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The State of Nonprofit Advocacy in Nebraska: Finding from the 2018 Nebraska Nonprofit Advocacy Survey

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The College of Public Affairs and Community Service (CPACS) was created in 1973 to ensure that the university was responsive to the critical social needs of our community and state. The College was given the mission not only to provide educational programs of the highest caliber to prepare students for leadership in public service, but also to reach out to the community to help solve public problems.

The College has become a national leader among similar colleges, with nine programs ranked in the top 25 in the nation. Our faculty ranks are among the finest in their disciplines. Faculty, staff, and students are integral to the community and state because of our applied research, service learning, and community partnerships. We take our duty seriously to help address social needs and craft solutions to local, state, and national problems. For more information, visit our website: cpacs.unomaha.edu

CPACS Urban Research Awards

Part of the mission of the College of Public Affairs and Community Service (CPACS) is to conduct research, especially as it relates to concerns of our local and statewide constituencies. CPACS has always had an urban mission, and one way that mission is served is to perform applied research relevant to urban society in general, and the Omaha metropolitan area and other Nebraska urban communities in particular. Beginning in 2014, the CPACS Dean provided funding for projects with high relevance to current urban issues, with the potential to apply the findings to practice in Nebraska, Iowa and beyond.



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STUDY OVERVIEW

Without the involvement of nonprofit organizations in the policymaking process, the populations nonprofits serve are left without effective representation. By giving input to the process of developing public policies, nonprofit organizations not only protect the wellbeing of their clients, but also reach beyond assistance to promote economic and social justice, strengthen democracy and equality of opportunities, and enhance civic participation in order to promote a collective goal or interest.

In 2018, the University of Nebraska Omaha's School of Public Administration partnered with the Coalition for a Strong Nebraska and the Nonprofit Association of the Midlands to survey 148 Nebraska nonprofit leaders and 41 state-level policymakers to understand current nonprofit advocacy knowledge and trends in the state.

This research showed that many nonprofit staff and policymakers lack knowledge about nonprofit lobbying rules. There also is divergent thought between which lobbying activities Nebraska nonprofits currently use and the type of lobbying activities policymakers think are most effective.

NONPROFIT AND POLICYMAKER ADVOCACY AND LOBBYING KNOWLEDGE

Nonprofits and policymakers were given a list of seven statements about legal advocacy and lobbying rights. The table to the right provides a snapshot of each of the statements along with the percentage of respondents who selected the right answer.

As seen in the table, misconceptions exist around the role nonprofits can play in advocacy and lobbying in Nebraska, suggesting the need for an increase in statewide education.

