

Harnessing Our Collective Power



Dr. Akilah Watkins'
Reflections from
Independent Sector's
2023-2024 Listening Tour



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Dear friends, colleagues, and partners from across our civil society,

On the one hand, I'm buzzing with boundless optimism about what we can create together. It's the 13 million nonprofit leaders, foundation staffers, corporate social responsibility professionals, and countless other voices in our sector who rekindle my hope every day. On the other, I'm fully aware of the steep challenges that threaten our dreams of a healthy and trusted charitable sector, a just and liberated society, and a flourishing democracy. Together, our mission is clear: to make sure everyone in this country has an opportunity to thrive.

When I took the helm of Independent Sector in early 2023, I had some big bets in mind – all designed to optimize charitable organizations' work. While we're uniquely positioned to shape this effort as our

sector's national membership organization, we know better than to think we can build the future on our own.

What if, instead, we set up a reciprocal feedback loop for good? What if we took a pause from our busy to-do lists and came together in person to find solutions to the problems keeping you up at night? What if we created sacred spaces for the full breadth of our sector to really be with each other? And what if we found new ways to build up our collective power – as a sector – to create the nation we all want to live in?

That's what led us on our Listening Tour across nine cities (and one virtual stop) where I got the chance to hear directly from over 500 changemakers to better inform our next steps and strategies. Our methodology was deliberate: We sat in a circle, created intimate spaces for deeply honest sharing, and simply listened to what emerged. We delved into what it means to lead in this time, explored ways to rejuvenate our nonprofit workforce after the exhaustion of the pandemic, dreamed up ways to reframe our sector as the economic powerhouse it truly is, and so much more.

This report is my way of looping you into that journey. It's packed with my personal reflections, what we heard directly from you, and how your insights are informing our strategy moving forward. As you flip through these pages, I hope you see yourself in the stories shared. Page 25 details our key takeaways, while pages 26 and 27 list the initiatives we're rolling out based on what we learned. And if this sparks a desire to join us, check out the membership details on page 30!

Looking ahead, I'm more hopeful than ever. Let's keep pushing the boundaries of what we can achieve together.

With gratitude and hope,

Akilah Watkins

Dr. Akilah Watkins
President and CEO
Independent Sector

LISTENING TOUR LOCATIONS



Thank you to our Listening Tour host organizations:

North Lawndale Christian Health Center

Candid

Atlanta Habitat for Humanity

Social Venture Partners Dallas/Pegasus Park

Gates Foundation

ASU Lodestar Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Innovation

The California Endowment

Anacostia Arts Center

American Indian OIC



Just a few weeks into my tenure, the Independent Sector team gathered in our Washington, DC office with a big map pinned to the wall. Where would we host the first stop on our Listening Tour?

Serendipitously, I had received an invitation to speak at [Chicago Cares](#), an amazing IS member organization that helps volunteers – who are foundational to our society but often overlooked in the nonprofit workforce – become agents of change. What better place to start our journey than Chicago?

When I was 15, I flew to Chicago to learn community organizing from Shel Trapp, a protégé of Saul Alinsky. I returned over the next seven summers as a volunteer supporting voter registration efforts. These experiences deepened my understanding of community life. I saw how people in neighboring ZIP codes could have completely different lived experiences. I met people trying to figure out how to love, parent, and thrive in communities set up to fail.

When I returned to the Windy City to earn my Ph.D. in sociology, I studied the Great Migration and the dreams of Black families as they migrated to certain neighborhoods of Chicago. I lived in those same neighborhoods and I experienced the challenges low-income residents face firsthand – from renting in a food desert to navigating the health system in community clinics as I birthed my son.

Two decades later, I returned to Chicago to gather ideas to enhance IS's work supporting nonprofits and foundations that serve these very same communities. Everyone I met was ready to organize, come together, and make things happen. We're not trying to make Lawndale into Lincoln Park – but we can make Lawndale the best it can be.

KEY THEMES

Here are some of the key conversations and questions we explored in Chicago:

How do we take care of the people who take care of our communities?

As a sector, we help community members attain affordable housing, make sure they can get their blood pressure checked, and have opportunities for rest and care. And yet, I heard a room full of people who touch this work from many different levels ask in unison, “How do we make sure our staff have those same opportunities?”

How do we continue building healthy relationships with individual community members as our work grows?

Our research reaffirms that volunteers not only support our work but also enhance public trust in our sector. The closer the public is to a nonprofit, the more they trust it. Knowing this, nonprofits should clearly communicate the good they're doing in communities and how individuals can benefit and get involved.

How do we hold space for conflict when we don't agree?

We're out of practice on how to do this as a sector. These tough conversations aren't for clicks or views but to come closer to real resolutions. Conflict is a generative tool we can lean on to build a thriving civic society.



“The true power of service is not the result of any one specific service experience; it is the journey that volunteers and companies take, in partnership with the community, that leads to an impact never dreamed possible. When we move community goals from the abstract and make them personal and real to volunteers and companies, that is when big, bold commitments happen. We appreciate Independent Sector’s dedication to upholding that vision at the federal level, ensuring that our leaders and communities are protected and can truly thrive.”

Rosie Drumgoole, CEO
[Chicago Cares](#), IS member

BY THE NUMBERS



More than one in five nonprofit employees in the U.S. are not able to meet their basic financial needs. ([Independent Sector and United For ALICE](#), 2024)



Four-fifths of Americans who volunteer said their experience made them view nonprofits more favorably, and **88%** would volunteer again. ([Independent Sector](#), 2024)

new york city

If Chicago is where I learned to fight for communities, New York City is where I forged those skills. As a teenager, I started a grassroots community development organization there, back when people didn't need a highly professionalized background or college degree to lead change. We could just be effective organizers.

I grew up in an all-Black, all-immigrant New York community, where sou-sous were a source of economic power. Hundreds of families contributed money into a pot every month, and one family received the cash to do something big. My parents bought their Brooklyn home in 1975, thanks in part to this collective wealth. My mother was part of the Great Migration and found a government job in New York City. My father, a Jamaican-Cuban immigrant, chased the American Dream all the way to the Big Apple in the 1960s. Their story mirrors millions of others'.

