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From Surveys to Advocacy to Solutions

The few minutes it takes you to fill out a survey can drive months, even years, of advocacy work that shapes legislation and improves nonprofits' ability to advance their missions. By providing input and sharing experiences, you help document challenges, expose trends, and identify solutions. A case in point is the nonprofit workforce shortages crisis. Until the results of surveys “blew the whistle” on the problem, hardly anyone recognized that everyone suffers the consequences when their local charitable organizations don't have the staff to address community needs. Now, thanks to multiple survey reports, the problem and policy solutions are front and center at the [federal](#), state, and [local](#) levels.

Late last fall, the National Council of Nonprofits launched an online survey asking nonprofits to share the challenges they were facing and the effects on the people they serve. Benefitting from more than 1,000 responses in all 50 states, the results showed that 76% of nonprofits had employee vacancy rates of more than 10%: 33.5% reported staff openings of between 10 and 19 percent, 26 percent had vacancy rates of 20 to 29 percent, and 16% with vacancies greater than 30 percent. Eight out of 10 nonprofits (79%) identified **salary competition** as a factor preventing them from filling job openings, and nearly a quarter (23%) stated that the inability to find child care affected recruitment and retention. These statistics

were strengthened by testimonials from frontline nonprofits that in turn shaped solutions of general application and government grants and contracting reform. During a [hearing before the Boston City Council](#) that featured a nonprofit panel, The [National Council of Nonprofits](#) cited this data to focus Councilors both on the crisis at hand and how they could use American Rescue Plan Act funds to provide immediate relief. In fact, all of the nonprofit witnesses at the hearing addressed the challenges of the workforce shortages and some proposed solutions including support of multi-year agreements and grants, investing ARPA funds, and prioritizing equity from the outset.

In March, the **CT Community Nonprofit Alliance** (The Alliance) published its [2022 State of the Connecticut Nonprofit Sector](#), based on insights shared through a survey and interviews with participating CEOs and executive directors. The report highlights financial health, service delivery and demand, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), and workforce challenges. The report found that survey responses “depict a strained sector that is showing cracks.” For instance, about a third of small nonprofits (those with budgets under \$1 million) indicated that they did not access relief funds such as the Paycheck Protection Program or Employee Retention Tax Credit. Without access to those funds, nonprofits reported it was harder to sustain operations while experiencing an increased demand for services. On workforce challenges, one-in-five nonprofits reported 20-29% vacancies in their workforce. Alarming, fifteen percent of BIPOC-led organizations have more than half of their positions vacant. Survey responses guided The Alliance’s advocacy to increase government funding for the state’s nonprofits, which resulted in [securing \\$330 million in funding increases](#) and other relief in the state’s biennium budget.

The **New Jersey Center for Nonprofits’** annual survey report, [New Jersey Nonprofits: Trends and Outlook 2022](#), shows that nonprofits are still contending with gaps between demand for services and funding, the impact of COVID-19, economic stressors, and ongoing racial inequities. A key finding from the survey is that “demands for services and rising expenses are still outpacing funding.” This is a longstanding problem for nonprofits that is expected to continue: four-out-of-five nonprofits predict that demand for services will rise, but only 55% anticipate an increase in funding. Coupled with the nonprofit workforce shortage crisis, New Jersey nonprofits expect to continue experiencing volatility. More than half (56%) of respondents reported staffing shortages, reporting an average vacancy rate of 21% and a total of nearly 1,300 unfilled positions. In the view of the state association of

nonprofits, these data are a call for funders to “embrace more flexibility and transparency in grantmaking,” including simplified applications and reporting procedures, and multi-year funding.

The newly released [2022 Oklahoma Nonprofit COVID-19 Report](#) from the **Oklahoma Center for Nonprofits** gauges the impact of the pandemic on indicators of organizational wellness such as funding and ability to serve. On the pandemic and public health guidelines, survey responses from arts, cultural, and humanities nonprofits indicated that their loss of earned income due to decreased demand continued. Seventy-seven percent of healthcare and human service providers reported an increase in demand for their services. Despite the challenges of higher costs and revenue loss, 40% of Oklahoma nonprofits expressed confidence in meeting their revenue goals for the year. Demonstrating flexibility and a willingness to adapt to changing circumstances and guidelines, more than half of nonprofits have adopted policies to encourage remote work days and adopted other policies to protect their staff. However, recruitment and retention remain a challenge according to survey responses: 29% of resigning staff cited burnout and mental health as a key factor. More than half of applicants turned down offers because the salary “was not competitive,” leaving organizations unable to refill positions.

Reviewing each of these survey reports, it is clear that data alone cannot speak to the depth of an issue and determine the solutions; testimonials and other anecdotes are necessary to bring these numbers to life. Nonprofits have raised awareness about longstanding problems related to government grants and contracts, grantmaking practices, legislation impacting nonprofits, and the nature of partnerships with the sector. Now there is more available quantitative and qualitative information on the impact the pandemic on charitable nonprofits and their ability to provide essential services to people and communities. Nonprofits and policymakers are well advised to carefully consider the approaches and solutions provided by nonprofits to overcome longstanding challenges, especially in areas disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.