

Fundraising for Our Most Complex Social Issues

BY RICHARD TOLLEFSON

Inspiring donors and raising philanthropic support for society's most complex issues – those that cannot be solved by philanthropy alone and where positive impact may not be realized for years – is a challenge facing nonprofits worldwide. Homelessness is one case in point.

Those facing homelessness are generally confronted by multiple challenges including food insecurity, chronic poverty, inconsistent access to healthcare, mental illness, substance use disorder, domestic violence, social injustice, and more. The issue is compounded by bias. Some people believe that individuals struggling with homelessness should be able to help themselves get out of their situation or even that it's their own fault. This bias makes fundraising even more challenging.

We spoke with four experts who share their stories of ways they turned challenges into effective fundraising opportunities related to this very complex, ubiquitous issue.

Human Services Campus Shifts the Conversation

Phoenix's Human Services Campus provides comprehensive services to individuals experiencing homelessness. During COVID, Arizona's Stay at Home order put a spotlight on the issues of homelessness and shifted the conversation toward concerns around its relationship to healthcare.

"How do you stay at home when you don't have a home?" asks Amy Schwabenlender, executive director, Human Services Campus. "Our campuses provided shelter for those who had no home. That helped shape the conversation regarding the public health crisis for the un-housed."

Although the link between public health issues and homelessness is no secret, the pandemic allowed organizations to make a stronger case for support by highlighting the contextual evidence. The lasting impact on society is increased understanding, and with that understanding comes hope for change.

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Save the Family Foundation of Arizona Captures Hearts with Impact Stories

Donors want to see results. For complex societal issues, sharing long-term results is nearly impossible to measure.

But that doesn't mean organizations can't show the influence donors are making through impact stories, relates Jacki Taylor, president and CEO of Save the Family Foundation of Arizona, a leading provider of housing and support services for homeless families. "Impact stories allow you to show the difference donors are making, one person at a time," says Taylor. She's found that the formula for success is:

- 1 outline the problem
- 2 share the hope the donation gives, and
- 3 show the impact the donation is making – person by person.

Native American Connections Achieves More with Trust

Native American Connections, which supports the behavioral health and affordable housing needs of Native Americans, is seeing an increase in trust-based philanthropy, according to CEO Dede Devine.

"We've seen grants coming our way to be used for what we believe our immediate needs are. It's more a 'You tell us what you need and let's get it implemented quickly,' mentality."

Donors are giving with fewer restrictions and allowing organizations to put money where they feel it's needed most. This gives organizations the freedom to target funds toward all aspects of their mission, empowering those with the knowledge and expertise to determine where the funding will achieve the greatest impact.

Valley of the Sun United Way Transforms the Board Room

The evolution of the board of directors is critical when addressing complex issues such as homelessness. Filling talent gaps, addressing burnout, and expanding roles is a natural process for any nonprofit board, but perhaps even more essential for organizations solving society's seemingly unsolvable issues.

CEO Carla Vargas Jasa shares her strategy for creating transformational change at the Valley of the Sun United Way. "During the past year, we instituted several board changes. We created new committees, including community development, fundraising, diversity, and board development. We also elected 21 new board members to bring on additional talents we felt we needed on the board."

Motivating and maintaining board engagement can be a daunting task. Yet, it's an essential ingredient for long-term success.

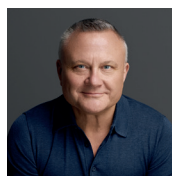




Lessons Learned: Six Key Strategies for Fundraising Success

From these impactful stories come six successful strategies to consider when seeking philanthropic support for complex issues:

- 1 DEFINE SUCCESS AND PROACTIVELY REPORT WHAT YOU CAN.** Too often nonprofits are at the whim of their funders who pre-define metrics and measures of success. Nonprofit leaders must take the lead and proactively determine the evaluation criteria tied to the strategic plans that they know will move the needle on performance, outcomes, and impact.
- 2 USE A THEORY OF CHANGE TO DEFINE YOUR FUTURE PATH AND THE ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES.** A theory of change is a description of how and why a desired change is expected to happen. It defines what conditions must be in place to achieve desired outcomes – a path toward your future goals. Since those outcomes and goals may be generations in the future, one bets on having the right conditions in place. The likelihood of achieving that future goal is increased because the means justify – or help achieve – the ends.
- 3 IF YOU CAN'T CHANGE THE WORLD, CHANGE ONE LIFE.** Remember Eiseley's story of the starfish? The boy walking on the beach saving starfish by throwing them, one-by-one, back into the water? A man said to the boy, "There are thousands of starfish; you cannot make a difference; you cannot save them all." The boy picks up one starfish and throws it in the water and says, "I made a difference for that one." Share stories of how philanthropy helped your organization touch one life and made a difference for one family. As you serve more and more families, you cumulatively can change the direction of your community.
- 4 CREATE A COMPELLING CASE FOR SUPPORT THAT SPEAKS TO THE HEAD AND THE HEART.** Create a case that shares stories of lives touched and provides statistics on achievements realized. Speak to donors' hearts and their emotional triggers to inspire their generosity.
- 5 ENGAGE DONORS WHO EMBRACE TRUST-BASED PHILANTHROPY.** One positive outcome of COVID was the significant increase in "trust-based philanthropy" in which donors put greater trust in executives, boards, and constituents of nonprofits to make informed decisions on where to apply donations to achieve the greatest impact. Donors who embrace this type of giving are effective, supportive partners in innovating and implementing creative solutions together.
- 6 ENLIST BOARD MEMBERS TO BE EVANGELISTS AND CHAMPIONS.** Because making change is often a long-term process, over time, leaders may approach change with caution. That's why real change agents need 'cheerleaders' on the Board to bolster their confidence, partner in and inspire change, and tell the world of their successes. Inform your Board and staff of progress and challenges, help them enthusiastically support and evangelize achievements in the community, and have them be champions of the transformation leadership is seeking to accomplish.



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