Now, it's time for nonprofits to realize our own version of the American Dream. It wasn't lost on me that many folks who wanted to join our Listening Tour couldn't because they were protesting at New York City Hall for fair compensation as part of the Just Pay campaign. Policymakers often overlook our sector as the job creators and collective economic drivers we are. It's well past time we use our power to do something big.

My final reflection, as a Black woman leader who's been in the game since I was 14, is that I know people are proud of me. I appreciate the love. I also want to be honest: Making bold moves as a Black woman leader can be scary. It's scary to be part of the oppressed classes we're working to support through our work, while people, institutions, and systems continually challenge you. My lived experiences around race and gender have been painful at times, but they've led me here, ready to make a difference with you.

KEY THEMES

In New York City, we came together to discuss these crucial topics:

How do we revitalize the soul of the sector?

Charitable work has become more professionalized. While I believe in technical training and expertise, we all wondered: Are we prioritizing credentials over community voice? Is our work becoming more transactional, gatekept, and devoid of real relationships and soul? What impact does that have on our people and our work?

How do we support our workforce fully, as whole humans?

We're not always meeting nonprofit professionals where they're at with flexible, human-centered approaches and support. We need funding to flow differently – from philanthropy and from government – to address the increased mental health challenges and exhaustion from working through the pandemic.

What does it truly look like to set up a person of color for leadership success in a historically white-led sector?

Many organizations, including ours, hired their first CEO of color after 2020. However, the sector has not collectively developed the skills and systems to support leaders of color with the necessary resources, trust, and power to thrive. Several leaders shared experiences of facing “the glass cliff,” and being expected to single-handedly fix failing situations.



“I hope to see organizations that can sustainably support their missions without undue financial strain. This includes ensuring that health insurance and other employee benefits are affordable and stable. Additionally, policies that provide tax incentives for companies offering meaningful discounts or services to nonprofits would be beneficial.”

John Miller, President & CEO
[Guide Dog Foundation](#) and [America's VetDogs](#), IS members



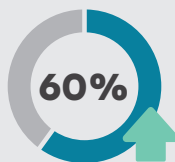
“NFF’s work is just one piece of what it takes to transform communities and it was wonderful to learn and connect with others with the same vision. I appreciate Independent Sector convening such a diverse group of individuals that have a shared purpose so that we can collectively leverage the strengths we all have. We need more spaces like that to learn from each other and collaborate on our work.”

Aisha Benson, President & CEO
[Nonprofit Finance Fund](#), IS member

BY THE NUMBERS



The nonprofit sector is the **third-largest private employer** in the U.S., making up 10% of the private workforce and providing 13 million Americans with paychecks. We generate a collective **\$1.5 trillion** annually. ([Independent Sector](#), 2023)



Between 2020 and 2021, **44%** of organizations that changed CEOs shifted from a white CEO to a CEO of color. In subsequent years, that number has increased to **more than 60%**. (IS member [Candid](#), 2024)

atlanta



After I learned to organize in Chicago and put my skills into action in New York City, I found my career calling in Atlanta. It's where I first entered philanthropy as a foundation program officer at 24 years old and understood what type of changemaker I wanted to be.

Part of that understanding came from having a great boss, Lesley Grady, who was committed to nurturing and mentoring young people on her team. She even showed up front and center for this Listening Tour, over two decades after she first hired me. That's the kind of love Atlanta has for its people, and the reason it was such a vibrant, caring, and supportive place to grow as a young professional.

The intensity of the work in Atlanta shaped me. I wasn't just sitting in an office; I was out there with donors and policymakers, driving through neighborhoods, and talking with residents in their homes. Atlanta taught me about grit, hope, and the importance of really listening.

I'll never forget a visioning meeting we held over 20 years ago while building a community center in a historically disinvested neighborhood. We hired babysitters, brought in great food from a local restaurant, and offered all the makings of a community-centered focus group. Where we got stuck, however, was our desired offer: a job training program. The community had other ideas.

They said, "You've got safe, walkable spaces with amenities for your families. You've got a supermarket in your neighborhood. We don't want this special thing you want for us. We just want what you've got."

Those words changed how I think about trust-building and resource-sharing. Atlanta headquarters over a dozen Fortune 500 companies, but that wealth doesn't always reach the neighborhoods and smaller organizations that need it. Our collective job is to make sure everyone has the chance to build wealth in line with their region's prosperity – and that will take all of us.

Atlanta offered the most diverse tapestry of Listening Tour attendees in terms of age, race, and scope. Every aspect of civil society was represented, from the grassroots to the grass tops, a beautiful sign that Atlanta is ready to harness its collective power.

KEY THEMES

We explored tough but essential topics in Atlanta, including:

How do we build a nonprofit workforce for these times?

The group suggested co-leadership models, consolidating efforts between organizations for efficiency, and policy changes to strengthen workforce benefits – including tax incentives for nonprofit employers that for-profit organizations already receive. Those who work in the charitable sector should have the same opportunities to build wealth as our for-profit peers.

How do we build new streams of talent that include the community served?

This is a time to be deeply self-reflective and ask ourselves different questions about how to attract diverse groups of people to our sector, especially those who have lived experiences related to our missions.

How can we continue changing the narrative to illustrate our sector’s impact?

The American public currently [trusts nonprofits more than any other sector](#), but there is still work to be done. How can we continue to build trust while best leveraging that trust to advocate for the policy changes needed to ensure everyone can thrive?



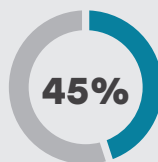
“I hope to see organizations like Independent Sector elevate and spotlight nonprofits that are truly effective, have integrity, and are making a substantive impact. In a sector where there can be variability in effectiveness, it’s crucial for intermediary players to use their influence to highlight those making a real difference. By doing so, we can ensure that resources and recognition go to the organizations driving meaningful change, thereby fostering a healthier and more equitable charitable sector.”

