

Executive Summary: Key Findings from CAN's Statewide Stakeholder Input Process

This report summarizes the themes and findings that emerged from the California Association of Nonprofits' (CAN) Statewide Stakeholder Input process. CAN engaged LFA Group (LFA, formerly LaFrance Associates, LLC) in 2009 to gather input on the organization's possible future strategic directions from current and past members, non-members, CAN Regional Partners and Policy Council members, and nonprofit thought leaders.

Key Findings

Through facilitated strategic conversations with over 40 participants, a broad survey with 603 respondents, and six key informant interviews, numerous and diverse stakeholders offered valuable suggestions for CAN's strategic direction and next steps.

Stakeholder Support & Audience

- The solid and constructive participation in this statewide stakeholder input from a wide range and large number of people and organizations is a powerful indicator of the **continued interest in and support for CAN** to exist as a sector-wide resource.
- Stakeholders consistently recommended that CAN use this planning process to **consider and define its constituency base(s)** as it makes in-depth decisions about program and services offerings. Specifically, members, Regional Partners, and Policy Council members alike suggested CAN consider focusing on small- and medium-sized nonprofits (especially in terms of aggregating political power), and whether or not **foundations and consultants** could become part of the organization's target audience (especially as consumers of information services).

Programs and Services

- Most members and other key stakeholders agreed that CAN should **focus on a few high quality programs and service areas** rather than "trying to be all things to all people." Particularly in the short term, a few high quality services will re-establish credibility with current members and build the case for new members. Beware of trying to do too much too fast, stakeholders cautioned.
- There was remarkable agreement across stakeholder groups that CAN should focus its programmatic efforts on **policy/advocacy and resource/referral services**. Fully 40% percent of survey respondents say they would join or renew their CAN membership if CAN were to continue direct lobbying activities in Sacramento. Further survey analysis revealed:
 - A greater percentage of organizations with smaller annual budget sizes (under \$1M) reported they would join or renew their membership if CAN conducted training on advocacy (40%) or conducted its policy and advocacy work in partnership with our subsector advocacy organizations (30%) than organizations with larger budget sizes (26%-30% and 15%-21%, respectively). CAN is strongly encouraged, particularly by Regional Partners and Policy Council members, to actively **collaborate with other statewide organizations** in its policy and advocacy work.
 - A greater percentage of foundations (50%) and consultants (49%) want CAN to gather data and prepare original research reports on the sector statewide as compared with nonprofits (32%). Foundations solid interest in CAN playing this role indicates that philanthropic support would like be readily available for this service area.
- Stakeholders savvy in policy/advocacy work recommended that CAN be **deliberate about and inclusive in setting a proactive policy agenda**. The key question is, "To what end should CAN engage in policy/advocacy?"

Recommended Operational Next Steps

- CAN should continue to **increase communication with members and key partners**. To do so effectively, the organization must invest in the accuracy and currency of its contact list.
- CAN would be well-served to move from this stakeholder input process to a **business planning process** to link strategies with a financial model. This process would include examining other analogues and model organizations and determining the most viable ways for CAN to derive financial support.
- Once CAN has determined its direction and key programs, it should **clearly define who its partners are** and what role they play in supporting the organization.

Key Questions

Over the course of this input process, LFA identified key questions for CAN to consider forward.

Key Questions Regarding Audience

- Does CAN serve the entire nonprofit sector, including foundations? Or, should CAN only focus on 501(c)3 organizations, perhaps focusing on a subset of nonprofits based on organization size?
- How does CAN best negotiate the wide diversity of organizations and locations in the state? Stakeholders recommend that CAN examine other statewide or national advocacy organizations as models for balancing the tension between serving a wide diversity of organizations, while not trying to be everything to all of them.

Key Question Regarding Policy/ Advocacy Activities

- How much is CAN “service” oriented versus “cause” oriented? Should CAN position itself as an organization that members join because they want particular services, or should CAN position itself as the organization to join to provide support to causes of importance to the sector?

Key Questions Regarding Additional Services

- What are the costs and revenue implications for each of the services and activities that CAN might engage in?
- Which services will meet the most important needs among CAN’s identified audience?

Key Questions Regarding CAN’s Infrastructure and Partnerships

- What is the most effective membership dues structure? Does CAN keep the current system based on member budget size? Should there be varying fee levels depending on level of service usage?
- What is the best organizational and tax structure to support CAN’s work? Should CAN be a 501(c)3 and 501(c)4 to most effectively provide services and conduct advocacy work?
- Who are the most important partners for CAN in its efforts?
- What is CAN’s relationship with regional management service organizations (MSOs)? How can CAN collaborate with MSOs to provide mutual benefit to all organizations?

Conclusion

A broad variety and significant number of key CAN stakeholders from across California engaged authentically and constructively in this process designed to garner input for the organization about possible strategic directions. There was remarkable consistency in the findings across stakeholder groups that the most important needs for CAN to fulfill include policy/advocacy for the sector and resource/referral services. Stakeholders view significant potential for CAN to aggregate power and raise awareness of the numerous nonprofit organizations in California to create a sector with a strong voice and greater coherence that ultimately will increase sustainability in the sector and maximize mission achievement.