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Betsy Nelson March 20, 2009

It was standing room only at the "Strategies for Sustainability Through Challenging Times" Nonprofit Summit on March 17. More than 350 people came to learn ways of weathering the storm that has hit our nonprofit community and our nation.

Designed specifically for executive directors and board members, the summit provided opportunities to hear practical, time-proven strategies for sustaining nonprofit organizations through fiscally challenging times. Topics addressed ranged from managing finances to reviewing human capital options, which for most nonprofit organizations is the largest part of the budget.

The unease organizations are feeling was evident in the room, from side conversations to structured roundtable discussions. Staff and board members want to do the good work that they feel mandated to do but are facing difficult choices on how to determine the right size and right programs for their organizations. Panelists provided great advice and even a few words of optimism.

The concept of "doing more with less" was addressed by almost all of the panelists, with the conclusion that "doing less with less" is a more manageable and realistic concept. All acknowledged that for mission-driven, hard-working individuals, this is a hard concept to accept.

Managing through the tough times to be there when the economy turns was another theme. Seasoned professionals spoke about the need to stay on top of finances on a monthly or even weekly basis and to make sure that decisions are based on good data, whether it is knowing the outcomes of activities or what each staff member actually does.

Good communication was emphasized, for all -- be they staff, board, donors, or public officials. As one panelist pointed out, in good times, communication can slide, but in bad times, it is critical. While no one likes hearing bad news, lack of information or misinformation breeds suspicion.

A coalition of eight organizations hosted the conference, sharing a collective concern for the wellbeing of the region's nonprofit community. Nonprofit organizations themselves, they know first-hand what these times are like.

Thanks to the Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers, The ASSOCIATED: Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore, Associated Black Charities, Business Volunteers Unlimited, Baltimore Community Foundation, The Leadership--**Greater Baltimore Committee**, Maryland Association of Nonprofit Organizations and United Way of Central Maryland for understanding the value of gathering people together.

Kudos, too, to Citi for being the lead sponsor of the event, recognizing the importance of the nonprofit community to our region. The seminar was taped and will be available for others to view, thanks to P.W. Feats.

The summit organizers knew that one afternoon event was not the single answer to the challenges nonprofits are facing and have developed the MD Nonprofit Support Network (www.mdnonprofithelp.ning.com) as a social networking site which will enable the conversation to continue. It will also serve as a centralized repository for resources, upcoming training and other information useful to the nonprofit sector. We invite you to become part of the network.

Betsy Nelson, executive director of the Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers, writes every other week for The Daily Record. She can be reached at 410-727-1205 or bnelson@abagmd.org

Highlights: Greater Baltimore Committee