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Leadership Challenges Facing Nonprofit Human Service Organizations in a Post-Recession Era

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Leadership Challenges Facing Nonprofit Human Service Organizations in a Post-Recession Era

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The nonprofit sector has been the fastest growing segment of the U.S. economy in the last decade, primarily due to growth in the economy's service fields of health care, education, and social services, which account for 87% of nonprofit employment (Salamon, Sokolowski, & Gellar, 2012). While the sector has grown significantly, it has still struggled to meet the demand for human services during the recent recession. The Nonprofit Finance Fund's 2014 State of the Sector Survey, which captured just over 5,000 nonprofits (human services being the largest proportion) showed 80% of respondents reported an increase in demand for services, the 6th straight year of increased demand, 56% were unable to meet demand in 2013, the highest reported in the survey's history, and 28% ended their 2013 fiscal year with a deficit. Accompanying the growth of the sector and the recession are significant challenges that have threatened the survival of nonprofits, especially smaller and mid-size agencies. These challenges include insufficient financial, human, and technical resources for responding to growing need and demands for service in the face of government and foundation cutbacks, tightly defined contracts, high rates of underfunded infrastructure and overhead, and even higher expectations for accountability (Nonprofit Finance Fund's 2014 State of the Sector Survey; Urban Institute, 2011).

Thus, while the demand for nonprofits to provide more services and accountability is increasing, there is also a thinner spread of funding that forces organizations to provide more services with less money. Often, nonprofit leaders and managers have to make difficult decisions about staffing and rationing of services to clients, as well as embrace new practice models that improve efficiency and demonstrate clearer outcomes. The managerial competencies needed to successfully navigate this complex environment have evolved, and recent scholarship on leadership emphasizes the clear need

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