



State-Nonprofit Partnerships: Working for Texas

Community groups are in the news today, as all levels of government look for ways to provide services faster, better, and more cheaply. Here in Texas, many state agencies realized long ago that nonprofit organizations are often the best choice for delivering services. Partnerships between state agencies and nonprofits have been enriching the lives of Texans for years, and not just in the human service arena. Working with state agencies, nonprofits also contribute to housing, environmental protection, the arts, and historical preservation. Their partnerships range from formal agreements to small grants to large long-term contracts, but they all have one goal: improving the quality of life in Texas.

Why are nonprofits such good partners? They are in touch with local communities across the state – their needs, their strengths, and effective ways of mobilizing volunteers. Their location, staff, and board membership give them perspective that a state agency can't match. Long experience with the limitations of tight budgets forces nonprofit organizations to be creative, flexible, and efficient with their resources, so they can often deliver services at a lower cost than can a state bureaucracy.

Why do nonprofits partner with state agencies? The obvious benefits are financial – these partnerships bring resources that enhance the nonprofits' capacity to serve. Additional support means nonprofits can do more for their communities, through new projects, expanding and improving existing services, or both. But there are other benefits as well. Relationships with state agencies help legitimize a nonprofit to other funders and prospective partners. And though state reporting requirements can be challenging, they can also motivate nonprofits to continually improve data collection and focus on quality and results.

The profiles below highlight current examples of successful state/nonprofit partnerships. Each example demonstrates a unique alliance between a Texas state agency and their nonprofit partners, and reflects some of the many innovative ways that Texas' public and nonprofit sectors work together address a specific need and promote public good.

Protecting the Unprotected

The Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services (PRS) is the agency responsible for protecting children in Texas from abuse and neglect. The need is staggering – approximately 95,000 children were involved in investigations that confirmed abuse or neglect in 2000. PRS caseworkers struggle to give these children the attention they need, but rising caseloads and the increasing number and diverse needs of families in Texas make that job harder every year. To fulfill its mission of "Protecting the Unprotected," PRS needs help.

Enter the Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) program, which connects abused and neglected children in the court system with community volunteers who serve as their advocates. CASA volunteers focus their attention on one child or set of siblings and follow them until they are in a safe, permanent placement. CASA volunteers are an independent voice for these children, sharing first-hand insights about their needs so caseworkers and judges can make more informed decisions.

The first CASA program in Texas started in Dallas in 1989. By 2001, there were 2,014 CASA volunteers assisting more than 11,500 children in 142 Texas counties. Texas CASA is the fastest growing state association of CASA programs, and its goal is to bring CASA to 41 more counties by 2003. CASA is a model nonprofit organization that extends the work of a state agency and increases its effectiveness by mobilizing community volunteers. CASA volunteers aren't just a source of "more" time and effort - they're a critical resource for making better decisions for Texas children.

Accessing the Outdoors

Texas has over 100 state parks and natural areas, but many inner-city, rural, and minority communities don't have access to the outdoors in a way that other Texans take for granted. A 1998 report by Texas A&M University entitled "Texas Outdoors: A Vision For the Future" highlighted this disconnection: many populations in Texas can't take advantage of our state's vast array of outdoor recreation and education opportunities due to lack of equipment, lack of transportation, or just lack of information.

Texas Parks and Wildlife (TPW) is working with nonprofits to change that reality through the Community Outdoors Outreach Program. With support and funding from the Texas State Legislature, this program began in 1996 to award grants to local tax-exempt organizations that work with families and communities. Many of the grantee organizations are nonprofits that connect children and teenagers with science and environmental education, outdoor skills and recreation, and mentoring experiences. The grants made in January 2002, totaling roughly \$60,000, will reach over 6,000 children, families, and teachers in urban and rural areas.

Individuals participating in these programs increase their knowledge and appreciation for nature and the outdoors. For the first time in 2002, one nonprofit grantee is even including a component that helps students prepare for the TAAS science test. The program also leads to greater public awareness of the youth and family activities offered by TPW. And last but not least, by increasing participation in outdoor activities, the program nurtures efforts to preserve and restore natural areas in Texas – more residents become aware of the natural and recreational resources of our state, their value, and the need for preservation and stewardship.

