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Priorities for a New President

By Ian Wilhelm

As Barack Obama prepares to enter the White House, he comes to power during a turbulent period in American history, with the nation facing a financial meltdown, two wars, and an increasing number of people struggling to meet basic needs.

But nonprofit leaders see opportunities in the crisis. They say the new president should work more closely with charities and foundations to solve the country's big problems — and help philanthropy grow during an economic downturn.

To explore what the incoming Obama administration means for nonprofit groups, The Chronicle interviewed numerous charity officials and experts, asking them what the new president can do to strengthen philanthropy, fund raising, and volunteerism during the next four years.

Of utmost importance for many of them is the need for the president to spur economic growth to trigger greater giving. But they also called for a more prominent role for charitable groups in the administration, a White House Office of Civic Engagement, for example, or a National Institute of Philanthropy, which would offer prizes for effective giving and promote collaboration among donors.

Others called for new government policies to aid cash-strapped charities, such as making financial assistance available to them from the Small Business Administration or allowing donors to food banks and other social-service charities to receive greater tax benefits for their gifts.

Still other nonprofit leaders argued that, despite the problems Americans are experiencing at home, Mr. Obama should not ignore the need in Africa and other impoverished regions of the world, urging him to increase foreign aid and reduce barriers to international giving.

The following are excerpts from the advice nonprofit officials have for the next president. You will find discussion among Chronicle readers about priorities for the next president online.

Provide Federal Assistance to Nonprofit Groups

In the past decade, government has outsourced huge segments of human services to nonprofit organizations, and we have been exhorted to behave more like private businesses.



Successful nonprofits have taken Sarbanes-Oxley seriously; we have high-functioning independent boards, strategic plans, measurable outcomes, and fiscal transparency. We are ready to meet the challenges presented by the economic crisis; indeed we already are meeting them.

Here in the South Bronx we have extended the hours of our food pantry to deal with the growing lines that start forming hours before we open. We are counseling families on debt management and how to avoid eviction and foreclosure. We provide training to the jobless in how to start their own microenterprises.

Yet we remain seriously undercapitalized, which will make it almost impossible to keep up with the skyrocketing demand for our help in preventing evictions, providing food and shelter, creating business opportunities, and caring for children. The success of our work will keep more families from homelessness, hunger, illness, and violence.

The federal government could do a number of things:

- Expand the definition of "small business" to include nonprofit organizations, making them eligible for any assistance the Small Business Administration eventually provides.
- Make loan funds and capital infusions available to high-performing organizations with track records of serving low-income communities.
- Create a loan-guarantee program for nonprofits so that loan funds obtained from a nonfederal source would be guaranteed by the federal government.

It will take coordinated work among government, philanthropy, and the nonprofit sector to stanch the losses in our nation's poorest communities.

— Nancy Biberman, president of the Women's Housing and Economic Development Corporation, in New York