

REMARKS of TOM TRESSER TO THE UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS GREAT CITIES INSTITUTE FORUM on “THE FUTURE OF NONPROFITS IN CHICAGO” – November 8, 2011

Let’s go right to the heart of the matter.

How many people here lead or run nonprofit organizations?

How many organizations have experienced serious budget problems in the past two years?

How many have made cuts of 10% or greater?

How many have made cuts of 20% or greater? 30%?

How many have laid off staff?

How many have cut back services?

How many have had their constituents harmed because of these cuts?

How many organizations here have seen actual loss of life because of these cuts?

From Bloomberg Businessweek, October 17, 2011 – “Illinois ranks first nationwide when it comes to nonprofit groups reporting late payments from the government, according to a survey last year by the nonpartisan Urban Institute. More than 80 percent of Illinois groups say their money doesn't come on time...it amounted to more than 31,000 bills totaling \$425 million. The Department of Human Services, for instance, had \$105.4 million in bills that were more than a month old as of early September. They ranged from grants to nonprofit groups to food to burial expenses.”

My friends, I’m sad to say the nonprofit sector has failed Illinois and it has failed America.

I could give you depressing statistics from a shelf full of reports and alerts about the state of our health, our education, our wealth or rather - our lack of wealth – our loss of home ownership and many **more** stories about how the 1% of America are enjoying success and excess not seen the Gilded Age of the 1880’s.

But the uber-statistic that is most telling, for me, comes from the Economic Mobility Project (from the Pew Charitable Trusts – www.economicmobility.org), which looks at economic mobility across generations (absolute) as well across contemporary society (relative). Their most disturbing finding is: “The United States has less relative mobility than many other developed countries.” So right now the chances of upward mobility in the United States is statistically equal to that of the United Kingdom. Denmark has the highest index of this sort of mobility – being three times more mobile. Bottom line – born poor in the USA and you are very likely to die poor in the USA.

It’s even more sad – our measures of Absolute Mobility – one generation to the next – is eroding. “Men in their 30’s today earn less than men in their father’s generation and family income growth has slowed.” They look at the data and conclude “This suggests the up-escalator that has historically ensured that each generation would do better than the last may not be working very well.”

You think?

OK 99%-ers what shall we do about it?

I can tell you one thing – that the mark of **insanity** is doing the SAME thing over and over again and expecting a DIFFERENT result.

So today I propose a very DIFFERENT course of action for the nonprofit sector in Illinois and across America.

I propose that we join forces politically to form a new alliance of nonprofit leaders, workers, constituents and allies for power and to elect candidates to public office who will pursue what might be called a Human Agenda – one that reflects the compassion, creativity, generosity, grassroots orientation and people-focused values of our sector. This is would be the opposite of the current Corporate Agenda – where they get all or stuff.

A new organization has just been launched called CForward. It was founded by Robbert Egger, a nationally known leader of our sector and Executive Director of D.C. Central Kitchen. CForward (<http://www.cforward.org>) is about political engagement. His organization is the major provider of food in the D.C area and he's a pioneering social entrepreneur and runs training programs but he realized that even he couldn't give away enough food. You can't charity your way out of poverty.

Frankly, I don't understand our reluctance to enter this arena effectively. Take a look at the National Rifle Association – a nonprofit, by the way, founded in 1871 and which now has grown to a very effective policy and lobbying organization. Do you mean to tell me that you all are LESS passionate about your missions and constituents that the NRA member is about her gun?

Let's look at the political infrastructure that has sprung up around evangelical churches, starting with the Moral Majority, and continuing with The

Christian Coalition, The Leadership Foundation and Focus on the Family and morphing into Tea Party fueled attacks on government and public services. What these groups have in common is that they share a set of values (you may agree with them or you may disagree) and they have established a civic architecture that has translated those values into public policy. They have hired elective officials who do their bidding. All very effective and, I would say, driving the discussion of policy and programming in American civic life. And this reality has backgrounded the remarks of every one of our speakers at this forum on the future of nonprofits.

We need to get political and stay political. We need to put OUR hands on the policy, budget and priority steering wheel and steer **away** from the path we are on as a nation – one heading right for the cliff.

We're passing out fliers that describe CForward and its mission:

CForward is a nonpartisan, 501c4 advocacy organization that champions the economic role of the nonprofit sector and supports candidates who include the sector in their plans to strengthen the economy.

The goals of CForward are:

- To champion the economic contributions of the nonprofit sector.
- To educate candidates about the economic contributions of the nonprofit sector.
- To support candidates who provide detailed plans for how they would partner with nonprofits, social enterprise businesses and micro-credit programs to create jobs and strengthen the economy.
- To help nonprofit employees, volunteers, clients and supporters use their rights as private citizens to:
 1. educate candidates about the economic role that nonprofits play in every community,
 2. distribute information about candidates who include nonprofits in their platform, and

3. work in concert with other private citizens to provide financial support and help elect candidates who have a clear plan to partner with nonprofits to strengthen the economy of the city, state or the country.

Scan this Q-Code to be taken to their web site for sign-up for their email newsletter



or to donate.

I'm also circulating a sign-up sheet to start an Illinois-specific e-mail list and Google Group. Go to

<http://tinyurl.com/CForward-IL>.

So what do you say?

Do you want to continue to sit on the sidelines of power and deal with the decisions of the powerful and continue to experience what I call “Death By A Thousand Cuts”? Do you want to continue to stand by as you and your staff burn out and your constituents suffer?

OR – do you want to do what businesses have ALWAYS done, what the National Rifle Association has done effectively for over 140 years and what conservative church leaders have been doing for over 30 years – and get in the game of politics to fight for what you believe in and change America for the better?

Can I get an amen?

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