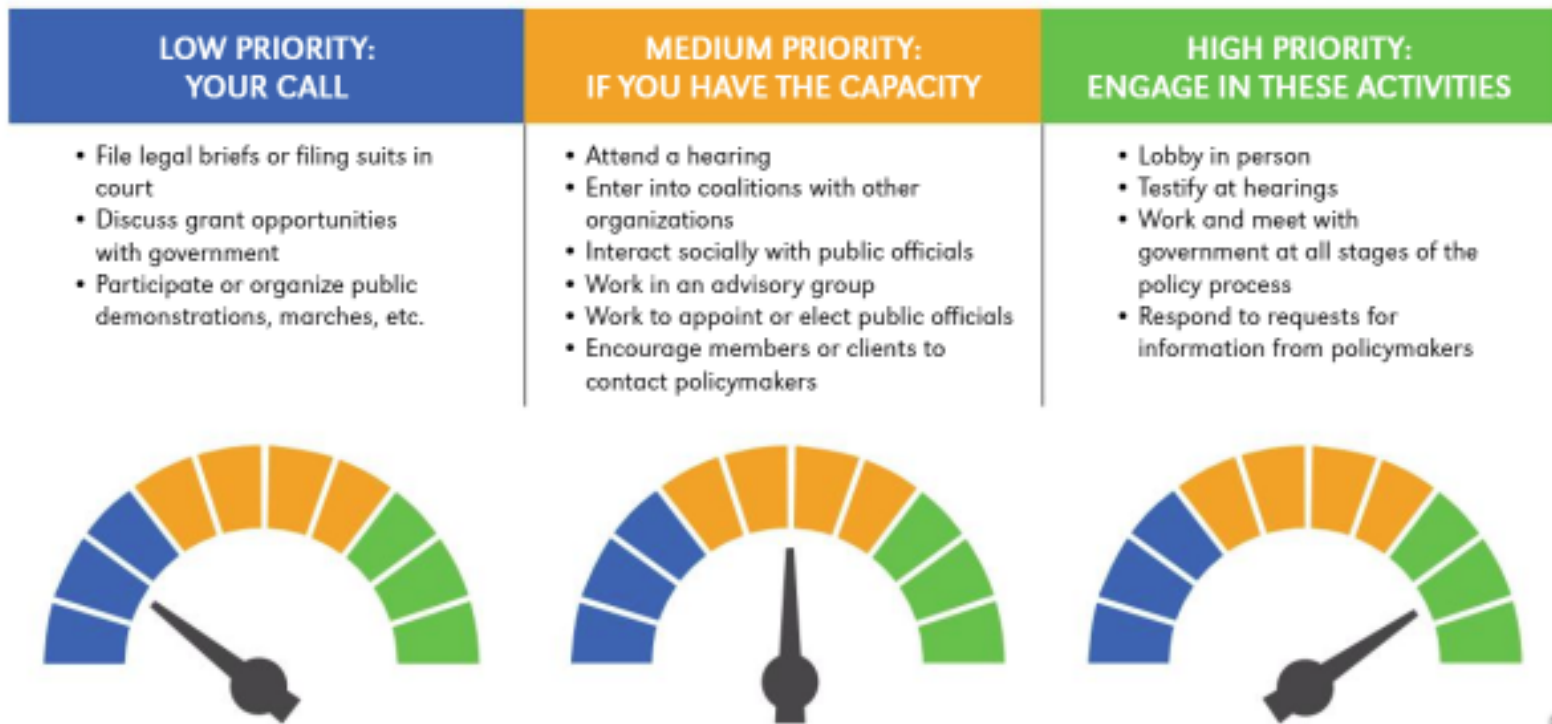
For example, only 47% of nonprofit leaders understood that they could lobby if part of their budget comes from government funds, but 76% understood that they could not use those government funds to lobby.

Additionally, only 35% of policymakers understood that 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations cannot endorse a candidate or elected official about policy matters.

	PERCENT WITH CORRECT ANSWER		CORRECT ANSWER
	Nonprofits	Policymakers	
Support or oppose legislation under current IRS regulations	64%	75%	YES
Take a policy position without reference to a piece of legislation, a bill, etc.	76%	78%	YES
Support or oppose regulations	75%	83%	YES
Lobby if part of your budget comes from government funds	47%	60%	YES
Use government funds to lobby	76%	65%	NO
Endorse a candidate or elected official about policy matters	74%	35%	NO
Sponsor a forum or candidate debate for elected office	44%	80%	YES







WHAT NONPROFIT ACTIVITIES ARE THE MOST EFFECTIVE FOR POLICY CHANGE?

Nonprofit organizations frequently engage in advocacy activities, but it is often unclear which activities are the most effective for policy change. In this survey, nonprofit leaders were given a list of advocacy activities and asked to share how frequently they engaged in these activities. Policymakers were given the same list and were asked how effective these activities are toward influencing public policy. The figure below shows recommended engagement levels for specific advocacy activities based on the perceived perspective of state policymakers.



SPECIFIC FORMS OF COMMUNICATION MATTER FOR EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY

- MOST EFFECTIVE:** Email and phone calls are the most frequently used strategies by nonprofits, and the most effective strategies according to policymakers.
- LEAST EFFECTIVE:** The use of social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook are the least effective.
- ANOTHER PREFERRED METHOD:** Policymakers consistently stated in-person meetings as another highly effective form of communication.

