

**Local Government Collaborations with Nonprofits
In North Carolina**



Prepared by the
Public Policy
Institute of
Western
Carolina
University

Executive Summary

In 2015 the Public Policy Institute (PPI) at Western Carolina University (WCU), conducted a survey focused on local government collaborations with nonprofits. The survey is concerned with specific programs, practices, and partnerships utilized by local governments in relation to nonprofits. By better understanding patterns and trends in regards to local government collaboration with nonprofits, the foundation is laid for stronger ties between the two in the future.

These survey responses highlighted several important trends in local government collaboration with nonprofits:

- Within the last 3 years a large portion of respondents (49%) stated that their nonprofit has **frequently** partnered with nonprofits in some form of collaboration.
- Over the next 3 years most respondents (99%) stated that their expected interaction with nonprofits will either **increase or stay the same**.
- The most common areas for government collaboration with nonprofits were in **Arts/Culture/Museums, Economic Development and Planning, Parks and Recreation and Fire**.
- The **majority** of respondents (61%) stated that the types of duties, services, or resources shared with local government agencies are related to informational exchanges between organizations.
- When asked where the **decision-making authority** rests when nonprofits and local governments collaborate, 37% of respondents stated that the decision-making authority is **shared** fairly equally between local government and nonprofit agencies.
- Overall, the majority of respondents (54%) stated that they believe collaborating with nonprofits has been **effective or very effective** in meeting their local government's intended goals and objectives.

SURVEY METHODS

This survey was distributed to 626 county managers and city managers. The survey was comprised of 26 questions; both multiple choice and open-ended questions were asked. The goal was to gauge how much local governments collaborated with nonprofit organizations, in what service areas, and the effectiveness of those collaborations. The survey was distributed online to email addresses provided by the NC League of Municipalities and county contact information via the counties' web pages. For those county managers that did not respond to the email requests, follow-up mail surveys were also provided. We received 120 usable responses (representing a response rate of 19%), including 19 county managers and 101 town managers, from across 52 different counties.

SURVEY RESULTS

I. Trends in Local Government Collaboration with Nonprofits

Over the last three years a majority of survey respondents (88%) stated that they collaborated with nonprofit organizations in some capacity. Nearly half of the respondents (49%) said they worked with nonprofits “frequently or very frequently,” while 37% stated they “occasionally or rarely/very rarely” collaborated with nonprofit organizations. In the past three years 12% of respondents indicated they did not collaborate in any capacity, with a nonprofit organization. The data provided by respondents indicates that most local governments in North Carolina collaborate in some capacity with nonprofit organizations. Survey respondents also reported that they partnered with a wide range of nonprofit organizations; these ranged from museums and libraries to law enforcement and youth development. On average, local governments work with about eight nonprofit organizations. This ran the gamut of possibilities: some respondents did not collaborate or collaborated with only one organization while other respondents collaborated with as many as 50.

Local governments also fund nonprofits at a high rate. When asked if they funded grants or contracts with nonprofits, 65% of respondents funded either one or both.

II. Service Area Partnerships

Respondents were asked to indicate the service areas in which they collaborated with nonprofit organizations, more than one service area could possibly be checked. The service area with the highest collaboration rate was “Arts/Culture/Museums” with 61%. “Economic Development/Planning”



and “Parks/Recreation” both had a collaboration rate of 58%. Other significant service area collaborations were “Fire” (40%) and “Education/Environment” (34%). Other areas mentioned to a lesser extent included “Community Clean-Up,” “Veteran’s Organizations” and “Chambers of Commerce” (See Figure 1).

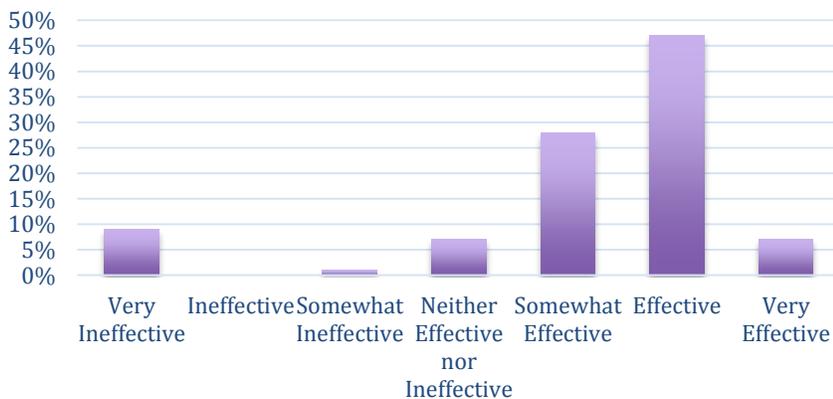
As one respondent commented:

Our relationship with our volunteer fire departments saves our home owners millions of dollars each year in insurance premiums, provides fire protection to our communities and places hundreds of paramedics and EMT's in our communities.