Changing Futures

The Texas Youth Commission (TYC) has a broad mission. The agency is charged with protecting the public by keeping youth who have committed crimes in custody, but TYC also must provide the necessary experiences and support for these youth so they can become healthy, contributing adults. Many TYC youth have serious problems that must be addressed before this development process can be successful,

including substance abuse, emotional problems, and mental retardation. To provide the individualized services they require, TYC often turns to residential contract care.

TYC contracts with over 40 providers for residential treatment services, and 15 of the service providers are nonprofit groups. These 15 nonprofits served an average daily population of 285 youth in 2000, in programs that included mother-baby parenting support for incarcerated teen moms, outdoors-based therapy and education programs, and substance abuse treatment. Youth placed in these programs receive individualized attention and support services that foster positive behavioral change.

By partnering with the nonprofit sector, TYC can access the strengths and expertise of nonprofit organizations without having to duplicate similar programs from scratch. The result is more creative and innovative services available to TYC youth, increasing their chances for future success. In turn, TYC's nonprofit partners gain financial stability through their state contracts, which enables them to extend their reach and services to youth in need. These contracts bring over \$9 million into local economies, many of them in smaller cities and towns like Harlingen, West, Marshall, and Fort Davis.

Restoring, Protecting, and Educating

In 1991, Texas Natural Resources Conservation Commission (TNRCC) started allowing companies to partially pay environmental penalties by investing in environmentally beneficial projects. These Supplemental Environmental Projects (SEP) were formalized in 1993 as part of the enforcement process; these projects are carried out in addition to what the company must do to correct its original violation. SEPs are implemented in the geographic area where the violation occurred.

In many instances, local nonprofit organizations are chosen to administer the SEP when a need has already been identified by local officials. Nonprofits can also submit their project proposals to TNRCC so the agency has a ready list of needs when a company decides to carry out a SEP. The use of nonprofits with expertise in environmental issues means that SEPs are viable even in areas where local government doesn't have the resources or skills to administer the projects.

Nonprofits can apply for SEP funding to prevent or reduce pollution, enhance the quality of the environment through proactive projects, or conduct public awareness campaigns about environmental matters. In 2002, there are 158 ongoing SEPs being administered by nonprofit organizations, from recycling projects to habitat restoration and sealing abandoned wells that pose both environmental and safety risks. These projects take place throughout the state, improving the condition of our environment in both metropolitan and rural areas.

Clean, Safe Water

Many Texas residents in the Border area live in colonias that lack access to safe water. The cost to connect their homes to water and wastewater systems can be prohibitive, but without connections these families face health and safety risks from contaminated water.

The Texas Water Development Board (TWDB) has been working with nonprofit organizations to make safe water available in the Border colonias. In 2000, the Texas State Legislature authorized TWDB to begin providing financial assistance to nonprofit organizations that work on self-help projects for colonia residents. This legislative action was based on the successful track record of nonprofit organizations in working with colonia residents to complete water projects that protect residents' health and safety.

Nonprofits have used this program to help colonia residents connect to water and sewage systems at a lower project cost than a traditional construction project. Costs are lower because residents provide their own labor, and the nonprofit organizations also have access to private sources of matching funds that are unavailable to the state. These self-help projects save money while improving quality of life and safeguarding the health of colonia communities. The self-help projects are small, but they meet a serious need at a fraction of the traditional cost – and to the families affected, the benefits of increased health and safety can't be measured.

Common Threads

The Texas state agencies noted above have something in common – they turn to the nonprofit sector for innovative solutions. While the problems to be addressed range from hazardous waste cleanup to advocacy for abused children, the solutions also have something in common. They are all grounded in the nonprofit sector's experience and expertise in solving difficult problems. Texas' public and nonprofit sectors have a long history of successful partnerships, working together to meet growing demands and improve the quality of life in communities throughout the state.

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