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THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

MANAGING

From the issue dated January 24, 2008

Nonprofit Primary Pursuits

New effort seeks to get candidates to focus on the charitable world

By [Suzanne Perry](#)

Concord, N.H.

As the selection of the next U.S. president races toward Super Tuesday next month, leaders of the Nonprofit Primary Project hope their efforts to get the candidates talking about the charitable world will continue to pay off.

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The project — started by the National Council of Nonprofit Associations, in Washington, and its affiliate, the Nonprofit Congress — has worked for months to follow the Democratic and Republican candidates who swarmed New Hampshire in preparation for the country's first primary, attending forums, town-hall meetings, and other

events.

Primary Project leaders have been asking presidential contenders three questions:

- What role has a nonprofit organization played in your life or career?
- How would you strengthen the economic and social capacity of such organizations?
- How would you work with nonprofit groups to achieve your vision for America?

They have also been looking for opportunities to remind politicians of certain statistics, such as that nonprofit groups represent more than 8 percent of the gross domestic product (as calculated by the National Council of Nonprofit Associations), while 67 percent of American households give to charity each year, contributing more than \$200-billion, and 60 million Americans volunteer each year.

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The New Hampshire Center for Nonprofits, which coordinated the effort, has documented on its [Web site](#) the responses it elicited from nine of the presidential-primary candidates.

Just as important, say organizers, project leaders are sharing what they have learned with other charities, urging them to test the project's approach in their own states. "It can be replicated at all different levels," says Mary Ellen Jackson, the center's executive director. "You don't have to be New Hampshire to do this."

Kyle Caldwell, president of the Michigan Nonprofit Association, says nonprofit associations across the country have been watching New Hampshire for advice on how to approach policy makers. "Being first out of the gate really helped set the agenda for the rest of us," he says.

Robert Egger, president of the D.C. Central Kitchen, an anti-hunger group in Washington and director of the Primary Project, wants to expand the project's approach to all levels of government nationwide. This month, he plans to announce the V3 Campaign — for voice, value, and votes — with a goal of getting every candidate for mayor, state legislature, Congress, and president to explain by Inauguration Day 2017 how they would work with nonprofit groups.

Mr. Egger says the Primary Project convinced him that charities could cooperate to advocate for more than just their own causes. "The real strategy was, Would nonprofits in New Hampshire lower their kind of individual flags and stand together?" he says. "That was the real test."

'Economic Stimulator'

Mr. Egger, who has been the driving force behind the New Hampshire project, argues that nonprofit groups must work together to get on politicians' radar screen as organizations that play a major role in the national economy and help the country tackle its social problems.

His message to candidates: "There are 80 million people getting older in America, our economy's going global, but you have in every community a really robust, vibrant economic stimulator in the nonprofits. How would you partner with us?"

Many charities are wary of becoming more politically active for fear of violating Internal Revenue Service rules barring tax-exempt charities from partisan politics — an attitude that hindered the New Hampshire center's project at first.

Michael Ostrowski, president of the center's board, recalls that when the group first broached the idea to its members, the reaction was often, "Whoa, no, that's the third rail of nonprofit life."

But the center hired a nonprofit lawyer, Ann McLane Kuster, to coordinate the project and to draw up guidelines about what the project could and could not do.

"We not only have a right to be involved in these processes, but in some ways an obligation to speak for the sector and to raise the sector's issues with candidates," says Mr. Ostrowski, president of Child and Family Services, a charity in Manchester, N.H.

Mr. Egger donated \$15,000 for the project from his speaking fees and an anonymous donor gave an equal amount. Over the past year, the New Hampshire center trained nonprofit leaders to approach all of the presidential candidates, as well as their campaign staff members. Mr. Egger and the center decided to go to the candidates' events after they had trouble getting the politicians to attend forums nonprofit groups had tried to plan.

'Bird Doggers'

In New Hampshire, about a dozen nonprofit leaders became what the Primary Project calls "bird doggers." Several of them tailed the candidates in the days leading up to this month's primary.

When Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton told the audience at a campaign rally here that she wanted to answer as many questions as possible, Joan Goshgarian, head of the New Hampshire Business Committee for the Arts, decided to seize the opportunity.

What would you do, she asked Mrs. Clinton, to promote the country's nonprofit organizations?

The question elicited a lengthy response from the New York senator. "The whole nonprofit sector in America not only delivers essential services, but is a huge employer," she said. "The number is close to 10 percent of people who work for the nonprofit sector."

Senator Clinton, who began her career as a lawyer for the Children's Defense Fund, praised what she called the "third leg of the stool" of American society (along with business and government). "It is essential that I as president do everything I can to expand the nonprofit sector."

She promised to work to allow people who don't itemize their taxes to get deductions for charitable donations, to help nonprofit groups compete for government contracts, and to highlight the work nonprofit groups do — for example, through White House conferences. And she said she was looking for other ideas.

