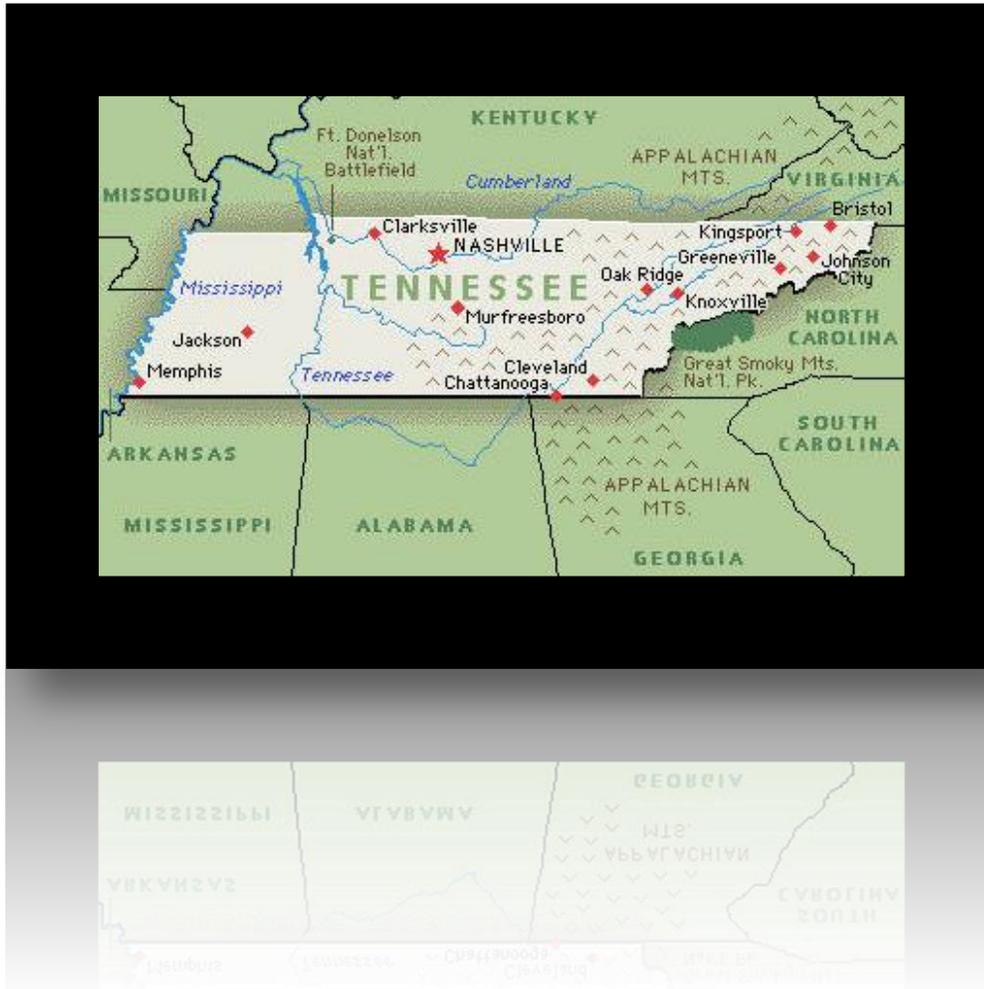


Together Tennessee: Strategies for Strengthening the Community Change Sector



Convened by:
Tennesseans for Fair Taxation

Nashville, Tennessee
July 13-14, 2012

In partnership with:
Tennessee Health Care Campaign
Tennessee Disability Coalition

Introduction

On July 13 and 14, 2012, representatives of 21 community change organizations gathered in Nashville for Together Tennessee, a strategic thinking summit on the state of community change work in Tennessee. The summit was initiated by Tennesseans for Fair Taxation as part of a strategic reassessment of their work, its political and social context, and the situation of Tennessee's community change sector at large. In brief, the Summit revealed an urgent need for the community change sector to address common internal challenges, in order to achieve greater success on the most pressing issues facing the state.

Tennesseans for Fair Taxation (TFT) has been a leading advocate for tax justice and other social causes since its informal founding in 1984 and official incorporation in 1996. This year, TFT has been involved in a process of transition, both in terms of internal structure and external focus. The departure of TFT's executive director and the organization's move from Knoxville to Nashville present both a challenge and an opportunity to reflect on TFT's approach to tax justice advocacy and organizing.

