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Fending for Themselves

Legal-services charity requires program leaders to raise money

By Rebecca Gardyn

New York

When Doug Lasdon, executive director of the Urban Justice Center, called Madeline Garcia Bigelow a little over a year ago to offer her a job, she gave him the brushoff.

"I told him I really wasn't interested," she says. "I had a pretty good gig where I was."

But Mr. Lasdon, director of a nonprofit legal advocacy organization here, wouldn't take no for an answer, and, after several more calls to Ms. Bigelow, she finally agreed to meet him. After asking her what she liked about her job as co-director of a Bronx charity that helps victims of domestic abuse, Mr. Lasdon asked Ms. Bigelow what she didn't like.

"I do get frustrated sometimes," she admitted. "I have all these ideas for ways I can better help my clients, but I can't get any of them implemented because I don't have any authority over the budget. I wish I had more control over the money so I could have the freedom to work on needs that I see aren't being addressed."

Mr. Lasdon didn't say much in response, she recalls. He just nodded, smiled, and said: "Welcome to the Urban Justice Center."

The Urban Justice Center, which celebrated its 20th anniversary last year, has a staff of 56, including Ms. Bigelow, who joined the organization in late 2003. With an annual budget of almost \$4-million, the charity provides legal services for homeless people, street vendors, and others who have trouble getting legal representation, including sometimes controversial groups such as prostitutes and strippers. Unlike most organizations of its size, which typically have a centralized development office to raise money, the Urban Justice Center requires each of its eight project directors to raise their own salaries, the salaries of any staff members they hire, and the entire budget for their projects. "If they can't do that, they can't stay here," Mr. Lasdon says.

Potential Pitfalls

That approach is unusual. Many experts caution fund raisers to avoid jobs that require them to raise their own salaries. "It can present some challenges," says Paulette Maehara, president of the Association of Fundraising Professionals. "A fund raiser might be tempted to put his or her own interests before the donor or the organization."

Others say that a requirement to raise one's own salary should be a red flag to people seeking fund-raising jobs. Leaders of organizations that make such demands, they say, are likely to believe that raising money is entirely up to the fund raiser, even though most fund raisers believe solicitations are

more successful when senior employees and board members help open doors to potential donors and participate in fund-raising calls.

The Urban Justice Center's approach, however, is not entirely without precedent. Missionaries at religious organizations are sometimes required to raise a portion of their salaries, for example. The same is true of some university researchers. "It is not unusual for researchers to have to raise their own salaries; they are typically written into the grants that support their work," Ms. Maehara says. "While this is not a common model among charities, if it works for them, I'm not going to criticize it."

Complete Control

Project directors at the Urban Justice Center believe the approach is a good one. While the fund-raising requirements are difficult for some directors, the job provides what many of them see as an irresistible advantage: complete control, not only over the type of work they do but how their project money is spent.

Ms. Bigelow, who runs the center's Domestic Violence Project, which assists battered women and children, for example, had very little fund-raising experience and admits that she was somewhat intimidated by the requirement. But the opportunity to have total control over her work was too tempting to refuse.

"It definitely has been a steep learning curve," she says. But with the additional responsibility has come a kind of security not readily available elsewhere. Her friends who work at organizations with centralized development offices, Ms. Bigelow says, "have this fear that at any time they could be told their program is going to be cut, and there's nothing they can do about it. That will never happen to me. Because I raise the money, whether I grow or don't grow is totally dependent on me. It's a very freeing feeling."

Says Wendy Bach, the project director for the center's Homelessness Outreach and Prevention Project: "I don't know of any other organization that gives its project directors this kind of freedom."

Accidental Beginnings

The Urban Justice Center's fund-raising approach developed much like the organization itself: by accident, says Mr. Lasdon.

In the early 1980s, after obtaining a law degree from Cornell University, Mr. Lasdon went to work as a lawyer at Covenant House, which runs a shelter for homeless teenagers in New York, but he quickly became frustrated in the job. He had learned that the city's foster-care system was discharging children at the age of 18, although state and city regulations require that they receive care until the age of 21, but he was unable to persuade Covenant House officials to sue the city for breaking the law.

"I spent a year trying to convince my bosses to let me bring a case that I knew would make a huge difference in the lives of foster kids," he says, "but no one would listen."

Finally, Mr. Lasdon resigned, sued the city himself, and won. While still working on the case in 1984, Mr. Lasdon received a grant of \$25,000 and started the center, initially called the Legal Action Center, as a one-man outfit. He had become interested in the plight of homeless adults, and, working from a dilapidated building in Harlem, he used the grant money to provide them with legal and other services, such as help in applying for government assistance.

"I really didn't even mean to start an organization," he says. "I just wanted to do the work I wanted to do." Soon he befriended other lawyers who were looking for the same kind of freedom -- the chance to help the clients they wanted to in the manner they thought best. As long as the other lawyers were willing to raise their own funds, Mr. Lasdon welcomed them on board. "I simply didn't have the money to hire a big-time fund raiser," he explains.

As his budding organization quickly began to expand, Mr. Lasdon says, he never felt comfortable with the idea of becoming the other lawyers' boss. "I have no interest in telling anyone else what to do," he says.

Sharing Space

Indeed, the Urban Justice Center operates like eight independently run nonprofit groups that happen to share the same letterhead and electricity bill, in addition to office space. Each project director acts much as an executive director would, overseeing from one to 15 staff members and a budget that ranges from \$100,000 to \$900,000. Each director is required to contribute some of the money he or she raises to the center's overall operating expenses.

Across all eight projects, 57 percent of the money that project directors raise comes from foundations, 36 percent from government contracts, and the remaining 7 percent from individuals, but the mix varies greatly by the particular project and the types of donations each staff member chooses to pursue.

