



# Fundraising in Your Own Back Yard: Inviting Clients to Be Donors

By Rona Fernandez

PHOTO BY BRIDGET KANE

A Women's Community Clinic health worker speaks with a client.

**IN MY WORK AS A FUNDRAISING CONSULTANT,** I'm always surprised at how many nonprofits overlook what seems to be an obvious source of new donor prospects: the people who are served by or are most involved in their program work. For most grassroots organizations, these key constituents are often the backbone of their donor program, but for many other groups, their clients or members are rarely (if ever) asked for money, and they rarely fundraise for the organization either. If your group is one whose donors come mostly from outside your core constituency, then the good news is that you probably have a whole other pool of people you can tap to make your grassroots fundraising program more successful: the people served by your program.

It's not surprising that the people directly affected by your program work would make good donor prospects. In her November/December 2009 article for the *Journal*, "Silos Are for Farms," consultant Tina Cincotti quoted researcher Penelope Burk's finding that 93 percent of donors volunteer, and 95 percent of volunteers give money to the organizations they volunteer with. Although statistics for client-based giving are not available, we know anecdotally that the people who benefit the most from your services—whether you provide free health care services or free legal advice, as the two groups that are profiled

in this article do, or some other low- or no-cost service—would also want to support your work financially.

I spoke to the directors of two San Francisco organizations that have regularly raised several thousand dollars each year from their client base: Belma Gonzalez, former executive director of what was then called the Women's Needs Center (now the Women's Community Clinic), and Marianna Viturro, co-director of St. Peter's Housing Committee. Their stories affirm some of the most basic principles of grassroots fundraising in powerful and inspiring ways.

The Women's Needs Center was a free clinic that provided crucial reproductive health services to low-income women in San Francisco. Although the agency raised the majority of its income from non-clients through a canvassing program and direct mail, they also brought in an average of \$3,000 a month from client donations—more than \$36,000 a year. However, the original reason behind asking for a donation was not just a financial one—it was that the clinic needed to comply with federal funding requirements.

"As a licensed community clinic, we were supposed to get a co-payment from our clients," says Belma Gonzalez, who was the executive director of the clinic for five years in the 1990s. "But as a free clinic, we didn't want to require a co-pay from

folks or be seen as a sliding scale clinic. So, our compromise originally was to ask clients for the co-pay as a donation. The amount was based on the difference between what our funders would pay for the visit—which was based on the client’s income,

majority of people in the United States give money to nonprofits (about seven out of every ten people), and on average, about 60 percent of the total donations given by individuals in this country come from households with incomes of less than \$100,000

## AS THE GROUP’S WORK CHANGED, SO DID THEIR FUNDRAISING STRATEGY—SHIFTING FROM BEING FUNDED MOSTLY BY GOVERNMENT AND LARGE INSTITUTIONS TO HAVING MORE INDIVIDUAL DONORS, INCLUDING THEIR CLIENTS.

and all clients were living below the Federal poverty guidelines—and what the visit actually cost.”

St. Peter’s Housing Committee, based in the Mission District of San Francisco, a working-class neighborhood with a large Latino immigrant population, provides free tenant counseling, mostly for low-income, Spanish-speaking clients. As at the Women’s Needs Center, these services are offered free of charge, but the organization also makes a donation request that has become a standard part of their work.

“It’s optional,” explains Mariana Viturro, co-director of St. Peter’s. “We have taped up on every computer monitor that we are supported by the community and that we suggest a donation of \$30. Most people give in that range because that’s what we put out.” The group receives about \$7,000 per year from these donations.

St. Peter’s is unique in that it started out as mostly a social service agency and over time evolved into an organization that both provided services and did broader advocacy, grassroots organizing, and movement-building to help preserve affordable housing in San Francisco. As the group’s work changed, so did their fundraising strategy—shifting from being funded mostly by government and large institutions to having more individual donors, including their clients, whose donations could be used to support the group’s broader agenda.

Drawing from these organizations’ experiences, here are five things you can do in your organization to find new donors in your client base. You may not be able to make these changes immediately or all at once, but by doing just one or two of these things you can identify many prospects who have been right in your own back yard all along.

### Five Things You Can Do to Raise Money from Your Clients

#### 1. Don’t assume that people won’t or can’t donate.

The underlying assumption that many people in social service nonprofits make is that their clients, who are often low-income people, don’t have any money to give. But the large

per year. Even about 20 percent of people who receive Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (formerly known as welfare) give money to charities.