In addition to internal transitions, TFT is also facing a powerful external challenge in the form of the proposed constitutional amendment to ban any future income tax in Tennessee. The strength of this challenge requires TFT to acknowledge the difficulty of its continued struggle to change the state's unfair tax policy. This challenge also serves as a catalyst for new strategies, partnerships, and collaborations around the income tax ban and other pressing issues that affect all Tennesseans.

To this end, TFT initiated this strategic summit to examine not only their own approach to tax justice, but also to address the challenges faced by all social justice groups in the state, and to develop solutions to strengthen organizing efforts in Tennessee. The remainder of this paper describes the conversations, ideas, and next steps that arose from the Summit.

Original Summit Purpose

- To gain clarity on the most pressing issues affecting the health and well-being of Tennesseans.
- To collectively identify ways in which we might work together to address these issues and to strengthen statewide community building efforts over the long haul.
- To determine if TFT's traditional allies were willing to help fight the proposed constitutional amendment to ban a broad-based income tax in Tennessee.



The State of Community Change Efforts

The Summit began with an assessment of the state of community change efforts in Tennessee. The purpose of this conversation was to share successes and struggles in the field of community change, and develop a common analysis of the reasons why certain strategies are effective and others are not.

The conversation began with identifying successful efforts and the reasons for these successes, but quickly turned to the individual and organizational struggles within the field of community change. While participants agreed that there are solid examples of community change victories, the discussion focused mainly on the need to address our common internal struggles in order to strengthen community change efforts across the state. Below are some of the highlighted successes:

Community Change Efforts in Tennessee: What is Working & Why?

Increased Awareness and Social Change

- Increased involvement and awareness from young people has been promising, thanks in part to social media and other forms of information media and communications. Young people are being exposed to issues and educated earlier in life.
- Increased awareness around sustainability and specific environmental issues such as fracking.
- Broader social changes efforts such as Occupy Wall Street and the Health Care Campaign, increased youth involvement and overall awareness of critical issues.
- A positive shift in religious and societal tolerance has contributed to a more favorable organizing environment.

Local Victories and Specific Successes

- Progressive mayoral elections, state budget issues, and other sector-specific efforts.
- The U.S. Supreme Court's upholding of the Affordable Care Act was also viewed as an important success in the struggle for social justice.

Why Community-Based Approaches are Working

- In general, participants felt that community-based organizing work was an important factor in all successful change efforts. Dedicated and persistent efforts by grassroots organizers, combining hard work with issue-specific knowledge, expertise, and training, has been fundamental to advancing community change efforts.
- Finally, the group highlighted the importance of respectful listening and being willing to learn from those they serve and organize.

Core Struggles and Challenges

After identifying successful efforts and impacts in community change, the discussion shifted to considering the major challenges facing community change efforts. This section was meant to focus on external challenges to community change work, yet participants repeatedly identified internal organizational and individual issues as the core challenges to community change efforts. Below, we highlight the major contextual and internal challenges identified by participants as the core struggles for community change efforts in Tennessee.

Contextual Challenges

- **Cultural Resistance in Tennessee.** Participants felt that they were fighting an uphill battle against some of Tennessee's cultural tendencies. They specifically identified the lack of an organizing culture in the state, a culture of individualism, and the public's tendency to put their trust in corporations ahead of community.
- **Awareness and Education.** Widespread lack of awareness and insufficient education about the issues were identified as fundamental barriers to community change work.
- **Grassroots Participation and Leadership.** The group felt that community change work suffers from a lack of organized leadership from within the communities where they work.
- **Influence of Money in Politics.** Participants were generally frustrated by the power relationships around money and politics. They felt that they were up against powerful, wealthy interests, and that the facts they try to raise awareness around are often overshadowed by political propaganda.

Individual and Organizational Challenges

- **Collaboration and Communication.** Participants felt that their work suffered from a lack of organizational collaboration. This is due in part to "turfism" and biases across issues and organizations.
- **Collective Voice and Vision.** Tennessee's community change sector does not have a clearly defined collective vision, shared world view, or common voice.
- **Capacity.** Participants felt that their work was less effective due to limited resources and deficiencies in organizational capacity.
- **Loss of Hope.** There was general agreement that community change work is suffering from a lack of hope and inspiration. This includes apathy on the part of the general public, as well as burnout, disappointment, and pessimism on the part of community change practitioners.
- **Sustained Funding Support.** Participants noted that sustained funding support for organizing work just isn't available.

At the close of this conversation, participants were clear that the sector's collective internal and organizational challenges must be addressed in order to strengthen community change efforts across the state. The group emphasized importance of staying positive in the face of these challenges, as well as the need for increased collaboration, a collective vision, deeper partnerships on the most pressing issues, and an enlarged circle of allies.