Doug Ammar, Executive Director
[Georgia Justice Project](#)

BY THE NUMBERS



The wealth of white households in Atlanta is **46x** greater than that of Black households. (IS member [Kindred Futures](#) via Urban Institute, 2024)



In an IS study, **45%** of Americans said they believe nonprofits are making things better. ([Independent Sector](#), 2024)

Minneapolis



The Minneapolis Listening Tour session was our first stop focused on listening to a specific community within our broad nonprofit sector: the urban Indian community. Our nation's complex history of violence against Indigenous people is something we continue to reckon with, and something that is still experienced by Native people who have been erased or rendered invisible. This invisibility has been and continues to be a barrier to opportunities for urban Indian communities. Despite this, the strong organizing ability of the Twin Cities' urban Indian community gave me so much hope.

Cultural tradition guides Native nonprofits as they work to heal, repair, and lay the groundwork for a more just future. This was evident in everything from how participants configured our meeting space in line with cultural sensibilities to how we turned a tight 90-minute agenda into a rich, emergent, four-hour collective experience.

I was also struck by everyone's deep connection to their communities. They were familiar with both macro and micro community unmet needs, such as a school bus in a specific rural area without safe after-school transportation. These conversations went beyond typical capacity-building or fundraising, instead creating honest spaces for discussion. Leaders brought community members' faces and stories into the room, inspiring conversations that were raw and real but full of love and care.

Community-building is a north star for Native nonprofits, which are also marked by strong advocacy efforts. Leaders are dedicated to building thoughtful coalitions and partnerships, such as streamlining back-office operations across agencies. This shared support model is something the charitable sector could replicate as a best practice. In fact, reflecting on this visit, we all have much to learn (and lift up) from Indigenous leaders who weave their cultural strengths, values, and identities into their work.

KEY THEMES

Our conversations in Minneapolis explored these key questions:

How do we prioritize working across communities of color and supporting leaders of color?

The murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis sparked a global justice movement. While philanthropy – especially in Minnesota – largely responded by supporting causes to combat anti-Blackness, our sector missed the chance to build solidarity across all affected communities in the region. It’s essential to invest the time in relationship-building, trust-building, and truth-telling to build strong, multiracial coalitions.

How can our sector engage, invest in, and learn from Indigenous approaches?

We want to take into account what healthy nonprofits look like for all our communities, not just a select few. We learned about the work to identify a framework defining healthy Native nonprofits and look forward to learning from it more broadly as we shape our national policy agenda.

How can we support Native leaders in driving solutions that truly address the challenges they see daily?

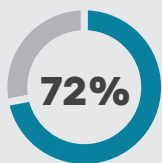
The urban Indian leaders we spoke with acutely understand their communities’ needs, but their approaches are often questioned and their organizations underfunded. How can our sector overcome systemic barriers to funding, create more access to resources, and amplify the good work of different communities?



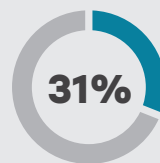
“The nonprofit sector needs legitimate partners from philanthropy that center the community’s voices in the work. We need partners who are committed to allowing communities to lead; to empower us to enact solutions we are already doing and doing well. We applaud Independent Sector for these first few steps and look forward to a promising future.”

Joe Hobot, President & CEO
[American Indian OIC](#)

BY THE NUMBERS



Native people in urban areas represent a significant but often ignored section of the U.S. Native population. **Seventy-two percent** of all American Indian/Alaska Natives (AI/AN) and **78%** of all AI/AN children live in cities. (IS member [National Urban Indian Family Coalition](#), 2015)



According to IS research, only **31%** of nonprofits engaged in advocacy or lobbying over the last five years, whereas Native nonprofits said that advocacy is a core value system for them. ([Independent Sector](#), 2023)



Dallas's Listening Tour stop was perfectly timed – it took place just two months before our 2023 Upswell Summit hosted alongside [Social Venture Partners \(SVP\) Dallas](#), an IS member. The region is a fascinating social and political environment: They're experiencing rapid development with a growing progressive population in a traditionally conservative state that's bearing the brunt of the climate crisis. Changemakers here also work within deeply entrenched power structures underpinned by "Southern politeness," which is a cultural shift from my roots in Chicago and New York.

I had the chance to listen to leaders of Black-led nonprofits in Dallas. While 2020 brought much-needed awareness of our national history and the need for racial equity, we must keep pushing for progress. Recent events, such as the lawsuit against Fearless Fund and its many implications for the sector, show that gains are not guaranteed.

Texas has the [largest Black population in the U.S.](#), and it's where more than 250,000 enslaved Black Texans were declared free on June 19, 1865 (Juneteenth). But the legacy of the antebellum era still affects education, housing, food security, and environmental issues today. In Dallas, I learned about Sandbranch, a mostly Black town with no running water, trash pickup, or streetlights. Because of the color of their skin, the residents of Sandbranch don't get to experience the value of their land.

So how do we achieve justice? How do historically underrecognized communities gain self-determination and access to their region's resources? Charity isn't the answer. Instead, we need to work together to advocate against inequitable policies. We need to marshal our collective power to effectively hold local and national governments accountable and get money flowing in different ways.

All this being said, I experienced a lot of hope after my time in Dallas. The city’s bipartisan support for educational reform and investment shows that cross-political collaboration is possible. I walked away inspired by the idea that together we can push for policy changes that bridge divides and improve lives across all communities – during this election year and beyond.



KEY THEMES

Here are the key conversations and questions we explored in Dallas:

How can we embolden leaders to speak truth to power?

One fundraiser shared a question he sometimes asks himself: “How much of a coward am I being today?” It’s not that social sector leaders don’t possess a fighting spirit (I mean, we’re talking about Texas!) – but the “power” we’re speaking truth to is often holding the purse strings.

How do we scale and replicate successful programs as a sector?

Dallas is doing incredible things around educational reform, but we heard there isn’t infrastructure to scale that work given the large population and magnitude of need. We discussed opportunities to make replication easier, such as a coalition map to showcase a high-level view of partnership opportunities – something we are actively developing.

How do we grow workforce capacity locally?

