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Effective Board Leadership Defined Among Nonprofits During Alliance Conference

MEMPHIS, TENN. (May 5, 2008)...Some 150 nonprofit professionals, including 15 board chairs, 55 board members and 80 executive directors and staff, gathered to embrace a common goal of defining and executing more effective board leadership during the 3rd annual Alliance for Nonprofit Excellence conference, "Boards of Directors – Myths and Realities," May 1 at the Jewish Community Center. Alliance CEO Nancy McGee and her team produce the annual conference in partnership with the national publication, *The Nonprofit Quarterly*, for the purpose of education and exposure to national perspective. Each year, different topics inherent to the nonprofit industry are explored.

"Nonprofits are playing a more critical role in our community than ever before. We're all in this to make a difference," said Dr. David Renz, director of the Midwest Center for Nonprofit Leadership at the University of Missouri, Kansas City, who opened the conference. Dr. Renz also served as moderator for a local panel of board chairs and executive directors representing Memphis Health Center, Goodwill Homes Community Services, Tipton County Commission on Aging, and Synergy Treatment Center.

Other distinguished speakers on the agenda included Keynote speaker Dr. Yvonne Harrison, assistant professor of the Center for Nonprofit Leadership at Seattle University; Ruth McCambridge, editor-in-chief of *The Nonprofit Quarterly* magazine; Dr. Judith Millesen, associate professor of political science at Ohio University, who spoke on "Building a Strong Board Connected to Community" with emphasis on accountability; and Ron Moitzfield, chair, St. Louis President's Council. All participated in breakout sessions.

Keynote Speaker Brings National Research Findings (Memphis Included)

Keynote speaker Dr. Harrison brought national research on board chairs to determine impact and influence. The first phase of her research began in 2006 through 21 personal interviews with respondents in Seattle, Wash. and Victoria, British Columbia. In 2007, the second phase involved an online survey of 195 nonprofit leaders from across the U.S., including Memphis, and Canada. Board chairs and senior staff participated. According to Dr. Harrison, in an article published in the national magazine, *The Nonprofit Quarterly* (summer 2007), both phases of the research project mirrored one another. Trustworthiness, intelligence and good listening skills were considered highest-rated qualities where being dictatorial, critical and motivated by self-interest ranked among the lowest-rated attributes. Below, some key points from Dr. Harrison's presentation:

Board Chairs Wield A Lot of Power

- A board chair's effectiveness or ineffectiveness directly affects the success of an organization and the execution of its mission.
- Board chairs have influence over other board members, CEOs and management teams as well as external stakeholders such as funders, regulators and other clients.

An Effective Board Chair...

- Is committed to action and exerts his/her influence to achieve goals in a collaborative way.
 - Is a force for change with role clarity and the ability to bring people together.
 - Possesses both "Emotional and Spiritual Intelligence:"
 - Emotional Intelligence: Self-awareness, social awareness and relationship management.
- more-

- Spiritual Intelligence: A team leader who respects the talents of fellow board members and engages their involvement.

A Well-Organized Board is an Effective Board

- Strategic plan in place and best practices identified.
- Free flowing dissemination of information with senior staff.

Exploring Board-Chair Leadership

Following Dr. Harrison's presentation, conference participants were given the opportunity to learn from one another during table discussions exploring board-chair relationships. For example, at one table, the six-member group included two chair-elects, and one co-director who suggested that boards should become more engaged, have an equal male-female ratio, improve getting the word out and to partner with retailers for dollars going back to the organization. They defined poor performing board chairs as those with poor attendance and lack of participation. The group included Board Chair-Elects Sarah Waine of the Collierville Literacy Council and Kathy Bingham of the Shelby Residential and Vocational Service (SRVS), as well as Board members Nan Beem of the Collierville Literacy Council, Arlene Freeman of the East Arkansas Youth Services and Leroy Scott of the Door of Hope. Sister Maureen Griner, co-director of the Dorothy Day House of Hospitality, suggested that her table check out the book, *StrengthsFinder 2.0* by Tom Rath, which emphasizes the recognition of fellow board member talents.

Another factor that arose during the breakout session and the subsequent **panel discussion – Understanding Board/Chair and Executive Director Relationships** - moderated by Dr. David Renz was the importance of a succession plan for board chairs. Panelists included Memphis Health Center Executive Director William Jackson and Board Chair Anderson Williams; Goodwill Homes Executive Director Susan Mills and Board Member Holly Shotwell; Tipton County Commission on Aging Executive Director Margaret Fleming and Board Chair Eunice Jordan; and Synergy Treatment Center Executive Director Walter Williams and Board Chair Stewart Austin. Key points from the panel discussion included:

- Formal succession of board chairs is vital to keep continuity of effective leadership.
- Importance of freely shared information between board and senior staff.
- Fundraising is an important issue in the current state of the economy.
- An organization often needs to alter its image and public perception.
- Publicize an outcome study to determine the service is effective and valuable.
- Engage the involvement of government entities, i.e., providing transportation for the elderly should be brought before the City Council.

Starting a Board President's Council

Ron Moitzfield, chair of the St. Louis President's Council, discussed the importance of starting a Board President's Council in the Mid-South, which would bring together leaders of like-minds - both nonprofit and for-profit - who wish to contribute to more effective board leadership.

Moitzfield, who had been an entrepreneur in the for-profit industry, entered the nonprofit world to find more meaning. "The culture is different for nonprofits. They need to get together and discuss common causes just as the for-profits have done with competitors."

Moitzfield's initial group was comprised of some four to five professionals in business and law. His council has grown to 65 members and now includes executive directors and other community leaders.

In the afternoon, participants split into self-selected breakout sessions to cover topics including "Recruiting Effective Board Members," "Engaging Your Board" and "Your Board and Fundraising." Orientation, coaching and support for new members as well as respect for high-level volunteers was emphasized.

The Alliance for Nonprofit Excellence (formerly The Grant Center) serves more than 200 nonprofits in the Greater Memphis area (West Tennessee, East Arkansas and North Mississippi), providing information, training (more than 50 workshops a year) and consultation. Since 1992, more than \$155 million in national funding has benefited the Mid-South community as a result of Alliance assistance. For every dollar of local support to the Alliance, \$30 is generated for the Mid-South community. For more info, check the website at www.npexcellence.org or call 684.6605.