



## Reality, not rhetoric, on nonprofit world

By [Alan M. Cantor](#) / [For the Monitor](#)  
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Carolyn McKinney's column, "Actually, less government giving is the moral choice" (Monitor Forum, Aug. 2) gets a lot of things terribly wrong. McKinney is so adamantly opposed to government spending that she assails every version of it as not merely wasteful and counterproductive, but immoral. To prove her point, she sets up a false dichotomy, whereby the charitable sector is everything that government is not: close to the ground, efficient in helping only the truly needy and, put simply, "good."

McKinney vastly oversimplifies the charitable sector. She paints a picture of nonprofits being governed locally by concerned volunteers and staffed by modestly-paid hired hands, effectively helping neighbors they know. After three decades of work in and with the nonprofit sector, I know that that's often the case. There's much to admire in nonprofits.

But the nonprofit world is not all small, local organizations. Yes, it's the Friendly Kitchen and Concord Boys & Girls Club, but it's also Harvard University and the Metropolitan Opera. It's large foundations and enormous humanitarian enterprises like CARE and Save The Children. These large organizations do important work, but they hardly fit the image of McKinney's group of neighbors rolling up their sleeves to help a needy family.

### **Efficient? Sometimes.**

McKinney implies that nonprofits are inherently more effective, efficient and clear-sighted than government. I can assure her that that's the case - sometimes. Frequently it's not. Nonprofit leaders are like everyone else: Some are brilliant, selfless and diligent; others are dull-minded, selfish and lazy; most are somewhere in the middle. Nonprofit boards can be models of excellent governance or examples of wishy-washy group-think.

Nonprofit leaders are rarely held accountable, and I have seen cases where poor management and governance persist in an organization year after year, despite clear indications (persistent deficits, high staff turnover) that scream for correction. At least elected government officials can be thrown out of office. I have sometimes wished that an under-performing nonprofit board of directors had to face re-election after two or four years.

McKinney brags that conservatives give more to charity than liberals. Rather than argue that point, I question the importance of so broad a measure. (And I do so as someone who has been involved with nonprofit fundraising since 1982. That is, I am by all means an advocate of charitable giving.)

Charitable giving, yes, includes donating to the local food pantry and soup kitchen. It also means paying for a new swimming pool or donating a sculpture to one's alma mater, endowing the first flutist's chair at the Boston Symphony, or contributing to a partisan think tank like the Center for American Progress (on the left) or the Heritage Foundation (on the right), both of which are nonprofits. Charitable giving also includes donations to one's church, which may well go toward

feeding a hungry family, but which will far more likely go to maintaining the building and paying the minister and staff.

In other words, charitable organizations come in an array of sizes and missions, and only some of them deal directly with core human needs like food and shelter. And it's specious to confer moral superiority to conservatives because by some measures they give more to charity than do liberals.

If a conservative Wall Street banker puts millions of dollars into a foundation in his name, and that foundation then supports his prep school and the Cato Institute, what does that do for needy families and how does that connote a higher moral bearing or community connection? I'm sure McKinney herself would complain about the misplaced values of someone who gives millions to a liberal think-tank, Planned Parenthood and the Sierra Club.

The point is: Not only can you donate millions of dollars to charity without feeding or clothing or housing a single person, but you may be getting tax deductions for gifts that a large segment of the population would not consider charitable at all.

### **Misses the point**

McKinney writes, "Conservatism also fosters the organic growth of charitable organizations, which allows society to fill its own needs as they arise." Along with insisting on giving credit to conservatives, rather than liberals, in creating nonprofits, she misses the point that some causes are simply more marketable and attractive than others.

In her new book *Compassion Inc.*, Mara Einstein analyzes corporate support for efforts to fight various diseases. Einstein describes how corporations and individuals out-bid one another for the opportunity to donate to organizations fighting breast cancer - a cause that resonates well with their target market of consumers - while other diseases such as Alzheimer's struggle for any sort of support whatsoever.

Similarly, it's vastly easier to attract donations and corporate sponsorships for animal shelters than for homeless shelters.

There are some important causes that, sadly, simply do not sell.

Which brings us to McKinney's final misunderstanding. She writes about government and nonprofits as though they are operating in separate spheres without more than an occasional intersection. In fact, she talks about how when nonprofits do accept governmental support, it comes with cumbersome rules - a point I concede.

But government and nonprofits often do work together, and in many cases they do so productively.

Take, for example, the case where a multiple offender is busted for DWI. The court may order the defendant to undergo detox and treatment. Typically the state would pay a nonprofit to provide that service.

Surely McKinney doesn't want the government to be running rehab centers. Or does she think that the community, "fill(ing) its own needs as they arise," will pass the hat to pay for drug and alcohol rehab staffing and facilities? Or perhaps people of a small town will gather in the church basement or community center and treat the alcoholics and drug users among them before they drive again?

### **Over-the-top**

McKinney is apparently convinced that everything the government does is not only wrong, but immoral. And she sets up a counterexample, where every nonprofit is good and everything nonprofits do is efficient, effective, and right. Perhaps now and then her argument rings true: As the saying goes, even a broken clock is right twice a day. But her over-the-top rhetoric and simplistic argument reduce the world to heroes and villains.

In the real and imperfect world, we need both government and nonprofits working together to help the needy and to deal with the complex issues our communities face.

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