We heard a specific challenge about finding talent for frontline positions in local communities. There’s a need to invest in emerging leaders and overall leadership development, while creating avenues that attract people into our sector throughout the course of their lives.

“The conversation was a startling reminder that nonprofits are still being called upon to do more with increasingly limited resources. The number of people in need continues to grow, and the funding levels for nonprofits remain static for the most part. The same economic effects fueling more people seeking support are being felt by the organizations offering that support. Nonprofits often underestimate their strength and power, leading us to accept the status quo. Yet, we have the power to build a collective voice that champions the impact, influence, and role of the nonprofit sector – including our value to local communities, our value to the nation’s economy, and our critical role in civil society.”

Millicent Boykin, Vice President of Strategic Partnerships
[OneStar Foundation](#), IS member

BY THE NUMBERS



With the Council on Foundations, an IS member, we filed a joint amicus brief to support the Fearless Fund, arguing that charitable giving – including giving to counteract the effects of racial discrimination – is protected by the First Amendment. More than 200 organizations have signed on in support. ([Independent Sector](#) and [Council on Foundations](#), 2024)

seattle



I've visited Seattle at least once a year throughout my career. Whether I was aggregating health data with [Robert Wood Johnson Foundation](#), an IS member, or thinking through affordable housing policy as the chair of Grounded Solutions Network, Seattle is a place I know intimately for its changemaking work.

This time, I decided to walk to all my appointments instead of driving or taking a Lyft. From lunch with a foundation president to visiting community projects, I hit the sidewalks.

Truthfully, Seattle is facing challenges, including increased homelessness, drug addiction, and changes to its built environment. These issues came up in almost every conversation I had with local leaders, and I saw them firsthand as I walked around the city. The problems our sector tackles have only gotten more complex since 2020, and nonprofit leaders are feeling the strain. Washington has more jobs than people, and many had to work through the pandemic without a break. The collective burnout is real.

But a key theme of this Listening Tour stop was “tenderness.” Tenderness can show up in many ways: being honest about our struggles instead of pretending we've got it all together, finding new ways to collaborate instead of competing for funding, and checking in on each other's “soul health” instead of acting like everything's fine when it's not.

I was pleasantly surprised by the racial diversity in the room and the intense focus on supporting leaders of color. We discussed overcoming common challenges these leaders face, from gaining board trust to having the power to take big risks. The discussion in Seattle also brought up unique topics like the impact of remote work, especially how it affects our connection to the communities we serve, and how to keep momentum after receiving large, unrestricted gifts from MacKenzie Scott, a Seattleite and philanthropist.

KEY THEMES

Nonprofit leaders in Seattle brought up tough but essential questions that have implications for the future of our sector, such as:

How do we strengthen the nonprofit workforce?

Specifically, we must change the way we talk about our value as a sector. We are critical infrastructure for our civil society, job creators, and economic engines – not just “do-gooders.”

How do we recognize the true costs of nonprofit work?

As one participant shared, “Defense contractors and people who build highways aren’t doing it for 70 cents on the dollar, but we are.” But we shouldn’t have to operate from what many people refer to as a scarcity mindset.

Who is missing at the table?

Honestly, I love getting called out and identifying gaps in my awareness. While Seattle has a strong urban core, many nonprofits operate statewide. So I heard and appreciated the clarion call to adjust our programming to include rural perspectives and those doing critical work outside major metropolitan areas.



“In the fall of 2023, I don’t think we in the Seattle nonprofit sector realized just how much we were all still recovering (in isolation) from the pandemic until Independent Sector came to town and provided us context from around the country. What we learned was that the staffing capacity and stresses and strains on our people wasn’t something personal, it is a national crisis in our sector. Rather than feeling depleted even further, we felt energized to know that our sector is coming together to step up and be bold in taking our rightful place as a profession and expanding our vision of what increased capacity could create for our communities. With Independent Sector weaving together our collective power, it all feels possible.”

Sonya Campion, President
[Champion Advocacy Fund](#), IS member

BY THE NUMBERS



Almost **60%** of nonprofit leaders identified staff-related concerns – including losing staff to organizations with more competitive compensation and benefits, general lack of staff capacity and burnout, and internal cultural issues – as one of their organization’s biggest challenges. (IS member [The Center for Effective Philanthropy](#), 2024)

phoenix



Phoenix has experienced rapid growth I hadn't previously grasped before our Listening Tour session in February 2024. After visiting long-established cities like New York, Atlanta, and Seattle, I was struck by how fresh and forward-thinking Phoenix felt. Today, it's a major hub for tech and innovation and ranks as the fifth most populous city in America. Local leaders are exploring how artificial intelligence intersects with the social sector in ways other cities haven't yet. Phoenix's nonprofit and philanthropic infrastructure is still growing, and, unlike other places with centuries-old foundations, Phoenix has a unique chance to define its vision from the ground up.

Nonprofits and philanthropic partners across the Valley of the Sun are tackling protracted disparities that are heightened by contentious issues in Arizona such as immigration, voting access, and representation at tables of power and policymaking.

Even with these challenges, I left Phoenix feeling hopeful. There's a strong spirit of innovation and inclusiveness, with a commitment to hearing all voices, including rural nonprofits and Native-led organizations. Phoenix is a city where the future is being actively shaped by passionate, smart people of all ages, eager to unite and make a difference. This Listening Tour stop not only deepened my understanding of this quickly evolving region of the country but also strengthened my belief in the power of collective action to make the impossible possible.

KEY THEMES

Here are the key conversations and questions we explored in Phoenix:

How do we create coalitions to build power?

A grantmaker shared her fears about whom she could trust with politically sensitive issues. Coming from activist cities like New York and Chicago, this really highlighted the political realities in Arizona for me. Leaders were eager to build – and participate in – trusting coalitions to strengthen their political power, which aligns with IS’s advocacy research and its findings on the power of coalitions.

How should nonprofits adapt their communications strategies to holistically support their communities?

A changemaker shared how fundraising is challenging due to the population they serve, sparking a discussion about “deservingness” in terms of homelessness, poverty, and hunger. Nonprofit leaders can feel pressured to portray beneficiaries in a way that appeals to funders. How can we better educate funders and market our work differently?

