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## Want Our Expertise? Pay Us, Grass-Roots Groups Say

By Rebecca Koenig



CJJC

Thelma Gooch demands the return of her home, stolen in a reverse mortgage scam, with support from Nell Myhand of Causa Justa, a Bay Area social-justice nonprofit.

The requests are relentless. Multiple emails from foundations, nonprofits, and government agencies land each week in Maria Poblet's inbox, asking the executive director of Causa Justa, a social-justice nonprofit, to serve as an unpaid liaison to the black and Latino families she works with.

Other leaders of small nonprofits know that type of request well. Sharonne Navas, executive director of the Equity in Education Coalition, once was asked to gather 1,000 signatures from Latinos in just a few days in exchange for \$100 to cover her transportation costs. And Vu Le fielded calls about free language-translation services when he was executive director of the Vietnamese Friendship Association.

Mr. Le, now the executive director of Rainier Valley Corps and author of the blog Nonprofit With Balls, has coined a term for the phenomenon: "trickle-down community engagement." It occurs, he says, when donors and foundations bypass small organizations with close community ties and instead fund larger nonprofits to carry out community programs. Those nonprofits then ask the small groups to help, usually for free.

It's a grievance familiar to many grass-roots groups, especially those that work with minorities. Sometimes it manifests on a grand scale: When protests erupted in Ferguson, Mo., community organizers complained that established nonprofits sucked up donations intended to help the local community without doing the hard, long-term work of empowering residents.

The issue also pops up through mundane requests for translation and signature-gathering work.

Although often well-intentioned, these bids for favors are unethical, counterproductive, and insulting, say community organizers.

"It's this assumption that community engagement is something that happens easily and randomly," says Ms. Navas. "There's not respect for the building of trust and relationships that goes into building a really good movement."

Now the leaders of some small groups are pushing back against what they view as attempts to devalue and undermine their work, rejecting requests to work without pay, educating foundations, and advocating for partnerships they consider more equitable.

### Requests for Free Help

What prompts these requests varies, community organizers say. Sometimes they come from nonprofits and foundations that seem to genuinely want to help marginalized people but don't know how. On other occasions, they appear to be token efforts to make contact with disadvantaged groups of people to fulfill a grant requirement.

Ms. Navas believes they stem from a lack of respect for community organizers that makes large nonprofits comfortable asking for freebies that they themselves would never provide another group. The discrepancy in the way large nonprofits approach each other and how they treat community organizers, Ms. Navas says, is like how a customer treats Starbucks vs. a local mom-and-pop coffee shop.

"You would never go to Starbucks and ask for a free doughnut," she says. "I wouldn't go to the Boys and Girls Club and say, 'Would you offer your program at my shop for free?'"

At its worst, says LaTosha Brown, project director of Grantmakers for Southern Progress at Neighborhood Funders Group, it's simply exploitation.

Not only does this practice tax small nonprofits, it also undermines the very communities that large nonprofits and foundations purport to help, Ms. Poblet says.

"People want to include the voice of communities of color," she says, "and yet the way it's done replicates the power dynamic that puts communities of color at a disadvantage in the first place."

Relying on larger nonprofits to run programs instead of providing money for grass-roots efforts misses opportunities to support people who are working to transform their lives, Ms. Brown says.

"The process for communities to win and to change their circumstances is often as important, if not more so, than the outcome itself," she says. "When disempowered and marginalized people change the circumstances in their community, they feel empowered."

### **Hard to Say 'No'**

Despite their objections, leaders of grass-roots groups say they often are tempted to accept offers to assist larger groups without receiving adequate compensation. They fear that denying these requests risks alienating potential donors and grant makers and hope that participating will generate awareness of their work.

"For many people, it's easier to accept that panel assignment for free and hope it will lead to something good that will lead to publicity," Mr. Le says.

Organizers also worry that if they don't comply with these requests, larger organizations will carry out projects that disrespect their constituents or that their constituents won't be represented at all.