The common emphasis on these topics indicated a need to have a deeper discussion around the internal struggles of the community change and non-profit sector in general.

Identifying Tennessee's Most Pressing Issues

Next, the group worked to identify the most pressing issues facing Tennesseans. The purpose of this conversation was to see if there might be a set of common issues that could galvanize community change groups into a collaborative statewide campaign.

Prior to the Summit, meeting organizers conducted a survey among participants to identify Tennessee's most pressing issues. During the Summit, participants reviewed the survey data and defined the most pressing issues based on a set of decision making criteria established in advance (see criteria box). The following four issues received the most attention:

- Tennessee's Income Tax Ban Amendment
- Tennessee's Voter ID Ban
- Living Wage
- Implementation of the Health Care Act

Criteria for Most Pressing Issues

- Affect a large number of people
- Impact or affect other issues
- Reduce our basic quality of life
- Undermine justice and equality
- Undercut funding and/or resources for the state
- Are time sensitive
- And could be solved!

Prioritizing the Internal

While recognizing that certain specific issues have greater recognition and urgency, participants felt that a focus on a particular set of issues, rather than general problems, was an unproductive direction for the meeting. The group as a whole felt that the issues they work to address are so interconnected that it can be difficult to categorize them. Participants also felt that separating and compartmentalizing issues detracts from a holistic approach to addressing big picture problems. They also agreed that key players for many of these issues were not in the room, and needed to be involved for the pressing issue discussion to be productive.

“We want to make progress on issues, but we can't make it if we are hurting internally.”

Participants went on to express a shared frustration with the difficulty of building issue-based campaigns. There was a widespread recognition that there seem to be common roadblocks to issue-based work across the state. Rather than talking about specific issues, as we had originally planned, the group decided that the most urgent need is to look at the common internal challenges facing community change organizations that may be undermining the effectiveness of issue based campaigns.

Participants expressed this realization in the following way: “We want to make progress on issues, but we can't make it if we are hurting internally.” The group felt a shared need to reflect deeply and collectively on how best to sustain themselves as individuals, as organizations, and as a sector.

Identifying the Pain in the Community Change Sector

A Conversation That Needs to Happen

Although the Summit was intended to be an opportunity to reflect on the community change sector and think strategically about moving forward on issue-based campaigns, the conversation that emerged was focused almost entirely on the sector's internal struggles and challenges.

This shift was an opportunity to have a conversation that is desperately needed and missing throughout the non-profit sector. The second day of the Summit was an opportunity to recognize and address urgent issues that we believe are common to the community change sector in Tennessee and beyond.

Following this shift in the Summit's agenda and purpose, the remainder of the meeting focused on identifying and problem-solving around the common challenges and struggles in the community change sector. This shift sparked a discussion about the pain being experienced at the individual, organizational, and sector levels. Several problem areas were immediately highlighted, such as: turfism and issue silos; being overwhelmed, overworked, and overstressed; a lack of organizational capacity; and a vicious cycle of underestimating to funders the true cost and difficulty of organizing work.

We began this new conversation by first identifying the pain of individual leaders, of organizations, and of the sector, then problem-solving around that pain in ways that will allow community change work to be more effective and sustainable.

Personal & Organizational Pain

The following emerged as the major areas where participants felt that they were experiencing pain, either on a personal or organizational level. Most of the pains experienced by participants are not issue-specific and apply to a wide spectrum of organizations in the non-profit sector in Tennessee. Common pain areas include:

Funding

Participants felt the pressure of decreasing funding, the lack of longer-term strategic funding, and funders' reluctance to fund organizational capacity building. There was also recognition of the difficulty of finding core operating support.

Capacity

The group agreed that community change organizations struggle with limited capacity. Some organizations are also struggling with key personnel losses, while others struggle to balance movement-building and organizing work with the demands of organizational management and fundraising. Participants highlighted the potential of doing more collective work, sharing resources, and finding ways to connect and work together to increase capacity.



Identifying the Pain in the Community Change Sector (continued)

Burnout

Participants shared deeply and openly about the personal costs of the work they do. High levels of stress and long hours are affecting the physical health, families, and personal lives of people working in the community change sector. Community change leaders commonly feel that personal exploitation and sacrifice is part of the work, and that there is little emotional support for non-profit leaders. The group also acknowledged that low pay rate of community change work doesn't always pay the bills and that the culture of the non-profit sector reinforces this demanding and unsupportive work environment.