How do we build a multigenerational workforce?

The age diversity at this Listening Tour session was amazing, with four generations in one room. We had energetic Arizona State University students brainstorming with seasoned nonprofit veterans ready for retirement. This mix shows the potential of our workforce. How can we replicate this energy nationwide and encourage learning across generations?

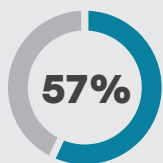


“When Independent Sector shared their research on The Retreat of Influence and the decline of nonprofit advocacy, it sparked a real moment among the group. The data underscored the power of the collective, how much more we can accomplish in coalitions, and what we lose by giving up on policy. There truly is strength in numbers. We can’t abandon advocacy as a tool to further our missions. So many nonprofit programs are government-funded – if we sit on the sidelines, where does that leave us?”

Sherri Jones, Development Director, [Rural Arizona Engagement \(RAZE\)](#)

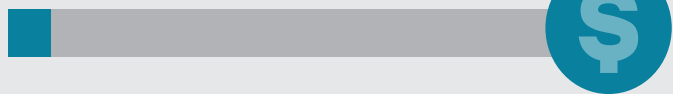
Leadership Council Member, [Lodestar Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Innovation](#), IS member

BY THE NUMBERS



Only **12%** of nonprofits reported participating in advocacy when not in groups, while **57%** of coalition members reported advocating. ([Independent Sector](#), 2023)

7.3%



According to Census data, nonprofit employees make up nearly 7% of the Arizona workforce but earn 7.3% of the state’s total wages, indicating that nonprofit pay is somewhat higher than that of other sectors. (IS member [Lodestar Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Innovation](#), 2022)



Los Angeles

I remember stepping off a plane at Los Angeles International Airport for my first youth organizing conference at 16. Returning for our Listening Tour as a seasoned leader, I was moved to see Los Angeles's passion for change has only grown.

So many Los Angeles-based social sector professionals work and live in the neighborhoods they grew up in. They've come full circle, proving that the answers to community problems are contained within those communities. As our field professionalizes, we sometimes forget this simple truth: There is brilliance and genius flourishing in our neighborhoods, buried under legislated neglect and disinvestment.

But Los Angeles is ready. Our Listening Tour session was buzzing with people eager to build coalitions and drive collective change. The deep connection these folks have with their neighborhoods doesn't just enrich their work – it fuels it. Los Angeles not only talks about making a difference but is also making it happen right here, right now.

We talked about how our workforce has changed since 2020. Many people didn't come back from the pandemic the same in terms of their mental and physical health. And, of course, there's the worrying retrenchment of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) that's problematizing the movement around racial equity in our sector, a theme we hear increasingly across many of our engagements.

But the solutions to our community's problems are also contained within the community. How do we unite more effectively as a sector to combat these challenges? One nonprofit may struggle to buy health insurance, but what if 500 nonprofits came together to buy it? Or 50,000?

KEY THEMES

In Los Angeles, the conversation covered a range of illuminating topics, including:

How can nonprofits strengthen their collective advocacy muscle?

Advocacy is education. It's part of our missions. It multiplies funder impact. However, our field doesn't advocate at the level it used to because we're not totally clear if and how we're allowed to. IS can help "turn the advocacy corner" in three ways: clearly defining rules, sharing adequate tools, and working with funders to provide resources.

How do we shift the nonprofit narrative?

Leaders shared stories of corporate counterparts saying, "I could never work at a nonprofit," insinuating the pay and prestige (or lack thereof) isn't worth it. But nonprofits are economic engines that provide 13 million Americans with a paycheck. We are leaders with deep skill, agility, heart, and competence. Let's be loud, proud, and honest about that.

How do we adequately support nonprofit leaders with high costs of living?

It's well past time to ensure those working in the nonprofit sector are paid well enough to take care of themselves and their families. While this is true across the board, it was especially top of mind in Los Angeles and other coastal areas.



"Working in a region as diverse as LA where many organizations collaborate across communities, it's easy to forget about the nuanced needs of individual leaders of color, as well as the small organizations led by leaders of color who primarily serve communities of color. Just a reminder to IS that a one-size-fits-all approach will not work for every issue, need, or challenge. In focusing on the nonprofit workforce of today and tomorrow, let's encourage, support, and learn from culturally relevant leadership development practices, in addition to other policies and benefits, that enable sustainable nonprofit careers."

Linda Akutagawa, President & CEO [LEAP \(Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics\)](#), IS member

BY THE NUMBERS



1.2 million

One in every 14 California jobs is at a nonprofit organization, and more than **1.2 million** people are employed by nonprofits in California. Nonprofits rank as the third largest by wages among key industries in California and the fourth largest by number of jobs, **producing more jobs** than finance and insurance, wholesale trade, and construction. ([California Association of Nonprofits](#), 2019)

Washington, DC



After hearing from eight major metropolitan areas throughout the nation, it was time to return to Washington, DC – a city that’s not only the heart of our American democracy but also a place that I call home, and the place where I’m raising my children.

This Listening Tour session grounded me in the local community. There’s something special about being able to say, “Let’s grab a coffee to brainstorm that issue,” instead of having to set up a Zoom call.

DC is built on the revolutionary idea of democracy. Establishing and upholding any revolutionary idea requires advocacy. This is the reality: If we want to really serve our communities, we can’t shy away from responsible lobbying, advocacy, and coalition-building. The bottom line is that the systemic changes we most want to see in our nation and our communities will not just happen by themselves. They take our collective voices and power. And we have the rules, tools, and resources needed to put those voices to work.

Being housed in the nation’s capital amps up our ability to advocate for the people who make our sector “work.” Now that we have direct feedback from the full breadth of our sector, we’re armed with rich insights to directly advocate to the highest seats of power: the White House and Congress. We’re deeply involved in bipartisan efforts to expand charitable tax deductions that incentivize giving and tax credits for nonprofit employers that offer things like child care, retirement plans, and paid family leave – credits that our for-profit peers already enjoy. What better place than the heart of our democracy to talk about these issues?

