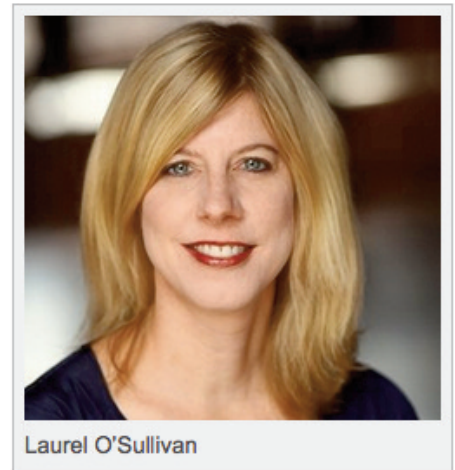


AdvocacyForward: A New Framework & Case Study for How Nonprofits Can Go From Surviving to Thriving With Advocacy

By Laurel O'Sullivan, J.D.
Principal & Founder of [The Advocacy Collaborative](#)

One of the biggest limitations for the nonprofit sector's sustainability is the way advocacy is undervalued. Despite acknowledgment from high profile books like Forces for Good that advocacy is a pivotal quality of highly effective organizations, many groups have yet to fully embrace this as a core value. How do we encourage nonprofits to pursue this potential? In short, we need to promote the expansive possibilities of advocacy. We need to talk about, train individuals in, and promote advocacy in a way that supports it as a leadership strategy and a driver for advancing mission with impact. We need a business model framework that gives advocacy the same management primacy as fundraising or programs.



Laurel O'Sullivan

We call this framework AdvocacyForward. It provides an adaptable development path with guideposts for growing and sustaining an organization's advocacy competency, defined as the knowledge, skills and understanding to lead with advocacy. At their core, AdvocacyForward organizations share a willingness to commit to advocacy as a strategy for advancing their mission. The framework recognizes there is no one development path for an organization committed to advocacy. Looking at how the leader of a small advocacy organization focused his attention provides an opportunity to apply some of the key principles of the framework.

CHALLENGE: How can a small 100 year old nonprofit maintain its relevancy?

The [John Howard Association](#) is a 100 year-old nonpartisan watchdog organization working to reform Illinois' criminal justice system. The Association embodies the principles of an AdvocacyForward leader. Five years ago, past Executive Director John Maki became more intentional about developing its advocacy presence and the organization went from merely surviving to thriving.

Like many smaller nonprofits, John Howard's growth and direction has been driven by its grants. The organization's small but growing \$300,000 budget supported multiple projects largely focused on addressing juvenile justice, prison monitoring and recidivism reduction. All of its programs were siloed, a reality of being grant driven. According to John, "Our structure felt really unwieldy for a small organization, but we were a bit captive to old traditions and we had grant obligations to fulfill."

In 2010, the organization began to question the relevance and impact of its long-standing approach: quietly producing compelling policy reports. It was looking for a new direction.

John did three key things that would transform the impact of the organization and which characterize AdvocacyForward leaders and organizations. First, he identified the organization's primary strength or value, its program work, and intentionally and consistently focused on ways to improve and elevate the organization's program work which had historically been more quiet, hidden and undervalued:

"We don't have authority, so we can't make people do anything. We do however, have the opportunity with our findings to influence stakeholders including inmates, prison staff, legislators, media and the Executive Branch."
Advocacy forward framework graphic

SOLUTION: By knowing its value and leveraging its program work more intentionally to support advocacy, an established nonprofit engages a wider, more diverse group of stakeholders and evolves into a new, dynamic organization.

The second and third things John did to lead with advocacy need to be viewed in tandem. He began identifying opportunities to slowly embrace more risk by engaging in legislative advocacy and confronting the opposition through the media. Embracing risk is a key element of AdvocacyForward organizations. He was able to do this more confidently and with improved odds of success

because of a third key AdvocacyForward principle he applied—he began to align the program work, the “quiet policy reports,” with the public facing advocacy.

