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Connecting Candidates to Nonprofits

When all of the candidates agree with the priorities of the nonprofit community, then the people served “win” an election regardless of which candidate gets the most votes. But without all of the tools interest groups have for influencing elections (e.g., PACs, fundraisers, endorsements), charitable organizations have to be creative and proactive to ensure the candidates understand the impact of nonprofits in their districts. It benefits everyone when candidates – who become officeholders – understand how policies affect the ability of the organizations to serve the state’s residents.

In **Nebraska**, the **Nonprofit Association of the Midlands**, the state association of nonprofits, and Coalition for a Strong Nebraska hosted a [Legislative Candidate Information Session](#) this month. The event gave legislative candidates the opportunity to introduce themselves to the nonprofit community and to learn about the work being done and resources provided by the nonprofits in their districts.

The sponsors’ goal was sound: Create an event to educate candidates about nonprofit work, give candidates the opportunity to ask questions, and show the state’s nonprofit community to candidates for greater understanding about how they help people in their districts. The hosts made abundantly clear that neither they nor charitable nonprofits endorse or oppose candidates for public office or promote or endorse any political party.

The [CT Community Nonprofit Alliance](#) recently convened two virtual Legislative Candidate Forums – one each for candidates to the state Legislature from the Hartford and New Haven areas. The events were billed not as debates, but as opportunities for candidates from all political parties to introduce themselves to their local nonprofits. An added benefit of the forums is that it gave CT Alliance members a way to encourage their local legislative candidates to complete a [Legislative Candidate Questionnaire](#), which then helps all voters understand the perspectives of individual candidates.

The CT Alliance also encourages nonprofits to host their own virtual candidate forum, which they explain “is an excellent way for candidates to hear about issues that impact your organization directly from their constituents.” The state association of nonprofits also identifies innovative formats to make the events even more interesting:

- An “**equal time Q&A**” features a moderator and/or a panel asking the same questions to candidates, allowing equal time for responses. The candidates should be briefed on the content, even if they do not receive questions in advance.
- A “**town hall**” allows the audience to ask questions. Questions should first be screened by a moderator to avoid partisan questions and to facilitate substantive dialogue.
- “**Candi-dating**” is speed dating for candidates and voters. It allows each person to meet with the candidates and ask their own questions in a (virtual) breakout room. All participating candidates rotate through all the breakout rooms for the same amount of time.

As long as [charitable nonprofits stay nonpartisan](#), the opportunities for candidate engagement and education are wide open. And the benefits to nonprofits, the people served, communities, the candidates, and democracy are immense.