III. Evaluating Local Government and Nonprofit Cooperation

Respondents were also asked which service areas they believed served as the most effective collaboration areas between local governments and nonprofit organizations. “Economic Development/Planning” collaborations were considered the most effective, with 22% of respondents citing this area as effective. “Arts/Culture/Museums” was the second most effective category (13%), followed by Parks/Recreation with 11%. Local governments felt their collaboration was the least effective in the areas of Disaster Planning/Emergency Response (1%), Health (1%) and Law Enforcement/Corrections (>1%).

Figure 2: Overall, how effective is nonprofit collaboration in meeting its intended goals?



When respondents were asked to what extent collaborating with nonprofits had helped accomplish certain goals, in almost every category respondents agreed that collaboration with nonprofits had helped to either some extent or great extent, as displayed in Table 1 below. This was particularly true for creating more favorable attitudes toward nonprofits by public employees, increasing access to volunteers and resources, and increasing the level of community services and programs. Respondents

also felt that collaborating with nonprofits had increased the quality of community services and programs, as well as increased citizen engagement in communities. They also felt that collaborating with nonprofits had saved their local government money, as 71% of respondents agreed that collaboration with nonprofits saved them money to some extent. See Table 1 below.

When asked overall how successful these partnerships were, 47% replied that intended goals had been met through nonprofit collaborations, while 7% stated that they were very effective. The majority of respondents felt that they were at least somewhat effective, with 82% of respondents

stating that it somewhat effective or higher (See Figure 2). The importance of these partnerships was noted by one respondent:

Our local library is a non-profit and as such requires tremendous public support. The operations at the local library provide services to our town and the surrounding community. Our town could not provide this service at the level of fund they receive.”

Table 1: To What Extent have collaborations with nonprofits accomplished the following:

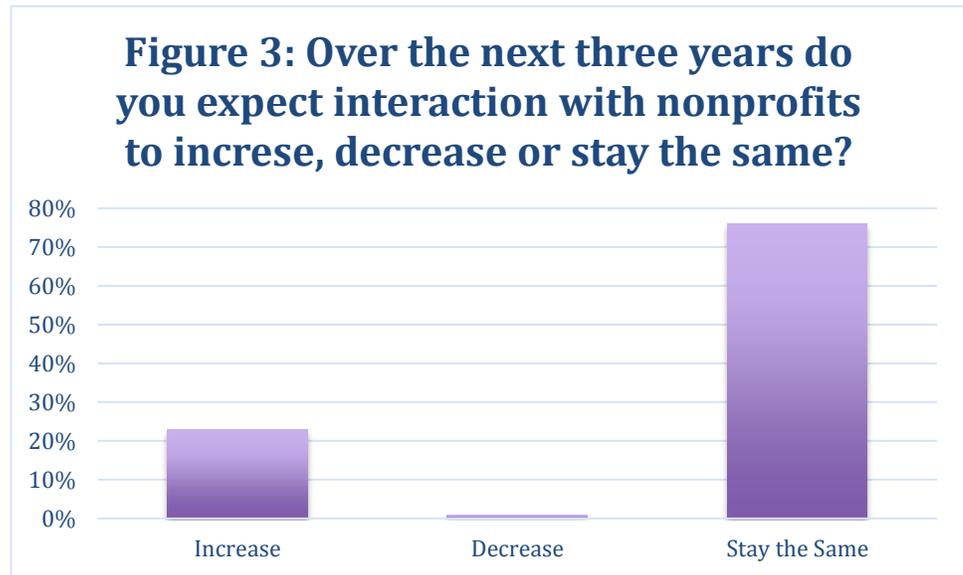
	To No Extent	To Some Extent	To A Great Extent	N/A
Saved Our Local Government Money	12.2%	47.6%	23.2%	17%
Increased the level of community services and programs	4.8%	38.6%	53%	3.6%
Increased the quality of community services and programs	6%	43.4%	48.2%	2.4%
Secured new public or private funding for local government	23.2%	47.6%	8.5%	20.7%
Secured new public or private funding for our nonprofit partners	14.5%	43.4%	25.3%	16.8%
Reduced our local government's need to compete with nonprofits for resources	25.3%	26.5%	18.1%	30.1%
Increased access to volunteers and other resources for our local government	11.9%	44.1%	36.9%	7.1%
Increased citizen satisfaction or trust in government	6.1%	50%	30.5%	13.4%
Increased our local government's trust in its nonprofit partners	6.1%	52.4%	15.9%	24.4%
Created more favorable attitudes by public employees toward nonprofit organizations	7.3%	52.4%	15.9%	24.4%
Created more favorable attitudes by elected officials toward nonprofit organizations	7.2%	43.4%	32.5%	16.9%
Increased citizen engagement in community activities	2.4%	50%	39.3%	8.3%

IV. Changes in Local Government Collaborations with Nonprofits

Most respondents reported that their local government’s outside collaborations were consistent from one year to the next, with 53% answering that their involvement with nonprofit organizations

had “stayed the same” since 2012. However, 41% of respondents said that their localities had increased the frequency with which they employed the help of nonprofits. Only 6% of respondents said collaboration had actually declined in the recent past.