KEY THEMES

Discussions in Washington, DC covered essential topics for our sector, including:

How do we advocate for a healthy nonprofit workforce?

We discussed findings from our quarterly roundtables with the White House, biweekly meetings with White House staff, and ongoing engagement with lawmakers on Capitol Hill. We also talked about initiatives such as the Nonprofit Stakeholders Engaging and Advancing Together (Nonprofit SEAT) Act, which aims to ensure nonprofits have permanent and sector-specific representation at the presidential level by creating a White House Office on the Nonprofit Sector.

How do we better invest in our membership?

Washington, DC has so many communities all moving toward change at the same time. It reminds me of concentric circles: You have local, regional, national, and international work all happening here. We heard the same message from many of the D.C. attendees: Investing in coalition membership helps bring those bodies of work together more effectively. Membership matters.

How do we fund coalition-building?

Nonprofits want to build partnerships and coalitions, but it takes both money and time to do this well. This is something organizations would like IS to do more of – in part building on the success of the Nonprofit Infrastructure Coalition, which we co-lead with [KABOOM!](#), an IS member.



“A healthy sector requires alignment and acknowledgment of the opportunities we have as a whole. Leveraging our force will allow us to not only accelerate change for those we aim to serve, but it will also create a better work environment for those who choose to use their life in service. I’d like to see us maximizing the magnitude of our workforce, our collective ideas, and our missions toward greater outcomes. In doing so, we can begin to ensure that our efforts are transformative and aim to support the total needs of community, while at the same time forcing a discipline that accelerates change at the pace necessary to solve the very complex issues we have inherited.”

Lysa Ratliff, CEO
[KABOOM!](#), IS member

BY THE NUMBERS



More than **8 in 10** American voters support expanding the universal charitable deduction for all taxpayers and extending federal business tax credits to nonprofit employers. ([Independent Sector](#), 2023)

The U.S. is a big country, and, unfortunately, we couldn't go everywhere. The Listening Tour was something we undertook completely on our own, and I wanted to ensure that we found – and continue to find – ways to set these tables outside of the largest metros. Our virtual Listening Tour session concluded the series and helped us to connect with the people who make up the crucial civil society in smaller towns, mid-sized cities, and rural areas in a way we couldn't necessarily do in person.

We heard from leaders in places like Milwaukee, Baltimore, and Dayton about the unique challenges the charitable sector is facing in those regions. These leaders are doing critical work and have an essential voice at our collective table. They're saying, "Don't skip over us. We're here. We're not flyover country. We all make up the same tapestry."

Each corner of our sector has unique challenges and opportunities. IS's work is to advocate for national policies that are aligned to different goals, which are informed by people's lived realities.

KEY THEMES

Here are the key conversations and questions we explored in our virtual Listening Tour session:

How do we pay our nonprofit workforce a liveable wage?

Rising costs to run organizations and pay livable wages affect every part of our country. Just because Dayton isn't as expensive as New York City or Los Angeles doesn't mean housing is affordable for nonprofit workers who live there. Without sector-wide narrative change around overhead expenses, pay equity, and talent acquisition, these challenges will continue.

How do we build pathways for new talent in these locations?

A unique challenge for nonprofits in smaller towns, mid-sized cities, and rural regions is both attracting top national talent and nurturing emerging leaders. When it's difficult to fill positions, burnout issues become magnified.

How do we address the fundraising challenges of operating in smaller, mid-sized, and rural locations?

It's difficult to access resources from large, national funders when they don't have a footprint of support in these geographic regions – but the limited funding from state agencies and local family foundations may not be enough either.



TAKEAWAYS & MAJOR THEMES

My key takeaway from the Listening Tour is that our hypothesis has been right – we need to double down on our focus on the **nonprofit workforce** and determine where and how we can bring the greatest value to the sector we serve. People matter. Our sector needs to extend the same care to our workforce as we do for the people every organization serves through our array of missions and causes. People make our civil society work, and we have to care for our people in new ways that are responsive to their needs and considerate of our shared future.

While IS is known for its national leadership in research, policy, and programming, our focus is grounded in deep engagement with our members and partners. We heard you. We took it all in, and now we're taking action with real strategies informed by your feedback. While our work remains focused on building sector health in four core areas – financial, governance and trust, policy advocacy, and workforce – we're responding directly to what people said they need by zeroing in on the health of our workforce. We're investing heavily in confronting workforce issues to buttress the sector health work we've been doing since 1980 as the only national membership organization representing the whole of the charitable sector.

TOP 5

CHALLENGES FOR THE NONPROFIT WORKFORCE

1

It's simply more expensive to operate nonprofits today. Everything from rent to health insurance premiums are rising annually, and leaders are struggling to support their teams and attract top talent with good benefits and fair pay. At the same time, general operational funding has declined.

2

Our people are exhausted after working through the pandemic and continuing to navigate systems with entrenched power dynamics. The severity of both mental health needs and physical challenges (such as long COVID) are increasing within the workforce. These trends are most pronounced in critical frontline roles that provide services to their communities – often communities that have been historically underserved.

3

People's relationship to work has changed; they're not centering it in the same way they used to. Organizational leaders are grappling with what that means and how to adapt, especially while recruiting and retaining young people.

4

Despite our sector's major contributions to our country, 22% of nonprofit workers are living paycheck to paycheck. Inadequate financial and social support, particularly regarding caregiving responsibilities, may be contributing to high rates of burnout and workforce shortages – especially for women and mothers.

5

Leaders of color often lack supportive boards, financial security, and networks of trust and support. While the last three to four years have seen more diverse leadership in our sector, many leaders of color have been left out to dry. Simultaneously, the current legal, legislative, and political environment is increasingly hostile and reactionary toward these efforts and accomplishments, causing some organizations to scale back how they do, fund, and communicate this work. We heard about the chilling effects of this environment in real time during our Listening Tour.

LOOKING AHEAD

One thing remains constant: Our people are the essential linchpin to advancing our individual and collective missions. We are preparing to launch the new **Center of Excellence on the Nonprofit Workforce** to address the major challenges facing sector leaders regarding the recruitment, retention, empowerment, and wellness of our workforce.