"If they treat me like that," Ms. Navas says, "I fear how they treat my community."

### **Pushing Back**

Still, some are rejecting requests to do free work. And rather than simply saying no, several try to explain to nonprofits and foundations why they find their proposals problematic.

"Generally, we try to explain that the work of community engagement is *work*," Ms. Poblet says. "It takes hours, expertise, and relationships. Sometimes we also say, 'This is not aligned with the work we're doing, so we can't prioritize it right now.'"

That has cut down on requests, she says, and some donors have responded either by increasing their grant amounts to cover the costs of the work or by offering to provide other services in exchange.

Previously, when nonprofits asked Ms. Navas to rally the community she works with, she gave them a budget that accounts for the hours it would take her to call people, organize them, and create translated materials.

"A lot of organizations stopped calling," she says. "They didn't want to pay the truth."

Now Ms. Navas requires that larger nonprofits name her organization, Equity in Education Coalition, as a partner on its grant applications. And if she rejects a request to do community-organizing work for another nonprofit, she explains her rationale in an email and sends a copy of it to that group's grant maker to help educate the foundation, too.

"I would rather be an actual respected partner and get paid for it," she says.

### **Stirrings of Change**

At foundations, there are stirrings of change. Rather than ask for free labor, some provide small sums of money to compensate nonprofit leaders for their time and expertise when they advise on issues their communities face.

The Fund for Shared Insight, led by a group of seven foundations and one corporation, pays nonprofit leaders \$500 when they accept invitations to speak to the organization. It also reimburses their travel expenses.

"We just believe it's important that nonprofits are recognized for the contributions they make to foundations and to our learning," says Melinda Tuan, project manager for the fund.

In Oregon, the Meyer Memorial Trust pays \$250 to \$1,000 to local nonprofits that help organize and host its community-listening sessions, in addition to paying for the use of the nonprofits' offices. It pays charities whose leaders serve on panels or provide expertise on certain grant-making decisions. And when it asks grant recipients to visit its office, the Meyer Memorial Trust reimburses their transportation and lodging expenses.

These policies were inspired by feedback nonprofits provided about how the foundation could be a more equitable partner and remove barriers to its resources.

"We are being responsive to the field and what their needs are," Elisa Harrigan, a program officer at Meyer Memorial Trust, says. "It's a way of saying, 'We appreciate your participation and the expertise you bring to the room.'"

Trust leaders say they hope to avoid setting a precedent that people will participate in activities only if they're paid, especially since some of their advisers come from for-profit companies.

But so far, Ms. Harrigan says, the compensation policies have helped foster "genuine respect" between the foundation and its grantees.

And there's reason to suspect other nonprofits would appreciate similar treatment: When Ms. Harrigan suggested that more foundations offer honoraria during a session at the Independent Sector conference in October, the room erupted in applause.

### **Consultant Model**

Some foundation leaders and community organizers call for further-reaching reforms. Grant makers and nonprofits should pay grass-roots advisers like they pay other professional consultants, says Ms. Brown. They should investigate whether their nonprofit partners are regranteeing money equitably, says Lateefah Simon, program director at Rosenberg Foundation.

And they should consider supporting community groups directly rather than using intermediaries, says Maria Mottola, executive director of the New York Foundation, even if that requires doing extra research to find less-publicized groups.

Just because a community organization lacks resources "doesn't mean there's an absence of vision or an absence of will or an absence of leadership," Ms. Brown says.

At Rainier Valley Corps, Mr. Le tries to practice what he preaches. To create his nonprofit's new fellowship program for young leaders of color, he wanted feedback from the community organizations where the fellows would be placed. But rather than ask other executive directors to volunteer their time and join his board, he allocated \$25,000 from his \$225,000 budget to pay five nonprofits for their guidance.

"We treat them like experts," he says.

*Send an email to Rebecca Koenig.*