

# Accelerants:

## The Nonprofit Infrastructure on Fire

by Elizabeth Boris

At their best, support organizations are propellants that drive organizations to excel.

IF I WERE TO DESCRIBE THE NETWORK OF ORGANIZATIONS that supports the nonprofit sector, I would not use the word *infrastructure*, which connotes a fixed and unchanging support system.

These organizations are hardly the static bones of the sector; rather, they are the interactive forces that transmit information and propel change. This network connects civil-society organizations through its hubs, which create opportunities for peer-to-peer learning and shared experiences as well as for improving practices, conducting and using research, and developing ethical standards. At their best, support organizations are propellants that drive organizations to excel. They promote an overarching view of the nonprofit sector's role in society by articulating the collective challenges of organizations and their constituents and by developing alternatives to address these challenges.

What are the implications of this dynamic perspective? It puts the focus on how the support network connects a diversity of organizations and facilitates their interaction with the wider environment. The recent presidential campaign, whose Web revolution so engaged the young, illustrates these dynamics. Networks embody speed, flexibility, interactivity, and a high tolerance for volatil-

ity, negative feedback, and redundancy. Successful network hubs provide quality content and a variety of communication and engagement options.

Now, with the reality of the current financial crisis, the support network of associations, publications, research entities, and others has a key role to play. If these organizations did not exist, there would be a movement to create them. The support network helps to identify and communicate organizational survival strategies. But more important, it documents and projects the impact of the financial crisis on individuals and communities all over the country. It also generates, communicates, and facilitates discussion of public-policy solutions.

Since the economic downturn may be more extensive than any we've experienced in our lifetimes, the network needs to be more interactive and more open to respond and function at a high level. Such demands call on support organizations to engage in collaborative problem solving and better coordination. The ultimate goal is to strengthen civil-society organizations to fulfill their missions during hard times. With a societal commitment to fund the network and a commitment by the network's hubs to collectively foster innovative capacity building for all civil society, progress toward this goal can be achieved.

---

**ELIZABETH BORIS** is the director of the Urban Institute Center on Nonprofits & Philanthropy.

To comment on this article, write to us at [feedback@npqmag.org](mailto:feedback@npqmag.org). Order reprints from <http://store.nonprofitquarterly.org> using code 150404.



