

FIRST PERSON by Jonathan C. Zur n



What Nonprofits Know

"It should be required for members of Congress to get trained by the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities!"

That wasn't what I expected to hear when I called on a participant during a recent professional-development workshop that our organization facilitated.

While probably intended to get a laugh, which it did, the comment also prompted me to think about how our society might look if elected officials took a few lessons from the nonprofit sector.

At the Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities, our programs promote understanding and respect on issues of diversity. We give students the skills to reduce bullying and stereotypes. Teachers develop better ways of connecting and communicating with their students. Business and community leaders learn critical skills of dialogue instead of debate. Is it naïve to think that elected officials could similarly benefit from such training?

No nonprofit can survive – much less excel – without the community's trust. Yet surveys indicate that many Americans do not trust the people we elect. It isn't uncommon for leaders to be the butt of jokes on late-night television and at the office water cooler.

The communication guidelines we employ at Inclusive Communities' programs might very well be beneficial for elected officials. Do our leaders practice purity of motive, making statements and asking questions that have genuine rather than misleading or hurtful intentions? If offended, do they follow the prin-

ciples saying ouch, then educating by naming the offense and explaining how it was hurtful? Do they take responsibility for what they say and how they say it?

These and other guidelines help our center facilitate meaningful experiences that motivate participants to improve their communication skills while bringing a better understanding of the experiences of others.

What are the results? One area school that saw an outbreak of violence after some people wore the Confederate flag engaged students trained by Inclusive Communities to lead ongoing discussions about the topic. That dialogue built relationships and diffused the violence. It also built bridges between people who previously disliked each other.

At another school, students and administrators recognized that students feared reporting bullying. They came up with a Words Hurt Website that allowed students to anonymously submit their experiences. Administrators automatically receive the posts and can respond. A local organization worked with Inclusive Communities to transform its policies and professional development around diverse recruitment and retention, resulting in an environment that looks and feels dramatically different than it did just five years ago.

The lessons for our elected officials on problem solving could come from myriad nonprofit organizations in our region. Groups such as Caritas and Homeward support our homeless neighbors by meeting immediate needs and promoting structural change. Big Brothers

and Big Sisters and the Virginia Mentoring Partnership offer support to children who benefit from positive adult role models. The Richmond Organization for Sexual Minority Youth provides a safe environment for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth. Partnership for the Future helps motivated high-school students with limited resources transition from high school to college and employment.

The organizations doing remarkable work in metropolitan Richmond provide a model, always looking for ways to collaborate and end duplication of services, and to responsibly use donations. And the perspectives on solving community issues that are gained by staff and volunteers who directly interact with the beneficiaries of such work would be invaluable for all who hold positions of power and influence.

Recent public debates on the local, state and federal levels all link to the mission and work of nonprofit organizations. What conditions are acceptable for people in prison? How are decisions made about transportation? Who finances quality education and wrap-around services for students who attend low-performing schools? In a time of budget cuts, what criteria are used to determine what's spared and what's funded?

Contrast the debates we hear from those holding elected office with the words of Inclusive Communities' program participants:

- *"The exercises I have gone through have made me see the other side of so many positions and actions."*
- *"Thanks to this program, I will try to make my school a better place."*
- *"I will stand up for other people when they will not stand up for themselves."*
- *"Getting to know people from other backgrounds helped me to recognize common interests and start friendships."*
- *"I came to this program unaware of others and most of the people around me, but I leave with values and lessons that will make me the person I want to be."*
- *"Through [the retreat], I see things through a whole new light. I feel less of a victim and more as a source to a solution."*

Indeed, our society could be a very different place if our elected officials took direction from the approach of the nonprofit sector.

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Opinions expressed on the Back Page are those of the writer and not necessarily those of Richmond Giving.