



Nonprofit Programs – What They Are, What They Are Not

True Programs Versus Random Activities

Activities

Activities are not the same as programs – Board and staff members need to understand this. Activities are a set of events that, although they are or seem beneficial to the community, are so loosely or informally conducted that it is difficult to readily ascertain if the events are truly needed by the community and/or are making any substantive difference in the community.

There are many types of activities that can be useful to a community, even someone standing on a corner and handing out food to whomever happens to walk by. On first impression, that event might seem beneficial to the community. However, without knowing whether the food is safe, whether those walking by really need the food or not, whether handing out the food on the corner is the best means to provide the food, it is difficult to ascertain whether the event deserves the ongoing investment of resources from the community.

Programs

The typical nonprofit organizational structure is built around programs. A nonprofit program is an integrated set of services conducted to meet specific, verified community needs by achieving certain specific benefits and changes (outcomes) among specific groups of clients in that community. Services include ongoing systematic evaluations, as much as possible, to ensure that the specific outcomes are indeed being achieved and that the community’s resources are best invested in that particular program. Board members should always be asking if those outcomes are being achieved.

Community needs are verified to exist by some means of market research (formal or informal). The programs or services to meet those needs are researched to be sure they are likely to meet the community needs. During delivery of the programs, program activities are evaluated to ensure they remain high-quality. Outcomes from programs are evaluated, with strong feedback from clients, to be sure the program is indeed meeting the needs in the community.

In essence, a well-designed program is similar to a well-designed research project from which a community can benefit and a great deal can be learned. Common examples of nonprofit programs are food-shelf programs, transportation programs, training programs, health services programs and arts programs.

Nonprofits often define their programs during strategic planning. Programs become major methods, or strategies, to reach strategic goals. For example, a nonprofit might have a mission to “Enhance the quality of life for young adults by promoting literacy.” Major strategies, or programs, to work toward that mission might be a High School Equivalency Training Program and a Transportation Program to get the young adults to the Training Program.

To clearly understand the nature of well-developed programs, it helps to think of them in terms of inputs, processes, outputs and outcomes.

- Inputs are the various resources needed to run the program, such as money, facilities, clients and program staff.
- Processes are how the program is carried out, for example, clients are counseled, children are cared for, art is created, and association members are supported.
- Outputs are the units of service, for example, number of clients counseled, children cared for, artistic pieces produced, or members in the association.
- Outcomes are the impacts on the clients from participating in the nonprofit’s services, for example, increased mental health, safe and secure development, richer artistic appreciation and perspectives in life, and increased effectiveness among members.