In late 2009 Illinois Governor Pat Quinn decided to reverse a campaign promise and suspend a statutorily constructed sentence reduction program called “Meritorious Good Time.” This policy change caused Illinois’ prison population to jump ten percent in one year from 45,000 to 49,000, adding untold costs to an already cash strapped state. Governor Quinn’s misstep caught John’s attention and became the catalyst that would begin to transform John Howard’s advocacy profile:

“A lot of advocacy is more opportunistic. A lot of it you can’t control. It’s important to understand and intuit what you can control because this is your power. Our biggest legislative victories weren’t planned for. And this is a key point. It is both the challenge and excitement of policy advocacy. “

In response to the Governor’s backpedaling, John decided to draft and introduce alternative legislation that aligned with recommendations made in their reports as well as best practices from around the country.

A second catalyzing event occurred in early 2013. In response to the tragic shooting death of Haidya Penaltan, an accomplished young teen who had just performed at the second inauguration of President Obama, the Mayor of Chicago, Rahm Emanuel and the Cook County State’s attorney called for legislation to significantly increase the mandatory minimum jail sentence for first time offenders caught carrying a gun without a license. According to John, it was a “classic ‘tough on crime’ story—she was murdered because we don’t have tough enough prison sentences.”

John and many others were certain the bill would pass, in part because there was a huge media push with national coverage. However, for numerous reasons, a bill that should have passed quickly out of committee did not. John was able to use the delay to begin building a bipartisan coalition against the bill. When it came up during veto session, it didn’t make it to the floor. It had gone from being a popular bill to a toxic bill.

RESULT: Advocacy becomes a catalyst for expanding influence and receiving a highly coveted MacArthur award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

By the end of the second legislative session in 2013, John Howard had gone from being a small virtually unknown nonprofit three years prior to being seen as a leading prison reform advocate. What had begun as a hopeless cause, turned into an opportunity to educate the media, the General Assembly, the Governor and raise the level of discourse around incarceration. The policy debate and media conversations had shifted away from demanding more imprisonment, to acknowledging Illinois prisons’ were overcrowded and different solutions needed.

As the organization’s advocacy work produced results, it began to attract more foundation support. In five years the budget doubled from \$300,000 to \$600,000. In February 2015, John Howard was named as one of only nine nonprofits nationally to be awarded the MacArthur Foundation’s coveted “Creative and Effective” awards. The path to obtaining funds to invest in advocacy capacity is seldom easy for nonprofits. It can often require trying multiple approaches and being willing to risk failure to prove your value.

“We are evolving from a very scrappy place, struggling to survive, to one now able to fight above our weight class. To become that larger more powerful organization—to go from a more desperate mindset to a more sustainable one—required hungry opportunism.”

Laurel O’Sullivan, J.D. is the Principal and Founder of the Advocacy Collaborative, LLC. We are passionate about equipping senior leaders of nonprofits and foundations to establish advocacy as an asset for greater impact for every organization they lead. Our signature Advocacy Forward framework identifies and builds on our client’s strengths while maximizing existing resource.

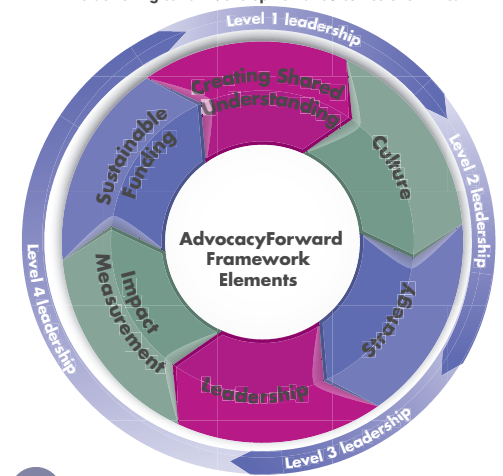
Founder Laurel O’Sullivan is a lawyer with the right balance of vision, pragmatism and experience to help organizations create actionable plans for establishing advocacy as an organizational strength. She serves on the Social Service Advisory Council for the Illinois Department of Human Services and the board of the Young Center for Immigrant Children at the University of Chicago and the Forum for Regional Associations of Grantmakers.

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AdvocacyForward organizations embrace advocacy and commit to achieving certain developmental outcomes over time.



AdvocacyCollaborative.com
Building Better Nonprofits Through Advocacy

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