Cambridge Community Foundation, Cambridge Agassiz Harvard Fund, and a local bank to help them jump start some of their community activities. Also, after lobby for change, the city passed an ordinance that allows the coalition to explain the community's need and then possibly receive grants and contracts from the city to help fund their activities (Community Benefits Ordinance, 2015).

Sustainability is an important aspect to the coalition in Cohoes because it is necessary to stay motivated and productive after the initial founding energy. While communication and leadership seem like obtainable goals for any community, Cambridge's means of sustainability are somewhat incompatible with the community

of Cohoes. Income demographics in Cambridge are very different than Cohoes. The median household value in Cohoes in 2015 was just over \$150,000 compared to almost \$670,000 in Cambridge (City Data 2017). This is not to say Cohoes will not be able to raise funds, but it will most likely be significantly more difficult than it is in Cambridge Massachusetts. The start up funds that Cambridge received were pivotal for their continuous success as a coalition. The Cohoes coalition, once established, should discuss the different avenues available for acquiring funding. The sustainability of the coalition in Cohoes is possible without these massive donors, however, this will take more of a community effort. This coalition will have to rely on members from outside of the community to be attracted to this area and be willing to participate in the events that the nonprofits of Cohoes host. Although the city of Cohoes is compact, it is surrounded by flourishing colleges, institutions, and businesses. These would be good resources for Cohoes. They can host initial events and that can pull in a lot of attention and revenue for them. If Cohoes is able to reach out to the local colleges and institutions for monetary support this would lessen the burden of the community to purchase and donate to this coalition.

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