

POINTS OF LIGHT: Nonprofit 'wish list' is not a budget-buster

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By Chuck Malloy

One thing seems certain about this year's legislative session. With a daunting budget shortfall lying before them, it's a good bet that trimming budgets will be high on the lawmakers' "do" list.

That means saying "no" to a lot of heart-wrenching causes in state government and, perhaps, to nonprofits as well. Kevin Bailey, who heads the Idaho Community Foundation's Nonprofit Center, is well aware of the challenges and lends a sympathetic eye to legislators who have to make hard decisions.



"It's a difficult job," he says. "There will be around 700 bills introduced, along with dozens and dozens of special interests making requests."

The community foundation is one of the groups with a "policy agenda" for this session, but it's one that legislators might be receptive to in this cost-cutting environment. Nonprofits receive almost no general-fund dollars.

"It's largely maintaining appropriations for grants that are paid with federal dollars, such as Meals on Wheels for seniors," Bailey says.

The center's wish list includes maintaining property tax exemptions for nonprofits, supporting appropriations that enhance nonprofits' ability to provide essential community services and keeping the federal and state tax codes friendly toward charitable giving. The agenda also backs initiatives that promote increasing the supply "of high-quality affordable childcare, policies that allow for innovative/pooled employee benefit solutions, and policies that ensure a stable and affordable health insurance market for employers, which affects all businesses (nonprofit and for-profit alike)."

Bailey says that Idaho legislators generally are supportive of nonprofits, and for good reason. "Idaho runs on nonprofits," he says.

He makes a good point. Something I have learned in my 10 months writing about nonprofits is that this state is full of good people doing good things – with minimal, if any, help from the government. And this is what Bailey sees every day in his job.

"I think about it from the aspect of my own family life," Bailey says. "Nonprofits are places of worship, after-school programs, childcare, places we send our kids for summer camps, the discovery center, the performances we see at the Morrison

Center. Nonprofits are like oxygen ... we take them for granted, but people will notice if you take them away and our communities will die off."

For conservative-minded legislators, nonprofits help keep government small by providing social services that substantially are not paid by taxpayer dollars.

"Nonprofits are a good deal for the taxpayer because in many ways, they save the state from having to create its own programs," Bailey says. "Not all nonprofits are perfect, certainly there are exceptions, but nonprofits are local, generally small and are well managed. Almost all have 10 to 25 board members who make decisions about the community and organizations that they shepherd. If that's not democracy in action, then I don't know what is."

As with other groups, Bailey says, there are advocates at the Statehouse lobbying for the center's policy agenda and other issues of interest to nonprofits. As Bailey sees it, there's a critical need for having that presence.

"Nonprofits should be at the table when it comes to public policy," he says. "If you are not at the table, then you're on the menu."

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