



**Passion + Policy: Making a Difference with a Government Relations
Career in the Nonprofit Sector with Larisa Wick, JD**
Season 2, Episode 7

***transcripts are for reference only and created with AI, no editing is done*

Transcript

Speaker 1:

<Silence> Welcome to Asking for Good a podcast for people who want to make a difference. Hear stories from seasoned non-profit professionals and volunteers on how to begin or further a career in making the world a better place.

Speaker 2:

Hi, I'm Katie Poer, a career fundraiser dedicated to making not-for-profit sector. Better. This is our final episode of the stakeholder series, and it's a discussion with the tangential and necessary third party players that support not-for-profit work. Honestly, at the beginning of my career, I saw consultants as frivolous and brutally. Honestly, I thought they were overpriced. Then as I grew in my career and worked with some wildly effective consultants, I was converted. I began to understand their real value to the sector. Consultants come to an organization to provide project-based or seasonal help, such as planning a gala or being extra hands to help processing gifts during an especially busy time. Other types of consultants come with specific expertise to explore a new way of working for the organization. This is about beginning to build a muscle and grow organizational capacity. Some consultant relationships are meant to be a temporary engagement while others are long-term partners.

Speaker 2:

Short-Term engagements take many forms, such as doing a feasibility study to determine the potential and organization has to raise money in a capital campaign. Some consultants specialize in filling specific roles while an organization is in search for an executive such as a president or a chief development officer. These are essential functions for which a consultant can come in and fill while the organization is investing time and energy to determine their next leader. Our interview today is with a long-term partner. There are several types of consultants and third party vendors that support not-for-profit work in this long-term capacity. Some examples are finance and accounting firms, marketing and communication firms, executive search firms, fundraising consultancies, research firms, and government relations or lobbying and advocacy firms. It's my pleasure to introduce to you Larissa Wick, JD from a government relations firm. Larissa joined the Wright group in 2011 and has dedicated her career to representing not-for-profit organizations.

Speaker 2:

Through her career, Larissa helps to advance legislative policy and funding campaigns before New York City and state governments. She has successfully led large scale capital campaigns for some of New York City's largest cultural institutions, and has developed numerous citywide funding initiatives that support

essential programs and services that aim to provide greater equity and access in some of the city's most under-invested communities. Larissa's career in government relations began as an associate attorney with Wilson Eler. Larissa subsequently led the government relations practice at Ms Communications in Los Angeles, working to create and develop social marketing campaigns for California State initiatives. Larissa is the current president of the Junior League of Oranges and Short Hills, and has served as a board member of this organization for several years. Larissa also serves on the board of directors of Live on and y and is a trustee of the California Thoroughbred Foundation. Larissa is licensed to practice law in New York. Welcome, Larissa, and let's dive in.

Speaker 3:

So what is the work that you do to support nonprofits?

Speaker 4:

Thank you so much. I work for a government relations firm based in New York City. We have an office in the city. We also have an office in Albany, and unlike other government relations firms that may represent a range of clients from for-profit clients to trade associations, the labor sector or nonprofits, our firm is very special for New York. We are the only government relations firm in the state with a mission to only represent the nonprofit sector and our clients range and size and scope. We have large nonprofits that are part of New York City's cultural institutions. We have smaller nonprofits that support new Yorkers with housing advocacy, legal services, domestic violence, and a range of organizations that are seeking to lift up the human services sector. Our work is primarily geared on the public fundraising side. Every nonprofit, it doesn't matter whether you're based in New York or anywhere in the world, shares the same mission to raise money.

Speaker 4:

And without fundraising, staffing lines do not exist. Programs and services do not exist, and the community impact for which the nonprofit was formed does not exist. And so our work really aims to move the needle forward with direct community impact by helping our clients secure public funding. And we do that at both levels of state government in Albany and in and in the city. And on the city side, our practice is primarily towards the New York City Council. The New York City Council has significant funding to allocate in a discretionary way to the nonprofit sector. And in Albany, the bulk of our work is geared at the New York State Assembly and the New York State Senate.

Speaker 3:

That's so intriguing. As I think about our audience, I think there's an important characteristic here that we should call out. So the organizations you are helping are 501(c)(3) organizations?

Speaker 4:

Correct.

Speaker 3:

Fantastic.

Speaker 4:

Yeah, and maybe I could just expand on that. I, I think for many of our clients, they see a government relations firm, especially if they're a nonprofit organization as an extension of their development staff. Based on what I just said before, every nonprofit has to raise, fund raise money, and for a lot of organizations, it's cheaper to retain a government relations firm to help them secure public funding. 'cause As nonprofits are looking to fundraise, they're looking as, you know, Katie at the corporate sector, individual giving philanthropy and foundations, and then public fundraising. And I think many organi, many nonprofits in the city or in New York state I should say, look to lobbying firms or government relations firms as that support that they need to help raise revenue from the public side. That's true. And we understand that that is a critical role that we play.

Speaker 4:

However we like to reframe the way we do our work, we do not see ourselves as discretionary For a nonprofit, our work is really meant to advance mission. And when we do our work, whether that's securing public funding or working on a legislative and policy campaign, that is really changing communities, when we are able to help our clients secure public funding that is supporting a staffing line, that is supporting the programs and services that are going directly into communities, when we are successful in moving policy forward, that is also deepening impact. And so for us, we see our work in partnership with our nonprofits strategically, we are the critical partner in helping our clients advance their own missions. And and that's a really special thing, and that's how we like to see our work. It's not transactional, it's a partnership for longer transformational change.