Loss of Hope

On a personal level, participants felt fatigue and pessimism in the face of difficult work. Many issues central to community change have seen defeats, and even success on these issues often only fills the holes to make a "kinder, gentler oppressive system." Doubts about the winnability of certain issues and the recognition of powerful opposition are contributing to feelings of hopelessness among community change workers.

Lack of Support

Participants noted the lack of support even among allies in the community change sector, and the presence of turfism and competition where there could be collaboration.

Need for a Broader Base

Participants felt that community change organizations struggle with framing their messages in a way that excites and motivates social service providers and the general public. They also identified a need to better engage people, who are impacted or oppressed by community change issues, and to strengthen and connect grassroots groups across the state.

Unsustainability of the Current Model

Participants agreed that the current non-profit model is not sustainable, particularly the leadership structure, where the executive director shoulders the bulk of organizational responsibility. In addition, long-time nonprofit leaders are leaving the community change field and the next generation of leaders are not entering the field. The community change sector feels the pain of the current model's inefficiency, and sees a need for different business models.

“If we are going to strengthen our ability to create change, we need to take care of ourselves, our organizations, and our sector.”

Strategies to Reduce Our Collective Pain

Following this deep discussion around identifying different forms of pain in the community change sector, the Summit focused on major changes needed to address them. These solutions settled into four broad categories of change, each containing actionable ideas to reduce the collective pain identified by participants and increase the effectiveness of community change work in Tennessee and beyond.

1. Re-Shape Infrastructure for Increased Effectiveness

Fundamental to addressing organizational and individual pain is an internal restructuring of community change organizations. Participants agreed that Executive Directors need more support both within their organization and across organizations. There was broad support for some form of re-structuring of the Executive Director position, to create new forms of sharing leadership and management within organizations.

In addition to the internal shifts, there was agreement on the need to share resources across organizations. Participants discussed the need to share such things as office space, member and informational databases, back office staff, trainings, and field staff.

2. Shift Non-Profit Culture

Much of the pain identified by participants was related to the culture of the non-profit sector. Participants felt that this could be improved by encouraging several changes. First, community change workers, especially Executive Directors, need to look after themselves, and commit to helping each other develop a more balanced lifestyle. Second, there needs to be a general shift away from turfism and competition towards a more collective approach to community change work. Participants also recommended shared trainings around key issues and more one-on-one support across organizations.

3. Collaborate Between Organizations

A crucial area for reducing pain is in the operational relationships between community change organizations. Participants advocated for more deliberate and formalized collaborations between organizations. This includes: a formal process for sharing information, creating a common vision and shared goals, and developing more collective resources to support community change work.

4. Deepen Grassroots Engagement and Next Generation Support

Finally, participants felt their organizations can do more to collectively build community based leadership, organization, and participation. To accomplish this goal, the group discussed the need to develop a broader and more inclusive organizing agenda, create stronger ties with faith-based groups, and work together to train and support grassroots leaders and the next generation of community organizers.

Next Steps for Reducing our Collective Pain

The previous section contained four broad categories of change identified by participants as key to reducing the collective pain experienced in the community change sector. These categories and changes are broad and flexible, and likely apply to many other regions and sectors beyond Tennessee.

In order to define targeted solutions for Tennessee, Summit participants developed concrete next steps under each of the four categories from above. The central goal of these next steps is to reduce the pain being experienced by community change workers, increase collaboration and mutual support among organizations, and foster additional grassroots leadership and participation.

Next steps include:

Annual Executive Director Retreats

What: A state-wide self-care retreat for Executive Directors of community change organizations. The retreat will provide shared support, reflection, and rejuvenation time for this high-responsibility position while creating deeper relationships, trust, and understanding between Executive Directors.

Next Steps: Gather Executive Director contact information; Do a survey for interest; Identify possible facilitators and host locations.

Leadership Roundtables

What: A “Leaderless” Leaders forum that brings together leaders, Executive Directors, and activists who share similar struggles. This informal forum will allow participants to share important information, support each other, and build relationships, trust, and respect.

Participants can use these forums to discuss potential restructuring and collaboration options for non-profit organizations (i.e. shared space, staff, etc.). These meetings need to be bi-weekly or monthly, and should be locally based to allow for face-to-face interaction.

Next Steps: Gather a core group of community change organizations located in Nashville to begin a discussion around areas of focus and potential restructuring options.

