Framing COVID-19

Topic #5: Nonprofits are essential—especially now

The US nonprofit sector plays an unparalleled, and irreplaceable, role in our nation and the world. Our work, our expertise, and our mission-driven mindset are vital to an effective response to this moment of crisis and to all that will follow.

The way we frame our call for nonprofits to be considered in emergency assistance efforts will matter tremendously. It will set the tone for our sector moving forward. It’s also an important moment for us to harmonize our framing strategies; a symphony has more impact than cacophony. Here are three considerations to make sure our shared voices hit the right notes and resonate.

1. **Connect what policymakers do today with future outcomes that matter to us all.**

People tend to dismiss concerns they see as an expression of self-interest. Frame communications to focus on broad impacts, common concerns, and widely shared implications. Show that we’re leading the conversation about resources and priorities in an important, forward-looking, and inclusive direction.

*Instead of "the nonprofit sector needs relief"*

"The nonprofit sector employs over 14 million workers—many of whom are already underpaid and undervalued. These dedicated, frontline workers deserve our support as they help out during this crisis. At a time when many nonprofits are struggling to survive, there is a worrisome tendency to exclude the charitable sector from relief packages and policies. If they don’t have access to the loans, tax credits, and tax relief that for-profit businesses will receive, we may see these organizations go under."

*Try "the nation needs the nonprofit sector"

"In crafting our relief packages and designing our response plans, we can’t afford to overlook the nonprofit sector. Right now, cities and states are relying on nonprofit partners as a buffer against the worst impacts of the outbreak. And we all will continue to rely on the expertise and experience of these community-based institutions in the recovery effort that lies ahead."
2. Be clear that NGOs have a distinct role—different from what businesses and government can do.

Talk about the sector’s distinguishing feature: a mission-driven approach. We take on essential work that isn’t necessarily profitable, but it is purposeful—and benefits us all. We have specialized expertise that often includes a deep understanding of community assets and needs. We have the ability to be nimble and creative to achieve community goals.

**Instead of "nonprofits are as important as business and just like government"**

"In our policies and relief packages, we need to remember that not all essential work is performed by businesses. One in 10 Americans, in fact, are employed by a not-for-profit organization that serves a charitable purpose. New York City declared about 40,000 nonprofit human services workers as "essential city employees." Other jurisdictions—and our relief dollars—should follow the same line of thinking."

**Talk about the unique role and contributions of not-for-profit organizations**

"Nonprofits are our country’s only institutions solely focused on making communities stronger. In the toughest times, we do the toughest work. When it’s time to restore and repair our wellbeing, we are equipped to do that as well. We measure success in terms of shared benefits, not private profits. To weather the worst and rebuild, we need this kind of community-minded perspective."

3. Be clear about the need for—and our sector’s commitment to—equity and inclusion.

To come through this crisis, we need policies and relief measures that respond to varying—and inequitable—health, social, and economic situations. Our communications need to make it clear that the nonprofit sector is part of the coalition calling for an equity-driven response. When we are careful to speak from a stance of solidarity, we activate a sense of shared purpose and common identity. That makes it less likely that people will dismiss or diminish the needs of communities facing disadvantage.

**Instead of leaving disparities until the end**

"Nonprofits are on the frontlines of the coronavirus response, providing food, shelter, medical assistance, and other critical services to those in need in their communities. Our work is now more important than ever. The ranks of people without basic essentials will grow as workers are laid off from hurting or closed businesses. Our work will be especially essential for people of color and people with low incomes, whose lives will be disproportionately disrupted by closures, job loss, and sickness."

**Center the call for equity and inclusion**

"The resources we allocate now must align with our vision for the future: a fairer, more just America. Our response will only be effective if it includes the places and the people left out by our current systems. To get this right, everything we do now must take into account the issues that communities were facing before the pandemic. The work we do as nonprofits—and our relationships with our communities—has taught us that a focus on equity must be front and center."
About this series

In this uniquely challenging moment, we need to connect people to the bigger picture. We need ways to explain health, enhance community, and offer hope.

We're pulling guidance from twenty years of framing research and practice to help advocates and experts be heard and understood in a time of global crisis. Every few days, we'll share a few ideas that can help us all amplify the values of justice, inclusion, and interdependence.

To suggest topics, share ideas, or ask questions, talk to @FrameWorksInst on Twitter. You can review previous topics or share the sign-up link with a friend.