

Helping Nonprofits and State Agencies Work Better Together

Without Delaware's nonprofits, state government could not provide all the services it is committed to delivering to its residents. Without state government, nonprofits would be forced to shut down valuable programs they provide in the community, and some would be closing their doors. Today's reality is that state agencies and the state's nonprofit sector have become deeply interdependent. Contracting has become a major way states handle service delivery issues. That makes it critical for both sectors to work together more effectively and in partnership, especially in these stressful financial times.

Building a stronger, more effective state-nonprofit partnership is the idea behind the Forward Together Project, a human-service initiative of the Center for Community Research and Service at the University of Delaware. Founded in 2005 with a major grant from the Jessie Ball du Pont Fund, the project got its start out of recognition that there were tensions threatening the working relationship. "Each side was unhappy with the way the contracting relationship was working, and each blamed the other for problems in the relationship," says Dr. Deborah Auger, director of the Forward Together initiative. "They had basically stopped talking to one another, out of anger."

The project used solid on-the-ground research to identify key sources of tension in the working relationship and to clarify issues. Because lack of trust had become an obstacle to the search for solutions, it capitalized on university researchers ability to serve as a collective, neutral "honest broker" to bring both sides together. They facilitated focused exchange on issues, which led to better understanding of each sector's viewpoints and constraints.

"Perhaps the most useful thing we did was to begin work with cross-sector workgroups charged with identifying possible improvements—to help support them by providing information on new ideas and identifying contracting reforms being tested elsewhere. That's where the project staff's special expertise came in."

In a report issued last spring, Forward Together project described four priority areas that still need deeper attention and reform:

- need for greater administrative streamlining of contract application and reporting processes
- greater common understandings and capacities to carry out performance measurement in both sectors, and new mechanisms for securing nonprofit advice as state performance goals and processes are set for performance-based contracts
- joint search for creative ways to address serious resource limitations, identifying potential cost savings and more effectively pursuing grant opportunities now slipping through the cracks
- better joint planning for services and more effective, genuine partnership efforts

"Our challenge is now to build on some early small-scale successes in improving things, to advance deeper reforms over the next year or two," Auger said. This effort will be advanced by a Human Service Leadership Summit planned for fall 2009.

The Forward Together Project itself has been a partnership, involving not only the University of Delaware, but also the state Department of Health and Human Services, the Department of Services for Children, Youth, and Their Families, the Delaware Association of Nonprofit Agencies, and the United Way. Project staff has included Maria Aristigueta, director of the University of Delaware's School of Urban Affairs & Public Policy,

as well as University of Delaware faculty members Kathy Denhardt, John McNutt, and Don Unger. Copies of the Forward Together report are available free of charge by e-mailing auger@udel.edu.

—by Deborah Auger