

Government Liaison

Description

This tool simply attempts to systematize the task of keeping track of what provincial and federal government agencies may be doing that will affect local CED activities. Of course, the main aim is to be up-to-date on what funding possibilities are in store. However, more fundamentally, the CEDO can take initiative to react to proposed changes in government policy—recently, for example, the proposed modifications of the Small Business Loan Act that would extend Industry Canada loan programs to social enterprises created by the nonprofit sector.

Liaison in its most powerful form means establishing *on-going* relations with specific officials in the relevant agencies. Such efforts involve rather routinely making telephone calls or visits, sometimes merely to touch base rather than for a more specific purpose. It should go without saying that such relations should not and indeed need not be conducted improperly to gain reasonable information access, an access that would be available to any inquiring citizen. Here is meant only that being readily acquainted over a period of time makes it easier to communicate. However, it is also true that a good relationship plus a good program record means that sometimes the agency representative will seek out the CEDO with a suggestion that it apply for certain funds.

In the U.S. the tool is not focussed solely on liaison with the administrative agencies of government. Rather, CEDOs will commonly maintain close contact with legislators and legislative committee staff as well. In Canada, this contact is not routine for CED groups, merely occasional when some specific and relevant legislative hearings are being held or when support is sought for a grant. The U.S. pattern makes sense there—in light of the kind of initiatives that U.S. legislators may take, which are not likely under Canada's parliamentary system. However, Canadian CED practice might well take a leaf from the U.S. practice in order to strengthen CED knowledge and support among elected officials.

Because local concerns about CED cannot as easily be furthered in the national parliamentary forum in Canada as in the U.S., the Canadian CEDO is particularly dependent upon some sort of national coalition to mobilize and focus attention on CED-relevant issues. Similar organizations at the provincial level can be important in furthering a positive provincial posture on CED. (See [National & Regional Alliances](#).)

Benefits

Quite apart from learning early about new funding programs so as to participate in them, as appropriate, the CEDO can benefit from news about standing programs - for example, that substantial monies remain to be committed in the closing months of a fiscal year and thus may be more easily accessible. And clearly, taking the initiative to promote federal or provincial government support for CED will have a general pay-off for everyone in the field.

Major challenges

The effort to maintain an on-going relationship with government offices is vulnerable to general turnover of personnel in those posts. It is necessary to protect against such loss of contacts by being close enough that the CEDO is at least aware of other personnel for contacts in the same office or agency.

Also, overly stressing government liaison activity as a way of learning of funding opportunities may serve to divert the CEDO to projects just because there is funding available. This loss of local priorities should be defended against at all times.

Some practical steps

1. Because of limits in time and energy, the CEDO needs to prioritize in the use of this technique. That is, it should determine which agencies or which offices of an agency are of greater importance to devote effort to developing the necessary relationships.
2. Sometimes it may be possible to divide up the work, so that a fellow organization will specialize in keeping track of one agency, while your CEDO focusses on another; and the two of you regularly exchange key information. (Of course, this assumes that issues of competitive advantage do not shape that exchange.)
3. A tickler calendar system will alert the CEDO to make routine contacts.
4. Sometimes it will be useful for a board member rather than a staff person to make a contact. This may be particularly true in contacts with legislators.
5. The more that the liaison information is shared among the CEDO's own staff and board, the more likely the connections can be made to enrich the CEDO's program.

Resource organizations & contacts

There are probably no specific resource organizations for this tool, but it may be helpful to talk with an organization that has been assiduous in its use. Contact Jacquie Thompson, at Life*Spin, P.O. Box 2801, London, ON N6A 4H4 (tel. 519-438-9533-x-33). Life*Spin is a vigorous advocate, often ruffling feathers in government, even suing, but nevertheless it has managed to gain considerable support, at all three levels.

Publications

- There are also probably no publications specific to the topic of government liaison by community groups. But the general topic of building partnerships is germane. See Flo Frank and Anne Smith, *The Partnership Handbook* (HRDC, 1997), copies available from the website for HRDC (www.hrdc-drhc.gc.ca/common/partnr.shtml).
- Also see *Stretching the Tax Dollar - The Federal Government as "Partner": Six Steps to Successful Collaboration* (Treasury Board Secretariat, Canada, 1995).