In addition to the Clinton rally, the project selected rallies for the

Democratic candidate Sen. Barack Obama and the Republican candidate Mike Huckabee, a Democratic-candidates dinner, and a Republican brunch.

When the Nonprofit Primary Project began, some of the politicians were like "deer in the headlights" when asked about the nonprofit world, several participants say. "Sometimes they don't get it at first, so you have to go back over why I'm saying what I'm saying," says Ms. Jackson.

She recalls meeting Governor Huckabee, and says his initial response was, "Oh, I'm not sure the nonprofit sector has impacted my life."

But she says he then went on to talk about how his wife had been very active in a support group when she was fighting cancer early in their marriage.

"You could see all the light bulbs going off," Ms. Jackson says.

In addition to educating the candidates, the project helped the state's nonprofit workers view themselves in a new light, says Monica Zulauf, executive director of the YWCA in Manchester, where Senator Clinton answered a question about nonprofit groups last year after giving a policy speech. She says many of her employees realized for the first time that the organization had the potential for real "political clout."

Red Jacket

New Hampshire's nonprofit leaders say being flexible and persistent proved key when trying to pin down candidates on their views.

At a rally for Senator Obama at a packed gymnasium at Concord High School just before the primary, Ms. Jackson wore a red jacket as a way to get noticed. But when the Illinois senator did not take any questions, she had to improvise. Accompanied by Ms. Kuster, she pushed her way to the front of the line as the Illinois senator shook hands and greeted people afterward. When he reached Ms. Jackson, she said, "Will nonprofits have a place in your White House?"

"Of course," responded Senator Obama, a former community organizer in Chicago. "I used to work for a nonprofit."

Ms. Kuster, whom Mr. Obama recognized because she works on his campaign, then introduced Ms. Jackson, and the senator offered a few more words: "Take a look at our national-service plan, which has a whole social-entrepreneurship component to it." (Senator Obama has promised to expand the country's national-service programs and to create a Social Investment Fund Network to provide money to

encourage innovative nonprofit projects.)

Encounters were sometimes brief, but the Primary Project workers tried at least to plant the word "nonprofit."

At the Democratic dinner in Milford, Thomas Blonski, president of New Hampshire Catholic Charities, worked to catch the Democratic candidate Bill Richardson's eye as he greeted people after his speech.

"Remember the nonprofit sector, like we talked about before," he said when Mr. Richardson reached him, referring to a previous meeting with the New Mexico governor. "I will," Mr. Richardson responded.

The Primary Project workers also took advantage of occasions when they met candidates unexpectedly. While Ms. Jackson and Mr. Egger were eating lunch at Caesarios Pizza, a restaurant in Manchester, Mr. Huckabee entered and headed directly to their table. Recognizing Ms. Jackson from a chat they had had at a rally the day before, he joked: "Am I stalking you?"

The former Arkansas governor went on to mention that he had just come from a charity fund-raising event in Londonderry, N.H., and had donated some soccer balls for children in Iraq. After some chitchat about his bass-guitar playing at the rally, he told Mr. Egger and Ms. Jackson that nonprofit groups were bringing in "hundreds of millions of dollars" to his state.

Ms. Jackson says her experience with Mr. Huckabee showed that nonprofit leaders should not be intimidated by political leaders, even those with a national presence. "They're interested in what we might want to say, they're interested in learning," she said.

"Governor Huckabee, national contender for president, recognized me," she says. "I'm just thrilled that that can happen."

June Meeting

Ms. Jackson is now working to create a video about the Primary Project that can be used by other nonprofit associations, and she will give a presentation about the project at a Nonprofit Congress meeting in June in Washington.

Nonprofit associations in other states are already exploring ways they can adapt the New Hampshire experience. Brenda Peluso, director of public policy at the Maine Association of Nonprofits, plans to propose at a meeting next month that her group consider bird-dogging some of the state's politicians.

"We don't get a lot of [presidential-primary] action here, but what I

thought was so applicable for us was to take it to our local representatives," she says.

Mr. Egger says the New Hampshire project shows how easy it is for nonprofit leaders to capture the ears of politicians. His V3 Campaign, to which he will initially donate his annual speaking fees of \$50,000 to \$75,000, will create a Web site to provide charities and state associations with advice on how to get candidates to say how they will work with nonprofit groups and to post written and recorded responses to a questionnaire.

The campaign will also eventually make consultants available to provide nonpartisan advice to candidates who want to develop policies to strengthen their relationships with nonprofit groups. They would also be available to nonprofit leaders who want to run for office, Mr. Egger says.

In New Hampshire, Ms. Zulauf of the YWCA has a more immediate goal: "I'd love to hear the word 'nonprofit' in an inauguration speech."



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