

Nonprofits in Crisis: Alternatives to Closing (Part Three)

03.09.21 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



The pandemic has unevenly affected the nonprofit sector.

Some organizations – food banks and health agencies, for instance – were allowed to remain open as essential services to meet surging demand. There has been continuing revenue from government, funders, and private donors but not nearly enough to meet the skyrocketing extra costs.

Many other nonprofits, though, faced an entirely different reality. The COVID-19 crisis struck quickly and brutally; there were mandatory lockdowns and, in any event, a population reluctant to gather in public. The usual programs, attractions, and fundraisers that are the lifeblood of so many groups became impossible to do. For this larger segment of the nonprofit community, there have been real doubts about their ability to make it to the other side of this pandemic — whenever that will happen.

But from both groups, there have been remarkable stories of resilience and innovation.

Here, in Part Three of our [series](#), we'll begin with the groups who thought they were faced with little choice but to turn out the lights and watch helplessly as everything they had worked and planned for was about to disappear.

Pivoting Programs, Delivery

In [Part Two](#), we wrote about a June 2020 survey in which respondents were both overwhelmed and worried but also somewhat hopeful. One nonprofit executive observed that the pandemic “inspired us to be more agile, to [pivot and approach issues](#) more innovatively, and challenged us to look at our work differently going forward.” Another noted that “it’s been very difficult in many ways but also very positive in adapting our culture to be more fluid, nimble, and paperless.”

These comments were part of an article – *COVID-19's Impact on Nonprofits' Revenues, Digitization, and Mergers* (June 4, 2020) – by David La Piana, *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. He is the same expert who – a decade ago – published *Merging Wisely*, the essay we cited widely in Part Two.

“Some of the creativity,” noted Mr. La Piana about the COVID-19 crisis, “arises directly from the need to be remote and rely on technology.” Virtual fundraisers and Zoom meetings, though, are only part of the changes. Some 82% of respondents in his survey – from across all subsectors of the nonprofit community – report “digitalizing some or all of [their] programs and services....”

This kind of broader change means that “...[n]ot everything will go back to the way things were.” A silver lining of the pandemic crisis is that it has pushed a somewhat hesitant nonprofit sector more fully into the digital age.

A few examples from around the nation demonstrate innovations in programming or in delivery methods that have helped the organization survive and, in some cases, to unexpectedly expand its reach into formerly untapped “markets.”

Examples: The Mission Survives

There are certain programs that seem unlikely candidates for even a temporary transition from in-person activities and contact to operating virtually.

For example, the well-known Big Brothers Big Sisters network has, for over a century, carried out the founders’ vision “of bringing caring role models into the lives of children.” Of course, personal contact between the Bigs and the Littles has always been the hallmark of the program. But when the pandemic made in-person interaction impossible, a local like Big Brothers Big Sisters of Sheboygan County Wisconsin made the critical pivot to virtual operations. They continue to “match Bigs with Littles, only virtually.” On the website, the Sheboygan County group explains its COVID-19 era temporary policy: “At a time like this, our mission to ignite the power and promise of youth is more important than ever. Here’s how we’re continuing to serve Sheboygan’s youth while keeping our Littles, Bigs, and staff safe.” Activities include learning languages together, watching movies at the same time, and playing games online.

“The consequence of COVID-19 has been particularly brutal to arts and cultural organizations, but ... there have been some remarkable adaptations to the situation that forced performing arts groups to shut down the usual presentations.” For instance, in the greater Memphis area, Opera Memphis now has virtual events “as if they were performing to a live audience.” They also go “around in trucks, singing.” The Germantown Performing Arts Center has an outdoor stage, another theater has started playwrights workshops, and dance performers now show their rehearsals virtually.

Examples: Mission and Reach Expand

In other examples, the COVID-19 adaptations have helped organizations find new patrons, clients, and beneficiaries. In some cases, the pivot has resulted in formerly untapped “markets” finding *them*

A Wisconsin youth theater company – Dare to Dream – has been able to continue and expand its mission “which is dedicated to bringing joy to children while helping them find and share their voices with the world.” Instead of offering in-person workshops and classes to local children, they switched to posting the classes and learning materials online. That, of course, could have been established in-house but the organization’s leader Rachel Thuermer found an opportunity to use an outside service provider, Outschool. Before the pandemic, the organization served 350 children in Sheboygan County; within six months, its reach jumped to 1,500 globally.

Worship services are normally a local event: in-person and inside a building. And, (notwithstanding some high-profile court victories recently allowing inside religious services to continue despite COVID-19), many groups have gone online. Local congregation members are certainly grateful for the opportunity to “connect” safely with clergy and fellow worshippers. But a not-unsurprising dividend is that going virtual brings in an entirely new “congregation” swelling the online “pews” each week. This move not only expands the reach and impact of the mission but also increases the potential donor base. For instance, many Reform and Conservative synagogues around the United States have wholeheartedly embraced this pivot, and have been “found” by participants not only in the U.S. but worldwide. For a religion that does not have houses of worship in each community, this development has been a godsend – forgive the pun – to Jews living outside large metropolitan areas. And it’s been a treat for all participants, no matter where they live, who can now enjoy listening each week to some of the finest cantors in the world.

Conclusion

The pandemic has been “... a worrying time. But it’s also a time of opportunity,” according to Steve Zimmerman, Principal of Spectrum Nonprofit Services, specializing in nonprofit sustainability and strategy. “It might well be the time to reimagine who you are and what you do and to make your organization better in the process.” See Reimagine Your Nonprofit to Survive the Crisis (June 1, 2020), *Harvard Business Review*.

In Part Four, we’ll explore some inspiring “spontaneous collaborations” in the nonprofit sector during this COVID-19 crisis, particularly by the (relatively lucky) organizations that stayed open but have faced skyrocketing new demand for services.

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