

REPORT TO PARTICIPANTS

Winter 2002 Consultations

on

***ADVOCACY - THE SOUND OF CITIZENS'
VOICES***

**ADVOCACY WORKING GROUP
Voluntary Sector Initiative**

July 2002

Introduction

The Advocacy Working Group (AWG) is comprised of seven individuals from the voluntary sector. It was established in the fall of 2000 as part of the Voluntary Sector Initiative (VSI). The mandate of the AWG is to work to ensure that advocacy is fully recognized and supported within the voluntary sector and outside of it as the valuable, legal and necessary work of the sector.

In February and March of 2002 we consulted with organizations and individuals from the voluntary sector in seven cities – Calgary, Halifax, Saskatoon, St. John's, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver. The consultations focused on the AWG position paper, *Advocacy – The Sound of Citizens' Voices*, and our purpose was to learn if it reflects the voluntary sector's beliefs and experiences with advocacy. Our goal is to achieve a broad consensus of thinking about advocacy in order to generate continued debate, discussion and movement across the sector and the country.

The Consultations

We met with over 150 individuals in seven cities. Each session was 3 hours long and was attended by approximately 20 people. We began with a short background presentation (see Appendix A for the agenda) on advocacy. Participants were then asked to speak about their experiences and concerns with advocacy; this was followed by a presentation and discussion of *Advocacy – The Sound of Citizens' Voices*. The consultation closed with participant recommendations and suggestions of how to continue to work on the issue of advocacy.

Responses to the position paper - *Advocacy – The Sound of Citizens' Voices*

We asked participants 3 questions to facilitate discussion of the paper:

1. Does the position paper reflect your thinking/concerns/experiences with advocacy?
2. Do you agree in principle with the goals, approach and priorities outlined in the paper?
3. Have we missed anything?

The written evaluation included 2 questions about the paper:

1. Does the position outlined in *Advocacy – The Sound of Citizens' Voices* reflect your thinking and experiences with advocacy?
2. Is there anything that you would like to see added to or changed in the paper?

There was overwhelming support for the position taken in *Advocacy - The Sound of Citizens' Voices*; no one voiced disagreement. A few participants supported the paper as individuals but needed to take it to their group for full organizational endorsement.

Some of the participants provided specific suggestions for changes to the paper and these have been incorporated into a revised version of *Advocacy – The Sound of Citizens’ Voices*. The most significant changes are the inclusion of examples and stories, more clarity on what is meant by advocacy and concrete suggestions for what organizations and individuals can do to support the growing movement for change in this area.

General Comments on Advocacy

While each consultation focused on the paper, some of the content from the general discussions about advocacy is worth noting. We found most participants to be well informed on the issues and keenly interested in advocacy and the rules and restrictions related to charitable status. The four themes to these discussions are noted below.

Advocacy and charity

There was discussion around what, if anything makes a charitable group different from an advocacy group. Most participants believe that charity and advocacy go hand in hand; a charitable purpose often requires advocacy as a response. There are problems with the definition of a charity – it is outdated and open to interpretation. Determining whether an organization is charitable often depends on who is asked. They also felt it is important to distinguish between advocacy and lobbying; lobbying is a form of advocacy but the reverse is not necessarily true.

The 10% rule

Almost all participants felt that the 10% rule is out of step with the current environment. While the 10% limit is not a significant concern for charities with large budgets, it is very problematic for smaller organizations. Participants questioned how government considers advocacy to be a legitimate/permissible activity and yet subject it to restriction.

Importance of advocacy

Participants strongly believe that advocacy is vital to the work of the sector; they see it as the spark for change and improvement in our society. It is tremendously difficult, if not impossible, for organizations to limit their advocacy when the root of the problems that they are dealing with requires policy change. There appears to be an assumption that service delivery is somehow more important than advocacy.

Relationship between the voluntary sector and the government

There are challenges that exist in the relationship between the voluntary sector and the federal government. It is important for the government to understand that advocacy is a significant way for charities to achieve their purposes. Many consider that this lack of understanding indicates that the government does not take the sector seriously, particularly with regards to public policy input.

A few participants were concerned that drawing attention to the issue may reduce the freedom that some organizations have to advocate for their causes. Others noted that the risk of having better relationships with government might inhibit the sector’s ability to challenge government positions.

Suggestions for the Future

We ended each consultation by asking participants for their ideas, strategies and approaches that will lead to changes in the area of advocacy. Almost all of the participants asked that *Advocacy – The Sound of Citizens' Voices* include something concrete for organizations to do or sign and that these actions or documents would form a significant part of the next steps for working on advocacy. The attached version of the paper has been modified to include this.

Participants made the following suggestions for how to continue the work towards change in this area:

Create a voluntary sector organization

Many believe that there needs to be an umbrella type organization for the voluntary sector. This organization would fill a range of roles including transmitting key information to the sector about relevant changes in legislation.

Link with large organizations

It was suggested that the negative perceptions about advocacy could be changed if small organizations link with larger, well recognized and respected voluntary sector organizations. This connection will give smaller groups greater credibility and help to create a broad understanding for the importance of advocacy.

Relationship with the federal government

Participants believe that the sector must continue to have an extended and open conversation about advocacy with the federal government. There are changes that each needs to make. The government must create a built-in structure that ensures that the voluntary sector input will be incorporated into policy decisions. The voluntary sector must address the quality and tone of its input in order to make itself a more valuable partner to the government.

Conclusions

The consultations supported our belief that advocacy is a key issue for the voluntary sector. Participants were very clear in their support of our position paper and for the need to continue to work for change. Many were grateful for the opportunity to discuss and learn about advocacy and the regulations that govern it. We received a very clear message to strengthen the content and language of the paper, to provide concrete and specific recommendations for action and to continue to raise awareness of the issue in the sector, government and with the general public.

APPENDIX A

ADVOCACY SESSION

AGENDA

(3 Hour Session, 20 participants)

1. Introductions
2. Purpose/Goals for the session
3. Background & Context on Advocacy in the Voluntary Sector
4. Your Experiences & Concerns Regarding Advocacy
5. BREAK
6. Advocacy Working Group (AWG) Position Paper – summary presentation
7. Discussion – does the AWG position paper reflect your thinking & experience?
8. Strategies and Approaches leading to changes in the area of advocacy
9. Evaluation
10. Close – next steps, how to contact us, your questions