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Let's Start a New Nonprofit Movement

By Audrey R. Alvarado and Robert Egger

The nonprofit world has undergone explosive growth in recent decades. Charitable organizations generate more than \$800-billion a year and employ 9.5 percent of the American work force. Yet the general public has only a hazy understanding of what nonprofit organizations do and how they earn their money -- in part because journalists rarely do more than cover charity scandals. Congress is now intent on passing legislation to fix abuses uncovered by reporters and others, but nonprofit groups otherwise get little attention from lawmakers, and have little say in shaping the nation's public policies.

Given the challenges facing society, and the size of America's charitable sector, the time has come for nonprofit groups to mature into a strategic, coherent, and coordinated force.

As a first step in putting the collective wisdom of nonprofit groups to work, we are urging organizations to join together and hold a Nonprofit Congress in Washington in October 2006.

This national gathering will aim to bring together groups of all sizes and missions -- the small church food pantries that serve a single neighborhood as well as the relief organizations that work around the globe. No organization will get to have undue influence just because of the size of its budget or membership, or the clout of its trustees and donors.

How much can one meeting accomplish? The real question is how much can be achieved by working from a shared vision. And the answer can be found in history.

For a century and a half, the British ruled India, yet they never had more than 3,000 officers stationed in the country at any one time. Those 3,000 officers -- and the troops they supervised -- controlled an entire subcontinent populated by hundreds of millions of people.

How was that possible? Simple -- they did it by keeping Indians divided. As long as the British could keep them separated by race, caste, geography, language, religion, and fighting among themselves for access or control of limited resources, they remained weak and easily dominated.

To counter this tactic, Mahatma Gandhi marched to the seaside city of Dandi and scooped up his historic handful of salt -- partly to inspire his fellow Indians to see that the universal need for salt made them all, rich or poor, Hindu, Sikh, or Muslim, equal. More to the point, it made them see that they were equally responsible to look beyond their differences and to find and build upon the things that united them. It was at that symbolic moment that Indians began their march towards emancipation.

The nonprofit world has been fragmented by many of the same forces as the Indians -- inequality of resources and a lack of tolerance, as well as fear of angering their supporters and government leaders. But nonprofit officials also have the energy, passion, and experience to build a new social movement based on the goals we share in common -- human dignity, civic engagement, economic security, and the pursuit of the common good.

The Nonprofit Congress would be the forum to begin shaping this movement, and will provide a valuable

way to exchange ideas, develop partnerships, and learn new skills. It would also:

- Strengthen the resolve and the resources of nonprofit leaders to engage in public policy and make sure that nonprofit groups are instrumental in taking on roles that enhance the democratic process in the United States.
- Invigorate the passion and commitment of the current generation of nonprofit executives, while enlisting and making room for a new generation of nonprofit leaders.
- Empower local, state, and national organizations to speak for nonprofit organizations and advocate at all levels of society.
- Communicate a nonprofit agenda to the country and to our elected leaders and invite those seeking the presidency in 2008 to share with the congress their views on nonprofit groups, as well as their visions for the country.

Today's challenges require a different response than that of the organizations that were created several decades ago when nonprofit groups were just beginning their expansion phase. Twenty-five years ago a few national organizations could successfully represent the nation's nonprofit organizations, but now it is time to make sure all charities are represented in the public square and that the agenda is set by organizations on the front lines of serving society, not by the donors who support them.

To develop plans for a Nonprofit Congress, we intend to hold a series of state meetings and regional plenary sessions, designed to encourage the maximum participation of nonprofit groups, with an emphasis on incorporating the views of small and midsize organizations whose budgets are less than \$1-million in annual revenue -- since such organizations represent 80 percent of all nonprofit groups. Inclusive and democratic participation is essential if the congress is to be successful and representative.

A group of volunteers would use information gleaned from these local meetings to inform the content of the congress.

Democracy cannot be scripted, and a forum that allows for free flowing ideas, true debate, and dialogue requires that no one entity, organization, or grant maker take charge of this effort. The goal is to create a three-day agenda that is tightly focused, so that the congress produces results that will make an immediate difference to the daily work and long-term strength of nonprofit groups nationwide.

Through the Nonprofit Congress, we hope to inspire and to build a solid base of leaders who can advocate for our individual programs, causes, and constituents, while remaining focused on the goal of enhancing our collective strength.

The United States cannot meet all the challenges it faces without vibrant and effective nonprofit organizations working together to ensure a just, caring, and equal society. It is not acceptable for nonprofit organizations to continue to operate the way they do now.

For many nonprofit leaders, the notion of working together and forming a new national movement will require a leap of faith. For others, it will challenge already stretched financial resources. But for those who recognize the futility of the status quo and who are ready to move forward, it is time to join forces and chart a new course for our country.

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