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Nonprofit Strategies



SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

Collaboration 2009 To Help All Nonprofits

By Barry VanderKelen

There is surprisingly more collaboration occurring between local nonprofits than it may seem. Collaboration can take many forms, from sharing information about best practices to complete merger.

Much of this spirit of sharing has been fostered by the annual Collaboration Forum, a confab of all nonprofits in San Luis Obispo County that will take place on Oct. 23. This is the 17th year of the event, and it is known this year as "Collaboration 2009."

The event will be held at the San Luis Coastal Adult School, 1500 Lizzie St., San Luis Obispo, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Information, including registration, is at www.collaborationslo.org.

Included among the speakers are Florence Green and Karen Baker. Green recently retired as executive director of the California Association of Nonprofits and was named one of the 50 most influential nonprofit leaders in the country by Nonprofit Times newspaper. Baker is the California Secretary of Service and Volunteering, the first-in-the-nation position in a governor's cabinet. There will be a reception with

Baker at 3 p.m., followed by her presentation at 3:30.

Throughout the day, local nonprofit leaders will share their successes and failures in working with other organizations. There will also be breakout groups for attendees to discuss opportunities to collaborate in specific ways.

This is an important event for nonprofit board members, volunteers, donors and employees. By learning more about collaboration, attendees can help organizations overcome resistance to it. Collaborating gives an organization access to resources that help it fulfill more of its mission and makes it easier to adapt to change.

Previously I wrote that there is a surprising amount of collaboration already occurring. It may not seem that way because too often collaboration is used as a code word for merger or consolidation. But it is important to think of collaboration more broadly because mergers alone will not bring efficiencies to the nonprofit system.

Economists know that specialization is vital to a system's success. Think for a moment about the creation of a computer. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people design and craft the thousands

of pieces that make up the machine. The system works efficiently when each task is completed by an expert, who can complete the task in the least amount of time. The machine is produced at a lower cost using a collaborative model rather than one small group of people designing and building everything. This analogy holds for nonprofits: boards and staff need to focus on what they do best and compensate for their weaknesses by working in partnership with other organizations.

Put another way, when resources are scarce, a fundamental question for any organization is who pays attention to what problems. And how much time do they spend on each problem? Can more problems be solved working together or working apart?

Collaboration 2009 is a good, and low-cost, way to learn how to collaborate.

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Resource Use

- Support nonprofit leadership
- Board development/training
- Strategic planning

Nonprofit Business Column of The Tribune

The San Luis Obispo Tribune publishes a column every other week in the Business section dedicated to the business practices of nonprofit orgs. Barry VanderKelen, Executive Director of the San Luis Obispo County Community Foundation writes the bi-

weekly column to help strengthen nonprofit organizations in the community. Each column is reprinted here as a one-page handout for use by local organizations. Barry can be reached at 543-2323 or by e-mail at barry@slocf.org.