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Can a Nonprofit Organization Strike?

By Robert Egger

When appealing to donors for support, nonprofit organizations often paint a cold and bitter picture of what America's cities might look like if homeless shelters, hospice centers, or humane societies suddenly disappeared.

But this begs the question: Would charities actually go on strike — withholding services if governments, foundations, or other donors did not provide the funds and mutual respect required to do the job right?

Taking such an action goes against the very grain of what most nonprofit groups stand for, particularly those that provide basic human services. How many charities really would be willing to stop providing care for the elderly, after-school tutoring, animal protection, cultural programs, community development, or all of the other things they collectively do each day?

The question is no longer a rhetorical one for my organization, the D.C. Central Kitchen, which decided to go on strike to force the District of Columbia government to contribute to the cost of providing meals to the men and women who reside in government-run shelters each night.

Since 1989 the D.C. Central Kitchen has provided close to 20 million free meals to drug-treatment clinics, after-school programs, and centers for the elderly, as well as to city shelters. When we began to develop our meal-distribution network, asking the city for support would have been a moot point: The District of Columbia government was broke. But as deficits gave way to surplus, and the number of men, women, and children in homeless shelters swelled, we began to push for some help.

For the past two years we have been patiently prodding District officials, assuming that they would recognize the financial and other benefits of working with us to pick up food from local hotels, restaurants, schools, and caterers — while training homeless men and women for food-service jobs.

In late 2005, the city finally decided it would award a contract on April 15 to provide meals to the shelters, and in the meantime it would allocate \$50,000 a month toward the cost of the service. The funds would help but not match the \$1.6-million that the D.C. Central Kitchen has been spending on the meals each year.

On May 1, after no contract and repeated calls to the city official in charge failed to resolve the matter, the D.C. Central Kitchen stopped delivering meals to numerous homeless shelters operated by the District of Columbia.

We take no pride in this act, but we decided that it was morally wrong to continue to allow the city to abdicate its responsibility to provide some level of financial support to ensure that decent, balanced meals are made available to its most vulnerable residents.

My chief operating officer and I also decided to give up food ourselves during the dispute as a sign of solidarity with the homeless men and women who could miss meals as a result of our actions.

But this battle goes well beyond the D.C. Central Kitchen and the District government. It illuminates a

concern for nonprofit organizations everywhere whose contributions to the well-being of their communities are routinely dismissed or ignored.

Nonprofit organizations employ one-tenth of the work force and contribute an equal amount to the economy, yet they are expected to scramble, year after year, for meager resources.

The time has come for charities to stop being willing to "soldier on" and slowly bleed ourselves emotionally and financially dry when no for-profit business in America would ever be expected to do the same.

As I have talked to nonprofit leaders across the country, I hear the same laments of being asked to do more with less money, with little or no say in how city budgets are decided.

During our strike, I encountered a troubling illustration of why this occurs.

Countless peers called to support us for taking a stand, and wished out loud that they could do the same. Yet when asked why they couldn't, the refrain was as uniform as it was telling — they were afraid.

It is time for nonprofit leaders to stop ducking from controversy, and to acknowledge that if they take dimes when they know that dollars are needed, they serve neither their constituents nor their missions.

As harsh as it sounds, by doing so they are doing the exact opposite of what they want to achieve; in fact, they are contributing to the problem.

When charities are cowed into submission and remain silent in the face of failed systems or outdated policies for fear that they might lose their livelihoods, they betray the very ideals upon which the nonprofit world was founded and contribute to the insidious power dynamic that created the very problems so many of us seek to solve.

Most important, when nonprofit groups follow their individual paths, rather than band together to advocate equitable partnerships with businesses and government, they do nothing more than cast seeds in the wind — flowers may grow, but no garden will bloom.

But neither, frankly, will going on strike build the kind of community we all want.

Although my organization's effort did achieve the results we sought — we resumed delivery of meals and ended our fast after eight days when the city agreed to a firm date to award the contract — it was simply confusing for much of the public.

The strike attracted significant attention from the local news media, yet most Washingtonians have little understanding of how nonprofit groups operate and did not grasp the larger issue we sought to elevate.

No action by one group, standing alone, can change that.

What charity leaders, the people who run America's "community corporations," need to do is start insisting that cities and grant makers see them as true partners and contribute, not out of charity or some sense of moral obligation or guilt but because these organizations generate consistent results and powerful returns.

In the Washington area alone, nonprofit groups account for some 15,000 organizations; nationally more than 1.5 million organizations are at work solving problems and providing services.

Only when charity leaders display the courage it takes to stand up one by one — and merge that with the vision to stand together — will the nonprofit world garner the clout it requires to be able to move society forward.

Robert Egger is president of the D.C. Central Kitchen and author of [Begging for Change: The Dollars and Sense of Making Nonprofits Responsive, Efficient, and Rewarding for All](#) (HarperCollins).

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