Speaker 3:

That's a great way to explain it. And I would take it one step further just to say that you're also helping the city and state realize what they want to accomplish as well through the nonprofit partnerships.

Speaker 4:

Absolutely. We are as critical to government as we are to our clients. The best way we can do our jobs is to provide access to our clients, to key decision makers in government. Our clients, because of their expertise, know the best policies that the city needs. And if we are doing our job well, we are creating partnerships between our clients and government so that policy can be done effectively and impactfully and that communities are really feeling the benefit of that partnership.

Speaker 3:

Fantastic. I want to ask you next about how you got into this work. It seems so niche and so very exact. And if you're out in the world, what does it mean for you if you're trying to get into a role like this?

Speaker 4:

Sure. Or how

Speaker 3:

Did you get started <laugh>?

Speaker 4:

Sure. I'm asked that question all the time, and there are so many entry points into this work. For me, it was very fortuitous. I am a, a lawyer by background and I went to law school in Albany, New York, as

everyone knows, that's the state capital of New York. And for those that may not be for May, for those who may not know this as a law student, your first year is just complete grind in studying. But you, your schedule opens up a little bit in your second and third year, and the school is really encouraging students to look for jobs in your second and third year as a way of building your resume. And I was very much in that place as a second year law student looking for a part-time job. And I used the word fortuitously before, but it is so appropriate to use it again.

Speaker 4:

I fortuitously found an internship at a law firm based in that had offices in Albany. And at the time, this law firm was the largest lobbying firm in the state of New York. And I was, I, I was able to start working in January of my second year in law school, part-time, and I was an intern in the government relations practice. And my first job as part of this internship was to cover the New York State session legislative session on Monday and Tuesday afternoon in January. And for those that may not know, the, the legislature is in session from January to June, and that is when the state budget is worked on. And that is when legislation and bills are introduced and passed. And as a law student, I would sit up in the gallery on, on in the Senate Gallery, and I would just take notes on all of the bills that were being introduced and debated on and ultimately passed.

Speaker 4:

And I could not get enough of politics. I fell in love with the process and that ultimately led me to the career that I have now. I moved downstate because I wanted to be closer to my family, and I wanted an opportunity as a young adult to live in a city. And I joined the firm's New York City government relations practice. And I have found that my legal degree has been so helpful in this work because of the legislative and policy work that's associated with the job. That legal degree is just helpful in analyzing legislation, understanding the impact to communities or to any one of our clients. But my route is just one way of entering this this sector. I would say that most of my colleagues in this space find government relations or lobbying based on their own experience working in government. It is, it is a very common trajectory for staffers in New York government, whether you're on the state level or city level to get that experience working on the inside and then transfer out to either work at a nonprofit or to work for a firm like the right group doing government relations work.

Speaker 3:

And do you have any advice for anyone thinking about pursuing a career in the nonprofit sector?

Speaker 4:

I think the advice that I would give for those that are thinking about government relations work or lobbying work or just the nonprofit work in general, is that it can be very fulfilling. For me personally, I have learned through this work and it's unique. I only represent nonprofits and so my perspective is different, but for me, I have truly understood that my purpose in life is to be on the service of others and representing nonprofits and seeing the impact that we are able to achieve is what continues to fill me up and give me great joy and gratitude about my job. I think a nonprofit career can be very meaningful. It can take some time to see the hard work pay off, but the reward is there.

Speaker 3:

Do you think people should just go for it if they're thinking, if they, if they like lobbying, if they like politics, or do you really think they need to secure a government job first or go to law first? You know,

would they be laughed out of <laugh>? Would their resume be laughed out of the, the firm if someone fresh from college wanted to pursue this?

Speaker 4:

I think one of the really great things about a career in government relations is that you don't need to have a set of skills or a specific background to get into this work. Recent college graduates are perfect candidates for working for elected officials, whether that's staffing a district office or working on a legislative or policy team for an elected official or for an agency or any entity of government. And from our experience working with staffers in government or having the experience of working with those that have left government, that is an incredible resume building experience. The hands-on experience, the direct work, working on policy and, and budget campaigns and with constituents can provide a range of skillsets that are so transferable to so many different kinds of jobs. Whether it is a job at a nonprofit organization, a job working in a government relations capacity, or for a lobbying or a law firm, or any other kind of job where a communication skillset, writing skillset, policy and and analysis skillset, all of that is very transferable.

Speaker 3:

I am vehemently agreeing with you. I'm nodding <laugh> because I got my start actually on the political side in the campaign side of things. But I was exposed to so many things and learned so many skills there. So I am really glad that you're endorsing the idea of some public service to an elected official. And I really appreciate your time.

Speaker 4:

Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

Speaker 2:

This wraps our stakeholder series and we hope it has helped you in your job search to understand all the different moving parts of the not-for-profit ecosystem. Coming up next, we're gonna talk about perfecting your application, beginning with an expert in resume building and job applications. Until then, we hope you'll rate and review us wherever you get your podcasts and take care.