

Nonprofits Do What Government Can't

As Sonoma County nonprofits struggle to survive during these deeply challenging economic times, we continue to hold the community together. Our partnerships are critical to the health and wellbeing of our community members. Therefore, the county government needs to do much more to support us.

Governments have to contract with nonprofits to provide essential services that are required by law. These vital services sustain and enhance communities. Nonprofits do what county government cannot do and at a significantly lower cost to the taxpayers. The government's sole job in this relationship is to contract with and pay those nonprofits, on time. Nonprofits have better knowledge of the community, provide more culturally appropriate services, provide higher quality programs, and are more nimble and innovative. Importantly, nonprofits are more trusted in the community than county government. In California we rate nonprofits higher in confidence levels than for profit or government sectors with 80% of Californians expressing confidence in our state's nonprofits.

During the pandemic, nonprofits that were not built for disaster recovery acted on behalf of county governments and stepped into the breach to respond to a monumental crisis providing food, medical care, basic needs, and support for those who were stressed and depressed, many of whom were seeking this support for the first time in their lives. As we stepped up to fill the gaps in government services we stretched ourselves to capacity and met the needs of our community. The ability to pivot into new strengths and abilities signaled to all of us that business as usual was over, but the government has not drawn the same conclusion.

We know that nonprofit human-services organizations are drastically underfunded, a problem that predated the pandemic. By outsourcing to nonprofits in areas such as homelessness, mental health, disability, child welfare, and work-force preparedness, governments can save money and provide higher-quality assistance. Unfortunately, the government does not pay the full cost of providing services, forcing nonprofits to rely on donations to make up the difference. That underfunding, combined with significant delays in payment, strips away limited resources that are in especially high demand during a crisis.

When you combine underfunding and late payments with the notion that nonprofits that provide essential services are interchangeable is not only false, it is dangerous. The organizations that the county contracts with provides specialty care is critical in particular fields. Each organization's work in the community requires a great deal of training and experience. The crisis outlined by the Press Democrat and the response by members of the Board of Supervisors demonstrates that our county leadership may not fully understand the nature of the level of expertise needed to maintain viable programs for those in our community who are the most vulnerable and marginalized.

The past few years have been especially difficult for the nonprofit sector. Constantly competing for resources and justifying expenses takes a toll. When the county agencies that depend on our services fail to pay on time or don't draw down the funds needed to accomplish the work, our jobs become even harder. When nonprofits suffer, communities suffer, and services disappear. Those harmed most by the underfunding of human-services organizations are the low-income BIPOC communities that receive less help in the face of desperate need, and the nonprofit work forces made up predominantly of women and people of color who are paid poverty-level wages. Workers are often forced to rely on the same social services they provide to clients.

It was recently noted by a county Supervisor that Sonoma County is home to **more than 3,080** registered nonprofit agencies and not-for-profit organizations. (GuideStar Jan 24, 2020) However, most of these 3,080 agencies do not provide direct human services, as many of these nonprofits are churches, schools, foundations, or have inactive nonprofit status. Volume does not equate to services.

The county must prioritize equitable wages for human service work. Nonprofit employees are chronically underpaid compared with private business and even government employees, whose salaries are often set by the same government officials who determine how much contracted human-services workers are paid. This pay disparity hurts a highly educated work force that is disproportionately made up of women and people of color, a problem that was exacerbated by the pandemic (Rubin 2021). If the county wants to stabilize services it relies on to fulfill its mandates, living wages, full, timely payments, and expanded funding cycles are essential. Nonprofits are continually hamstrung by either not allowing indirect costs or keeping them capped at low rates, which inhibits the ability to upgrade

systems that are critical to doing business such as paying for utilities, insurance, technology, maintenance, and cybersecurity. There is the cost of doing business and the cost of having a business. It's time to fund both.

Our state and local governments depend on human-services organizations to help solve pressing social problems while asking them to accept contracts that don't cover full program costs, provide equitable wages, or allow them input on program design and services. No company contracted by the government to build a bridge or fix roads would accept such parameters. Why should nonprofits?

Signed:

Becky Ennis, MNA
Executive Director
SOS Community Counseling

Emily Hope Parker
Inclusive Compass

Mary-Frances Walsh, MHS
Executive Director
NAMI Sonoma County

Tim Miller
Executive Director
West County Community Services

Maurice Lee, ADC III, MBA
CEO
DAAC/Center Point, Inc.

Ellen Barnett
Founder
Director of Outreach and Program Development
Imagine YOU....with What matters most to you
Integrative Medical Clinic Foundation

Susan Fette, MFT
TLC Child & Family Services, CEO
SAY, Interim CEO

Cathryn Couch
Chief Executive Officer
CERES COMMUNITY PROJECT

Whitney Reuling
Executive Director
Sonoma Family Meal

Alethea Larson
Interim Executive Director
The Living Room Center, Inc.

Cynthia Calmenson
Executive Director
Imagine You

Jack Tibbetts
Executive Director
St. Vincent's de Paul

Stephanie Manieri
Executive Director
Latino Service Providers

Elece Hempel
Executive Director
Petaluma People Services Center

Cynthia King, MSW MPH
CEO
Community Action Partnership

Soledad Figueroa
Executive Director
River to Coast Children's Center

Melanie HaLL
Program Manager
Cloverdale Senior Multipurpose Center

Michele Rogers, PhD
Executive Director
Early Learning Institute

Jenny Harrow-Keeler
Executive Director & Co-Founder
Integrative Healers Action Network

Rebecca Fein, MPH
Executive Director
Verity - Sonoma County's Sexual Assault Prevention, Intervention, and Healing Center

Jeanette Pantoja
Director
Sonoma County Community Organizations Active in Disaster

Thomas Pope, LMFT
Clinical Director
Lomi Psychotherapy Clinic

Melanie Dodson
Executive Director
Community Child Care Council (4Cs)

Robin Bowen, MHSA
Executive Director
Child Parent Institute

John Evans
Board President
Child Parent Institute