	NONPROFIT USE FOR ADVOCACY		POLICYMAKER'S PERSPECTIVES ON DIFFERENT FORMS OF COMMUNICATION				
	Yes	No	Not Effective At All	Slightly Effective	Moderately Effective	Very Effective	Extremely Effective
 Email	75%	25%	2%	7%	41%	29%	20%
 Phone	68%	32%	0%	15%	34%	34%	17%
 Twitter	59%	41%	60%	30%	10%	0%	0%
 Facebook	58%	42%	46%	37%	15%	2%	0%
 Video Conferencing	44%	56%	30%	25%	28%	15%	3%
 Websites/Blogs	25%	75%	17%	54%	24%	2%	2%

WHO FROM A NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION IS INFLUENTIAL IN SHAPING PUBLIC POLICY?

This research also sought to determine which individuals have the greatest influence in shaping public policy. While executive directors are often tasked with advocacy and engagement, policymakers also seek the voices of individuals impacted by policy decisions such as direct service providers and individual members/clients.

LOW INFLUENCE	MEDIUM INFLUENCE	HIGH INFLUENCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Contributors other than members or clientsFoundations and other funding agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Political party leadersOther national organizations active in policyBoard members	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Individual policy expertsDirect service providersElected and appointed officialsExecutive DirectorProfessional staffIndividual members or clients



WHY NOT?

We asked nonprofits about some of the different ways they do and do not engage with their stakeholders in their lobbying activities.

▶ **71%** of nonprofits never provide transportation for clients to government meetings

29% never link clients/ members to legislative offices or elected officials

31% never encourage clients to attend public hearings or meetings

These numbers are important, especially if we want to make it clear that clients and community members are an important advocacy stakeholder group.

HOW CAN MY ORGANIZATION MOVE FORWARD WITH ADVOCACY?

The findings in this brief highlight the important gaps in advocacy knowledge among Nebraska nonprofit leaders and state-level policymakers, but also provide areas for growth.

Get Educated: Nonprofits and policymakers continue to be misinformed about nonprofit advocacy and lobbying rights. Make sure to seek information and training in Nebraska through organizations such as the Coalition for a Strong Nebraska and/ or Nonprofit Association of the Midlands, or national organizations such as Bolder Advocacy and the National Council of Nonprofits.

Get Focused: Prioritize your nonprofit activities based on your organization's goals and capacity. Based on this study's findings, we recommend a focus on lobbying in person, testifying at legislative hearings, or working directly with government officials to effectively influence policy change.

Get Strategic: When deciding who to involve in advocacy work, it is just as important to involve and train members, clients, direct service providers, individual policy experts, and other staff as it is your executive director or board president.

RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

The final sample for this study consisted of 148 Nebraska nonprofit leaders and 41 Nebraska state policymakers.

NONPROFIT LOCATIONS

▶ Omaha	60%	Kearney	2%
Lincoln	23%	Lyons	1%
Grand Island	2%	Papillion	1%

Other Areas **11%**

Ainsworth, Alliance, Aurora, Beatrice, Columbus, Elkhorn, Fairbury, Fremont, Lexington, Lyons, Macy, Norfolk, North Platte, O'Neil, Oxford, Red Cloud, and Scottsbluff

NONPROFIT TYPES

Human Services	47%
Public, Societal Benefit	27%
Education and Research	27%
Health	26%
Other	19%
Arts, Culture, and Humanities	15%
Environment and Animals	5%
Religion	3%
International	1%

Other included: Public Safety, Civil Rights and Liberties, Housing, and Youth

NONPROFIT RESPONDENTS

CEO/Executive Director/ Another Director	48%
Staff Member	40%
Other	9%
Board Member	3%

POLICYMAKER RESPONDENTS

Legislative or Administrative Aides	50%
Other positions (e.g., Legal Counsel, Ombudsman)	25%
State Senator	12.5%
Researcher or Analyst	12.5%

Time spent in these positions ranged from 4 months to 31 years, with an average of 5 years spent in these roles.

EXPERIENCE WITH ADVOCACY

40% of nonprofit organizations have engaged in advocacy for 20 or more years

23% have engaged for 0-2 years



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