When asked about potential future interactions with nonprofits over the next three years, 76% of respondents anticipated similar levels of involvement in that time period. Only one respondent expected collaboration to decrease. The remaining 23% reported expecting an increase in these public partnerships. See Figure 3.



For three years, there has been a partnership with the local Chamber of Commerce to hold a community festival that draws thousands into the town limits, brings government and local business owners together, and exposes the towns businesses and overall attributes to those who might not otherwise find themselves within the town limits.

Respondents were asked what factors influenced local governments’ decisions to further collaborate with nonprofits. The promotion of shared goals was the most common response, while the next two most popular answers were improving the quality of local services and improving the community’s access to services. Rounding out the top five factors were solving problems that were unable to be solved alone and using resources more cost-effectively with nonprofit organizations. Those respondents that indicated they did not partner with nonprofits were asked why were not involved in these types of collaborations. However, few respondents provided reasons for not partnering.

V. Potential Limits to Collaboration

As mentioned in the third section, competition for resources between local governments and nonprofit organizations leaves many of the former with unaccomplished goals. While only 5% of respondents had experienced late payments, albeit rare ones, from nonprofit organizations, concerns over already limited resources may deter vulnerable governments from attempting collaboration. When asked specifically how these collaborations accomplished funding goals, 7% said that these collaborations had no effect on saving local government money, and 27% said to no extent did partnering with nonprofits aid in securing public or private funds.

To further explore local government managers' opinions about nonprofit organizations, we asked a series of opinion questions targeting potential partnership limitations, as displayed in Table 2. Staffing and resources limitations appear as one potential hindrance to collaboration, as over one-fourth (27%) of respondents agreed/strongly agreed with the statement that "governments do not have the staff or time to manage collaborations with nonprofits." Others also saw competition for resources as an issue, as 20% of respondents agreed with the statement that competition discourages collaboration. However, very few respondents had the opinion that nonprofits provide poor or unreliable services.

In the open-ended comments, some provided very positive view of these collaborations:

Our county provides grants annually to non-profits that provide services that are needed in our community that the county is not providing. Success is measured in the number of individuals served and the quality of the services provided.

While most comments were positive, some managers indicated some negative prior experiences, such as one respondent speaking of a particular project:

[T]he nonprofit simply didn't have their act together; it wasn't handled professionally on the nonprofits part.

Table 2: Please respond to whether you disagree or agree with the following statements:					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Private interests (including those of nonprofits) do not belong in public service delivery	14.8%	39.8%	35.2%	9.1%	1.1%
Competition for resources discourages local governments and nonprofits from collaborating	6.8%	39.8%	33.0%	19.3%	1.1%
Governments do not have the staff or time to manage collaborations with nonprofits	9.1%	39.8%	23.9%	23.9%	3.4%
Differences in hours of operation, office locations, or other administrative differences between nonprofits and local government make it difficult to collaborate	6.8%	53.4%	26.1%	13.6%	0.0%
Nonprofit organizations provide unreliable or poor quality services	14.8%	51.1%	30.7%	3.4%	0.0%
Our local government has not developed strong enough relationships with the nonprofit sector to partner with them	17.0%	50.0%	18.2%	12.5%	2.3%
Nonprofit organizations cannot be relied on to represent the entire community	3.4%	47.7%	30.7%	14.8%	3.4%
When government and nonprofit organizations are involved in the same service area, nonprofits tend to lose out	1.1%	44.3%	42.0%	12.5%	0.0%
When government and nonprofit organizations are involved in the same service area, governments tend to lose out	2.3%	54.5%	40.9%	2.3%	0.0%

VI. Conclusion and Recommendation from Findings

Our survey found that overall interactions between local governments and nonprofits is incredibly common, and has the potential to continue to increase in frequency going forward. These partnerships are in a wide range of service areas, most prominently in areas like arts and culture, parks and recreation, and fire services. These partnerships served to increase the quantity and quality of community service, as well as increasing citizen engagement. Importantly, it was also found that local governments saved money through partnerships with nonprofit groups. These partnerships also had a secondary effect of increasing trust and favorable opinions of nonprofits among local government officials and employees.

From this data, there are several recommendations that we can make to local governments concerning nonprofits:

- Partnerships with nonprofits can save local government money, and the overall consensus is that they are effectively meeting their goals. Therefore, local governments should look into expansion of nonprofit partnerships in areas in which they find it to be most successful.
- Expansion of partnerships should be attempted in more service areas, even in a small scale. Initial partnerships can increase trust and lead to better future relationships between local governments and nonprofits.
- Have clear goals leading into partnerships and clear processes and expectations for achieving the goals of the partnership. Clarity in responsibilities and procedures, as well as having written agreements, can help guide the partnership.