

ADVANS-ing Central New York Nonprofits

By Susan Kenny Stevens, Ph.D

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Welcome to the Nonprofit Lifecycles Institute, a community of nonprofits, foundations and consultants driving operational capacity and resilience in the nonprofit sector to build stronger communities. We are a team of believers in the work of the nonprofit sector, and we are dedicated to helping nonprofits strengthen their mission and program capabilities by building organizational capacity.

Our team consists of master level consultants, foundation officers and nonprofit leaders invested in strengthening the nonprofit sector. We know money is tight for nonprofits so our approach has a laser focus. We target the capacity challenges nonprofits face at each stage of development, and we call this stage-based method, the “lifecycles approach to capacity.”

You can learn more about the lifecycle approach to capacity on our website (www.nonprofitlifecycles.com) or in *Nonprofit Lifecycles: Stage-based Wisdom for Nonprofit Capacity*.

But let me give you an example of a community that has put the lifecycles approach to capacity into action through the work of one forward-thinking foundation, and in the process created stronger nonprofits able to more effectively meet community needs in Central New York.

Nearly ten years ago, the Gifford Foundation, located in Syracuse New York, contacted me to design a program intended to increase the operational capacity of local nonprofits. Gifford staff recognized that many of their otherwise excellent grantees lacked capacity to operate their programs from a position of strength. Like many nonprofits, these grantees had minimal funds to invest in infrastructure, and all faced ongoing discouragement for spending money on overhead. From experience, the Foundation knew that without solid management, governance, financial resources and administrative structures, even the best programming will be compromised. So, to give these mission-critical grantees a boost, Gifford launched ADVANS --- Advancing and Developing the Value and Assets of Nonprofits in Syracuse.

ADVANS is one of about a dozen “Lifecycle Capacity Programs” I have designed and led over the past 20+ years. Many of the early programs were commissioned by national funders - Ford, Mellon, Warhol – with grantee participants from all over the United States. But more recently, as I have created similar programs in place-based settings (Morristown NJ, Denver CO, Syracuse, Phoenix AZ), the value of a program like ADVANS to a local community takes on more significance. The opportunity to strengthen multiple nonprofits in a particular region and to empower them to conduct their services from a position of strength is really powerful – and it has a snowballing effect, locally.

By the end of 2017, Gifford will have invested \$3.3 in 29 ADVANS organizations. In addition, the Foundation now applies the lifecycle approach to all its grant analysis beyond the ADVANS initiative. This means stronger, healthier organizations with more wherewithal to advance their missions and programs and thus improve community well-being.

There are several things that make ADVANS work. First, of course, is the Gifford Foundation's strategic and financial commitment. Equal to that is the time, energy and dedication each nonprofit partner commits to ADVANS' multiyear, time intensive program. The third leg of ADVANS' success stool is the lifecycles approach which:

- Meets grantees "where they are" – not where we wish they were or think they ought to be
- Employs a "leadership team" approach which spreads the ownership of the agency beyond the shoulders of the CEO.
- Engages quality consultants who we train in the lifecycles model to facilitate a comprehensive and holistic "self-assessment."
- Sets clear expectations and holds participants accountable for improvements to management, governance, financial and systems functioning.
- Is realistic and flexible so that participants can truly succeed
- Promotes sustainable habit change, helping participants realize what has held them back in the past. ADVANS is meant to have lasting value and embed new habits into the organization.
- Results in leveraged benefit to the greater community beyond the results experienced by participants individually.

And, speaking of leverage, since 2007 close to 150 nonprofit executives, staff and board members from Central New York have participated in ADVANS as executive, staff or board leadership team members. Many have so valued their ADVANS experience that they've brought parts of the process into their own jobs in the government, nonprofit and private sectors, as well as extending their knowledge to other volunteer boards on which they serve. In years ahead, ADVANS' leverage is likely to spread further as participating executives and board members move on to other jobs or board positions - yet another clear sign of the program's success and staying power.

ADVANS groups are creating formal and informal partnerships with each other. Individually, and together, they have become less "dependent" in their mindsets and realize they share an "interdependence" with their funders and with each other. They, and indeed many of the

nonprofits in Central New York, now speak in a common vocabulary. “Lifecycles,” “table-legs,” “hiring for fit” --- all now are part of their nonprofit and philanthropic lexicon. And with these words come a set of strategic and operational expectations that influence management and governance decisions and practices now, and into the future. Most important, thousands or Central NY residents are better off as they receive services from agencies that are stronger and more capable than before.

I have had a host of great consulting contracts in my many years as a nonprofit consultant. But the chance to work on the ground in Syracuse has led me to see the true value in place-based capacity building.

If you are a funder and would like to bring a Lifecycle Capacity Program similar to ADVANS to your community, please **contact us**. And if you are a *capacity matters* believer, become part of our lifecycles capacity community at **www.facebook.com/livinglifecycles.com**.