While the charitable sector is extremely powerful – producing almost 6% of the nation’s GDP – our sector can feel “under-powered” in comparison to the challenges we face today. Nonprofits and philanthropy have the opportunity to change the frame and set an example of how we equip and revitalize our workforce, including paid, stipended, and volunteer workers.

Our Center of Excellence on the Nonprofit Workforce will address these critical challenges and opportunities facing the nonprofit workforce through:

RESEARCH & ANALYSIS ————○

- Conducting a **comprehensive landscape analysis** to continue our learnings from this Listening Tour and a nationally representative, random sample **workforce survey** providing quantitative insights on the health of the workforce from multiple perspectives.
- Engaging in a groundbreaking research partnership with **United For ALICE** to produce a national snapshot of workers living paycheck to paycheck across the nonprofit sector to shape better policy, practice, and interventions. This includes a national report, a fact sheet on the economic benefits of achieving financial security for the nonprofit workforce, and a national- and state-level data dashboard.
- Launching a suite of tools and research around **DEI retrenchment**, including tracking threats that would impede the work of nonprofits and philanthropy and better understanding the potential impact of DEI retrenchment on the charitable sector’s workforce.

POLICY DEVELOPMENT & ADVOCACY ————○

- Continuing the multiyear process of advocating for the inclusion of nonprofit workforce data in the **Bureau of Labor Statistics** quarterly reporting so we can better inform our decisions as a sector.
- Leading a legislative effort to make nonprofit employers eligible for the same **federal tax credits** that for-profits already receive for such things as paid family and medical leave, child care, starting a retirement plan, or making their organizations more accessible for people with disabilities.
- Continuing to build deep relationships with the **White House and Congress** to better advance structural change for the charitable sector through the federal policymaking process.
- Continuing to advocate for the **Public Service Loan Forgiveness** program, which is a critical recruiting and retention tool for the nonprofit sector and a key ladder to financial freedom for nonprofit workers.
- Partnering with the **National Museum and Center for Service**, an IS member, to unify our nation around the “**American spirit of service**” to create richer paths to getting involved in our civil society at any age.



DEVELOPMENT OF STANDARDS, TOOLS & PROGRAMS

- Expanding services for senior leadership of nonprofits, using the current CEO Circle of Color program as a model. This **leadership circle** program was formed to address the staggering underrepresentation of leadership of color and actualize systemic change that results in increased executive-level representation.
- Using critical Initiative on Strategic Volunteer Engagement (ISVE) research findings to build tools that both nonprofits and philanthropy can use to encourage strategic use and management of the **volunteer workforce**.
- Updating our **33 Principles for Good Governance and Ethical Practice** to help ensure the integrity of our organizations' operations – including recognizing the impact of artificial intelligence on nonprofit operations and the unique challenges leaders of color often face compared to their white peers.

SECTOR-SPANNING ADVISORY STRUCTURES & COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION

- Building a diverse and representative **Advisory Committee** to guide, evaluate, and provide expertise across a wide range of subjects related to the nonprofit workforce.
- Evaluating tools and programs based on user feedback, impact assessment, and targeted interventions, with a goal of **continuous improvement** on issues like worker burnout, volunteerism rates, and recruitment.

The signals are clear: Our sector is at a turning point. This is urgent work, and Independent Sector is ready to lead the way alongside you. We look forward to continuing to engage our partners, members, and the entirety of our sector as we build the workforce of the future together.

PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS

501 Commons	Boys and Girls Club of America	Communities Foundation of Texas	Gates Foundation
8th Generation	Build Missouri Health Building Changes	Communities in Schools - Atlanta	Georgia Center for Nonprofits
A New Leaf	Burke Museum	Community Action Partnership	Georgia Justice Project
Achieve Twin Cities	Bush Foundation	Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta	Girl Scouts Arizona Cactus-Pine Council
ACLU of Georgia	Business Services Collective	Community Foundation of Lorain County	Girls Inc. of Metropolitan Dallas
After8toEducate	Cafritz Foundation	Community Nutrition Network and Senior Services Association	Givewell Community Foundation
All Stars Project, Inc.	The California Endowment	Community Wealth	Goodwill
Amanda Broun Consulting, LLC	California Wellness Foundation	Connect Detroit	Goodwill Northern Michigan
Amazon Global Philanthropy	Calm4Kids	Connected Nation	Governor's Office of Youth, Faith and Family
American Heart Association	Camino	Coro LA	Grand Valley State University
American Indian OIC	Campion Advocacy Fund	Council for Certification in Volunteer Administration	Grant Professionals Foundation
American Nutrition Association	Campion Foundation	Council on Foundations	Grantbook
Annie E. Casey Foundation	Campion Fund	Crown Family Philanthropies	Greater Auburn-Gresham Development Corporation
Archstone Foundation	Cancer Care	Crysallis Labs	Greenlight Fund
Arizona Commission on the Arts	Candid	CSSSA Foundation	The Guide Dog Foundation and America's VetDogs
Arizona Community Foundation	Catalytic Innovators Group	CWL Creatives	Habitat for Humanity
Arizona State University	Caterpillar Foundation	Dallas Truth, Racial Healing and Transformation	Hawai'i Alliance of Nonprofit Organizations
The Arts Community Alliance	Cause Effective	Demos	Hawai i Pacific University
ArtsFund	CD Tech	The Draper Richards Kaplan Foundation	The Henry Ford
Asian-Americans Advancing Justice - Atlanta	Center for Community Progress	Duet: Partners In Health & Aging	Hillel Jewish Student Center at ASU
Assistance League	Center for Effective Philanthropy	Durfee Foundation	Horton's Kids
ASU Lodestar Center for Philanthropy and Nonprofit Innovation	Chicago Cares	Dwell with Dignity	Housing Development Consortium
AT&T Foundation	Chicago Center for Arts and Technology	Earthjustice	Hugh & Jane Ferguson Trust
Atlanta Habitat for Humanity	Chicago Community Trust	EarthX	Human Services Campus dba Keys to Change
Atlanta Land Trust	Chicago Foundation for Women	Educational First Steps	Hyde Park Art Center
Ballmer Group	Child Poverty Action Lab	Einhorn Collaborative	ICAN Positive Programs for Youth
Bank of America Private	Children's Aid	Fair Chance	iDEntity
Bernier McCaw Foundation	Christo Rey Dallas High School	Feeding Matters	Immune Deficiency Foundation
Better Youth	Citi Foundation	Firehouse Arts Center	Inatai Foundation
Blandin Foundation	Civic Capital Consulting	The Firehouse Community Arts Center	Inclusive Action
Blue Print NY	Climate Solutions	Flinn Foundation	Initiative Foundation
BoardSource	Coco South LA	For Oak Cliff	
Boardwalk Consulting	Code Nation	Forefront	
BOSS Advisors	Collaborative Leaders	FSG	
	Commit Partnership		
	CommonGood Vermont		

