

The Virginia Network of Nonprofit Organizations: A Natural Partner for Virginia Libraries

by Chuck Koutnik

The rules are changing. After retiring from my position as director of the Appomattox Regional Library System and spending over a year working with nonprofit organizations, it is clear to me that a new direction is forthcoming.

No longer will nonprofits compete with each other for a piece of many available pies. Less government and more reliance on public charities may have its merits. The truth, however, is that when economic times are bad and needs are more plentiful, the givers, like everyone else, have less to give. The funding bakery is producing fewer and smaller pies.

A new model may be that we all work together to get a few large pies to divide amongst ourselves. Nonprofits—and despite many technical definitions to the contrary, almost all libraries are nonprofits—must better communicate with each other and be willing to stand as one before funding agencies.

One organization at the forefront of this trend is the Virginia Network of Nonprofit Organizations (VANNO). Their goal is to connect nonprofits, to facilitate communication between them, and to unify them in a common cause. VANNO's mission, succinctly put, is connecting nonprof-



Deborah Williamson, executive director of VANNO

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its through information, advocacy, and resources.

Founded in 2004, VANNO is based on a successful, proven model currently in use in forty states. The model resembles that

used by statewide library associations. Libraries need a strong voice in centers of government. So do all of the vast and diverse nonprofit organizations. A recent report, "Virginia's Nonprofit Sector: An Economic Force," finds that Virginia's nonprofit sector is the second largest employer among Virginia industries.

The library community has known for years that there is power in numbers, as can be represented by organizations. For one, the Virginia Library Association (VLA) has proved a strong advocate for all libraries and librarians across Virginia. Counting our numbers as part of the growing nonprofit sector makes VANNO a natural partner for legislative issues.

Since its recent beginnings, VANNO has advocated for national bills such as Senate Bill 3429, "Giving Incentives to Volunteers Everywhere Act of 2008." This proposed bill would raise the charitable

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mileage deduction on taxes from fourteen cents to forty-one cents per mile. The increased incentive to the volunteer is obvious. Libraries that heavily rely on volunteers would stand to benefit in their efforts to recruit needed help.

VANNO is very active concerning state issues. Interests that parallel library interests include the telephone excise tax refund process and the nonprofit sales and use tax exemption.

Of particular interest to small 501(c)(3) public libraries, VANNO has brokered a group health insurance plan for independent nonprofit organizations. They have also created a list of vendors that specialize in nonprofit work, such as auditors, accountants, fundraising professionals, and others.

Deborah Williamson has taken on the special role as executive director of VANNO. An attorney who has spent most of her career in the nonprofit world, Deborah brings to VANNO a unique skill set. She understands the legal ramifications of running a nonprofit. She also brings a history of working with notable nonprofit professionals in the Richmond area.

A small nonprofit conference this past September found VANNO securing three of four U.S. Senate candidates as speakers. The real highlight, however, was VANNO's ability to secure a group of nonprofit notables to facilitate breakout groups.

Williamson has seriously pondered VANNO's statewide role. While VANNO stands available to answer questions and serve as a resource for individual nonprofits, a more important function is providing support to a network of resource centers through which technical assistance and training can be delivered. VANNO's greatest strengths lie in its ability to (1) provide overall guidance to the centers, (2) raise public awareness about the value of nonprofits, and

(3) serve as the legislative advocate for the sector. This closely resembles VLA's relationship to Virginia libraries.

The majority of the resource centers supported by VANNO are Cooperating Collections of the Foundation Center. Most of them are located in public libraries, including libraries in Washington County, Alexandria, Arlington County, Fauquier County, Fairfax County, Fredericksburg, Hampton, Hopewell, Richmond, Roanoke, and Virginia Beach. One is also

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located in the George Washington University Library in Ashburn, Virginia. As Cooperating Collections, they provide public access to the research tools of the Foundation Center, especially to the esteemed Foundation Directory Online. Most of the staff working in these Cooperative Collections are librarians and benefit equally from the support of VANNO and VLA.

When asked how VANNO and organizations such as VLA and VPLDA (Virginia Public Library Directors Association) can work together, Williamson stated, “VANNO is a natural partner with any organization that has a statewide constituency that includes nonprofit organizations. All nonprofits, no matter what their mission, need the same things—resources, especially volunteers and volunteer leaders; adequate infrastructure; and to be making an impact in their communities. It is with these common needs that VANNO assists nonprofits. VANNO's advocacy efforts, in particular, are designed to increase

a desire in the public to support nonprofits with donations and volunteerism and to ensure a supportive public policy environment for nonprofits.”

Two examples of VANNO's efforts to these ends include “Virginia's Nonprofit Sector: An Economic Force” and the Nonprofit Economic Vitality Center. The former is a joint report of the Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society, Connect Network, and the Community Foundation serving Richmond and Central Virginia. VANNO is leading efforts to ensure the study is delivered to policy-makers statewide, as well as to other leaders in the business and government sectors, to showcase the tremendous economic impact nonprofits have on the state. To cite a few examples, nonprofits employ six percent of Virginia's workforce, spend \$27 billion annually, pay \$8 billion in wages annually, and generate \$461 million annually in tax revenue to the state. You can view the report in its entirety on the VANNO website at www.vanno.org.

The Nonprofit Economic Vitality Center is a joint effort of VANNO and the National Council of Nonprofits. This virtual resource is designed to give nonprofits a tool to help them figure out how to continue to serve their communities' expanding needs on dwindling budgets. Available at www.councilofnonprofits.org/economy, the resource provides basic facts and analysis on the economy, describes the impact on nonprofits, and offers proactive steps nonprofits can take to weather turbulent times.

So, I encourage readers of this article to learn more about VANNO. We should look for partnering opportunities between VANNO, VLA, and other library organizations. Seriously consider joining VANNO, which is doing so much to protect the interests of all nonprofit organizations. ■