Cross-Organizational Board Retreats

What: A training session and meeting for board members representing organizations across the community change sector. The retreat will provide a chance for board members to engage in a similar process of identifying their pain and sharing problem-solving ideas across organizations. It will also provide education around board responsibilities and expectations, as well as around staff job descriptions and roles.

Next Steps: Get buy-in from Executive Directors and Board Chairs of leading community change organizations across the state; Get each board of directors to designate a point person to help coordinate the cross-organizational retreat; pull together the point people to plan the retreat.

Deeper Strategic Collaboration among Organizing Groups

What it is: Deliberate communication and collaboration among organizing groups for the purpose of working together to increase grassroots engagement and leadership development efforts across the state. This effort includes an intentional sharing of organizational resources such as issue knowledge, organizing techniques, membership/grassroots databases, and organizational strategy. The group identified the need to collaborate on such things as grassroots leadership trainings, fostering civic participation in underrepresented areas of the state, and get out the vote efforts.

Important to this goal is an effort to increase understanding of the differences between the organizing models, constituencies, and membership structures of community change organizations. Being able to conceive and conceptualize each other's work will make it easier to share information and identify potential for collaboration.

Next Steps: Create a list-serve to begin a strategic planning discussion; Commit to holding one-on-one meetings with organizations that were not represented at the summit; hold a broader strategic planning retreat with key organizing groups from across the state.

Conclusion

This Summit grew out of the recognition that community change work in Tennessee is at a crossroads. Tennesseans for Fair Taxation and their partner organizers believe that in the face of difficult external and internal challenges, it is more important than ever to have a broad and inclusive conversation about how to expand and deepen collaboration between community change organizations. The Summit originally aimed to test the idea of a broader issue-based campaign, and TFF requested participants' support in their fight against the state's income tax ban amendment. In general, however, what we found is that we first need to address the individual and organizational issues that are preventing greater progress on Tennessee's most pressing issues.

The pains and potential solutions described here are not limited to the community change sector in Tennessee; they are common to non-profit work throughout our region. In a recent study funded by the Annie Casey Foundation, over 300 nonprofit organizations throughout the Southeast were surveyed on issues of leadership and succession planning. The survey discovered that over 60% of non-profit Executive Directors are planning to leave their post within the next five years, most without any succession plan in place. The reasons they list for leaving are strikingly similar to the pains outlined during this Summit. While we may be talking about these struggles with each other, the conversation needs to be broadened if we are to work collaboratively to address common pains.

As the writers of this report and as an organization dedicated to strengthening the capacity of community change groups, we believe that today's environment demands a shift in the nonprofit sector. It is important to begin moving away from the pattern of isolated organizations and individuals struggling alone, towards a collective impact framework that unites organizations and leaders around shared agendas, continuous communication, and mutually reinforcing activities.

This Summit began a process to directly and openly discuss both problems and potential solutions in Tennessee's community change sector, and for that we give credit to Tennesseans for Fair Taxation and their partners for taking this bold and thoughtful step. We hope, however, that this conversation can expand and continue throughout the Southeast, as awareness grows around the challenges facing non-profit work today.

Cultural Celebration at the Summit

While not directly related to the issues confronting the community change sector, it is important to recognize the cultural celebration that took place during the Summit. This celebration, at the end of the first day, was a wonderful way to enjoy and appreciate some of our region's cultural offerings.

The musical and theatrical performances were an inspiring reminder of the importance of art and culture. Cultural traditions and artistic creativity are closely related to the work of community change, and form an important part of the healthy, just, and beautiful society that we strive to realize.

Performers:

Ryan Lynch, singer/songwriter

Nel Levin & Michael August of the Shelby Bottom String Band

Excerpts from "Cultural Millennium," a poetic journey through history, written, directed, and produced by Michael L. Walker and performed by select members of Michael L.'s company "Dream 7 Productions."

Participating Organizations: Together Tennessee Strategic Summit

Allies of Knoxville's Immigrant Neighbors
Barrett Johnston Law Offices
Black Children's Institute of Tennessee
Common Cause TN
League of Women Voters of Nashville
Mid-South Peace and Justice Center
Nashville Peace and Justice Center
Southern Partners Fund
State of TN
Tennesseans for Fair Taxation
Tennessee Citizen Action
Tennessee Disability Coalition
Tennessee Health Care Campaign
Tennessee Justice Center
TN Alliance for Legal Services
TN Alliance for Progress
TN Chapter Sierra Club
TN Conference on Social Welfare
TN Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition
United Campus Workers - CWA 3865
Vanderbilt University

Proceedings paper by Rural Support Partners, Asheville, North Carolina

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