Jersey Cares	My Money My Story	Polk Brothers Foundation	Tempe Community Council
Jewish Community Center of Dallas	National CAPACD	Pritzker Traubert Foundation	Threshold
Justice Journey Alliance, Leadership Foundation of Chicago	National Health Council	Rebuilding Together North Dallas	Together for Arizona
KABOOM!	National Indian Child Welfare Coalition	Reinvigorating the Conversation: Volunteerism, Service-Learning and Community Engagement	Truevolution
Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University	National Museum and Center for Service	Restore NY	The Tull Charitable Foundation
Kindred Futures	National Urban Indian Family Coalition	Rollins University	UnidosUS
LA Food Bank	Native American Community Development Institute	Roy & Patricia Disney Foundation	United Philanthropy Forum
Latinos Progresando	NDNZ	Rural Arizona Engagement (RAZE)	United Way King County
Leader Dogs for the Blind	New York University	Safer Foundation	United Way New York City
Leadership Council for Nonprofits	Nonprofit Association of Washington	Sall Family Foundation	United Way of Greater Atlanta
Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics	Nonprofit Finance Fund	Sapphire Foundation	United Way of Greater Knoxville
Leadership Foundations	Nonprofit HR	SCRD/Lodestar	United Way of Rhode Island
Leadership Now Project	Nonprofit Leadership Alliance	Seattle Foundation	United Way of Snohomish County
Leadership Tomorrow	Nonprofit Quarterly	Seattle Goodwill	United Ways of California
Leland Fikes Foundation	North Lawndale Employment Network	Seattle Mariners	University of California Berkeley
Living Cities	Northwest Area Foundation	Seattle Public Library Foundation	University of Southern California
Lloyd A. Fry Foundation	Northwest Harvest	Seattle University	Urban Institute
The Lodestar Foundation	NPower	Social Current	Vasculitis Foundation
Los Angeles United Methodist Urban Foundation	One Hope United	Social Justice Fund NW	Verizon
Love Blooms Here	OneStar Foundation	Social Venture Partners Dallas	VESTEDin Consulting
Lumos Marketing	Open Center for the Arts	Sojourners	Victoria Foundation
Maggie's Place	Panorama Global	Soulstice Consultancy	Vitalyst Health Foundation
Manifest Works	Para Los Niños	Southern California Grantmakers	VolunteerNow
March to the Polls	Partners Allied for Community Excellence	Southern Education Fund	Vulcan
Margaret A. Cargill Philanthropies	Partnership for Southern Equity	Southern Partners Fund	Wa Na Wari
Marwen	Path Forward Consulting	Southwest Folklife Alliance Inc.	Washington Nonprofits
McKnight Foundation	Paul Allen Foundation	Southwest Organizing Project	Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions
Mellon Foundation	Paz de Cristo Community Center	Speakman Consulting	We Are In
Memphis Music Initiative	Perigee Fund	Spectrum Nonprofit Services	Weingart Foundation
Michigan Council of Foundations	Perlman & Perlman, LLP	Starbucks Foundation	Wing Luke Museum
MIGIZI	Philadelphia Bar Foundation	Suits for Judah	YMCA LA
Minnesota Alliance for Volunteer Advancement	Philanthropy Northwest	Surdna Foundation	YMCA of DC
Minnesota Council of Foundations	Philanthropy Southwest	Tampa Bay Academy of Hope	Young Invincibles
Minnesota Council of Nonprofits	Philanthropy West Virginia	Team Read	Young Leaders Strong City
Minnesota Division of Indian Work	Philips Family Foundation	Team Rubicon	Youth Guidance
Mississippi Alliance of Nonprofits and Philanthropy	Plural Policy	Technology Access Foundation	YouthCare
	Pohlad Foundation		YWCA Metropolitan Chicago
	Points of Light		

BECOME AN INDEPENDENT SECTOR MEMBER

By joining Independent Sector, your organization will be part of a collaborative community of changemakers focused on building a healthier, more equitable nation.

Membership is designed to do three things:

1. KEEP YOU INFORMED

You'll receive the most up-to-date trends on the health of the nonprofit sector, trust in civil society, and other IS-commissioned research as we develop new resources, events, and tools that are available only to members and developed in direct response to our Listening Tour learnings.

2. ACCELERATE YOUR WORK

You'll hear directly from experts on policy issues impacting the sector, gain access to members-only storytelling opportunities to promote your work, and increase your knowledge and skills as a changemaker through webinars and workshops for our members.

3. BUILD YOUR COMMUNITY

As members, you and your organization's staff will have exclusive access to opportunities to meet, collaborate with, and learn from fellow changemakers and thought leaders at local, regional, and national levels.

To make membership affordable for organizations of every size, annual dues for this membership category are based on the size of your organization's payroll.

We invite you to join us. Visit <https://independentsector.org/membership/>





This Listening Tour isn't a one-off experiment but instead a catalyst for us to stay engaged with our members and partners. Become part of our reciprocal feedback loop! I want to know: What did we miss? What would you like to add? What are you most excited about?

Reach out to me directly at akilahw@independentsector.org.



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