Legacy Giving: Are Your Donors Waiting To Be Asked About Their Legacies?

By: Amy Silver O'Leary

The coronavirus crisis has led to a surge in Americans preparing wills and making estate plans. If your nonprofit does not yet have a legacy or planned giving program in place, it's a good time to consider how to thoughtfully introduce this possibility to your donors.

Legacy giving (also called planned giving) can help your nonprofit establish long-term sustainability while engaging donors in the life of your organization – and providing them with an opportunity to create meaning in their lives today.

Fewer than 6 percent of Americans include a charitable bequest in their will or estate plan—but one in three say they would consider doing so if asked. In one survey, only 17 percent of donors who said they were *open* to a conversation about legacy giving had been *invited* to have such a conversation by their favorite charity. The bottom line on these compelling statistics: we should be asking our donors about their legacies. And with a modest amount of training and preparation, even small organizations with limited capacity can engage fruitfully – and sensitively – in these conversations.

Often staff and board members of small to midsize nonprofits believe that legacy giving programs are only for organizations with specialized development staff. They might be surprised to learn that there are simple ways to get started that talented generalists can implement, and that board members can help with. In addition, your nonprofit might already be connected to resources that can be called upon when more technical expertise is needed, such as your bank, community foundation, or faith-based umbrella organization. Also surprising to many: rather than divert resources from present giving, legacy gift conversations often result in donors *increasing* their annual gifts.

This often-untapped area of development has the potential to set smaller organizations on a path to long-term sustainability. To offer guidance, the National Council of Nonprofits partnered with Neon One to create a new Guide to Legacy Giving, offering an overview of the subject and directing the readers to dozens of reliable resources where they can learn more; and presented a public webinar on Legacy Giving in April, 2021, featuring special guest presenter Joe Tumolo, CAP. As CEO of Gift Planning Development, Joe has helped more than 100 organizations start or expand their gift planning programs. The webinar is recommended for executives, board members, and development professionals of small to midsized nonprofits who are ready to get more confident and intentional with legacy giving.

Funders might also want to learn more about the subject, and should consider offering support for grantees' legacy programs as a wise capacity-building investment. The Harold Grinspoon Foundation's "Life & Legacy" project is an enormously successful example of such a project, helping Jewish organizations and communities across the county secure more than $1 billion in legacy commitments in eight years. One interesting aspect of Life & Legacy program is that it's a community-wide approach to developing legacy gifts to Jewish organizations, regardless of what specific organization each gift benefits. This approach can work among faith-based, issue-based, geographical, and other communities where a group of nonprofits bands together – ideally with funder support – to develop their legacy capacity together.

Long-term financial sustainability has never been more important for nonprofits, and leaders must carefully select among possible revenue streams as they plan their strategies. Legacy giving is one option that can engage donors more deeply today while providing them with the opportunity to ensure a stronger long-term future for the nonprofits they care about.