A Helping Hand

In fund raising, as with the legal work, Mr. Lasdon gives the project directors latitude -- and encouragement. Juhu Thukral, director of the Sex Workers Project, believes her project would never have been possible otherwise. She had started as a lawyer for the organization's Family Violence Project in 1999. After a couple of years, however, she decided she wanted to help prostitutes and other sex workers, some of whom are immigrants forced into service, and educate the public about their needs, which often include shelter and help in dealing with violence and harassment.

Three years ago, Ms. Thukral asked Mr. Lasdon if he would host a new project if she could raise the money. He agreed and helped her identify some potential grant makers and write proposals. Nine months later, she had her first grant of \$42,500; her annual budget has since grown to more than \$100,000.

Ms. Thukral's colleagues at the center say that raising all of the money for their work gives them an advantage over other grant seekers.

"I know the work we're doing more intimately than any development director ever could," says Ray Brescia, director of the Community Development Project, which promotes safe, low-cost housing and pursues other neighborhood-improvement projects. "That makes me uniquely qualified to identify appropriate funding sources, not to mention more motivated to go after every penny."

For example, he says, his project is conducting research on the health effects of rat droppings and lead poisoning on children who live in city apartments, and he believes foundations that make grants for environmental programs might be interested in supporting that work. But he says a fund raiser might not see the connection.

"Our work is about the environment: the indoor environment, the urban environment," says Mr. Brescia.

"A development director who didn't know our project might not apply for that grant because it might not look like the right fit."

Grant makers say they like being approached by the Urban Justice Center's staff.

"The fact that the project directors are so engrossed in the work makes them able to passionately and articulately communicate to funders," says Madeline Lee, executive director of the New York Foundation from 1978 to 2003 and one of the center's long-term grant makers.

"The biggest problem with development directors," she says, "is that no matter how familiar they are with a program, they're not the people actually getting out on the street and handing out literature or representing a mentally ill client in court."

Saying No

Urban Justice Center project directors say they like the freedom to say no to grant makers who ask them to change the focus of their work as a condition of receiving a grant. Kim Hawkins, who directs the center's Peter Cicchino Youth Project, which provides legal and other services to homeless gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender teenagers, says that when she worked at another legal-services organization with a centralized development office, she often felt pressured to change her program to appease grant makers.

"Unfortunately, I think the fund-raising folks tended to seek out monies that were available without a close eye on whether the grants they were seeking actually funded the types of problems we were seeing," she says. That, she adds, created anxiety for staff members because the work they regarded as most critical was not getting supported.

Without a centralized development office, however, project directors at the Urban Justice Center sometimes find themselves competing for the same grants. But even so, staff members say they work together closely.

"When I first started, other directors invited me to coffee to get up to speed, or they'd send me information on a grant they thought I might be interested in," Ms. Bigelow says. The group gathers every Friday for a pizza lunch to discuss their projects and share ideas.

"One of my fears was that I'd end up being the landlord to eight different projects, with no one really caring about the Urban Justice Center as a whole," says Mr. Lasdon. "But they really do support one another."

Feeling the Pressure

For all its advantages, the charity's fund-raising approach does have downsides. Wearing two hats can be stressful, admits Ms. Hawkins, who, in addition to running the youth project, raised \$234,000 last year.

"My program costs are basically salaries, so if I don't raise that money, people lose their jobs," she says, referring to her three staff members. "And because I personally know the kids we're working for, I know exactly who will be affected if services have to be cut. It's a lot of pressure."

Mr. Brescia, who spent about half his time raising \$750,000 last year for the community-development project, says he also feels stretched thin at times. "Would I like to do less fund raising? Sure," he says.

"Would I like to spend more of my time with my clients? Absolutely. But I still believe that to respond to the needs most efficiently, the fund raising needs to reside with those closest to the ground."

Some say that the center's fund-raising methods work because Mr. Lasdon has chosen good staff members. "Public-service lawyers have many of the same characteristics of good fund raisers," says Ms. Hawkins. "They tend to be outgoing, smart, and have a deep commitment to what they're doing."

But fund raising doesn't come naturally to all of the center's project directors. Sean Basinski, head of the Street Vendor Project, for example, is having a particularly hard time.

"Everyone hates fund raising, but I really find ways to avoid it," he says.

His project, which helps vendors combat harassment and expand their businesses, began three years ago with help from the New York Foundation, which has provided more than \$42,000 annually. But with those grants now ending, he has few other revenue sources lined up. The project, as Mr. Basinski says, is "in peril."

Still, he is committed to keeping it afloat, even if it means taking himself off the payroll or suspending the project for a few months.

"I really haven't totally accepted my fund-raising role, although now I have to because of this crisis," he says. "Our work is so rewarding that I've neglected to do the job I should've been doing on the fund-raising side."

A Possible Model

Even though raising money is tough for some directors, Mr. Lasdon says, his organization's style of fund raising should be considered by other charities.

But he says chief executives need to realize that the approach has risks. "Because they are fully responsible for their funding, my project directors have connections I don't have," he says. "If they really wanted to, they could take their money elsewhere, and that idea is very scary to many executive directors."

In the last two years, he notes, two project directors and their staffs have left the Urban Justice Center to start their own charities. However, Mr. Lasdon isn't threatened by the departures; instead, he considers them proof of how well his organization has acted as an "incubator" to expand good work.

"It is a unique human being who has the ability to give up control," says Ms. Bach, "but if you can find more Dougs, I don't see why this system couldn't work elsewhere."

It might be difficult for a charity that has been operating for years with a centralized fund-raising office to suddenly adopt a decentralized arrangement, says Ms. Lee, "but for people looking to start their own organizations, this structure has great promise. There is a dynamism and vitality at the Urban Justice Center that really is extraordinary."