“One of our monthly donors is a client. He gives \$25 a month,” says Viturro of St. Peter’s Housing Committee. “I think he makes \$1,500 a month. That \$25 is a lot for him.” If you assume that some people are just too poor to give or that they should spend their money on something else, not only are you robbing them of the opportunity to show their support and appreciation for your work, but you’re not raising as much money as you could be or bringing in all the donors who can and should be supporting your work.

#### 2. Call it what you will...it’s still fundraising!

If program staff in your organization have a mental block around fundraising from your clients—which is common for many groups who are used to seeing their clients as recipients of services only—then by all means call it something else! It’s not as important that your staff identify as fundraisers as it is that they carry out the work of bringing in support for the organization.

Viturro’s experience at St. Peter’s has shown her that calling an activity “fundraising” may make it unnecessarily intimidating. “When I show people spreadsheets with dollar amounts, they just don’t relate to it and get bored and think, ‘Oh, it’s just the fundraising report and it has nothing to do with me.’ When we approach it more from how it relates to community-building and our services, it’s more effective. It makes sense program-matically in terms of bringing people into the organization—it’s just one of the ways to do that.”

At the Women’s Needs Center, Gonzalez says that staff never called their requests for donations from clients fundraising, but that looking back on the experience, she sees that it was definitely a way of raising money for the organization from its clients. Once the practice was firmly in place, however, staff saw the importance of having clients as donors. “Later,” she said, “we felt it was important for clients to be on board with us.”

### **3. Educate everyone in the organization about how much it costs to do the work.**

All the people who care about your work (donors, board members, staff, clients, members) should have a sense of your budget size and what it costs to do the work. Not only is this a good way to build a more democratic organizational culture, but people will be more motivated to fundraise if they know what they are fundraising for and what kind of an impact the donations they bring can make. However, talking about money in your organization can bring up thorny feelings—and sometimes conflict—over how to handle fundraising activities.

At times these conflicts center on whether it's appropriate to even ask low-income people for money (see point #1 above), and can have more to do with staff members' own issues with money and fundraising than about whether clients want to give. Gonzalez emphasized the need for transparency with clients as a way to cut through some of these challenges.

"We would be lying to pretend that health care is free," she says about how she responded to staff concerns about asking for donations. "The value I advocated for was transparency," explains Gonzalez. "[I would suggest staff tell clients that] it costs us lots to be here and if you can help us out by donating toward what isn't covered for your visit by our funders, then you're helping to ensure your clinic will remain open."

### **4. Be respectful of and value each person's giving capacity.**

"When folks made their appointment we let them know about the donation and we didn't ask for the donation until their visit was finished," says Gonzalez about the client donations at the Women's Needs Center. "And we made sure the front desk folks were gracious and respectful with folks if they couldn't give."

No matter the size of the donation, it's important to value all donations by your clients and core members, as these are the people who are most committed to your work and most likely to give repeatedly when asked. At St. Peter's, more than 300 of their clients (about half of the people they see each year through their free legal advice service) make donations.

"Some clients give every time they come. It may only be \$5 each time but by the end of the year it's \$120," says Viturro. "The most incredible donations are when people win a case [thanks to St. Peter's free legal help], which meant they got their deposit back or were compensated for some abuse in their housing.

There was one case with three tenants who were able to get their \$1,000 deposit back, and they each gave \$100 to the organization." Even small donations can add up if you are giving people multiple opportunities to give.

Gonzalez emphasizes the importance of getting clients to see themselves not just as recipients of services, but as part of your work, and to impress this attitude upon program staff, who often have the most contact with clients. "I always ask folks to think about how they feel when they contribute to something or help out in some way," she says. "How they then feel a part of something, and are not simply an outsider looking in, or a person being served."

### **5. Make fundraising a part of everyone's job.**

Even if fundraising is not part of everyone's job description, every person—especially program staff, who often think of fundraising as something that happens 'over there' in another department, and not as part of their work—should be responsible for at least one key fundraising task.

At St Peter's, the counseling staff, not fundraising staff, are in charge of collecting donations from clients. "It's part of the counseling ask," she says. The counseling staff also do fundraising asks of the lawyers who volunteer their time to give legal advice to St. Peter's clients. "When new staff come on it's always part of the rap that we teach them, and in our client database there is information to put in about whether they made a donation and the amount."

At the Women's Needs Center, the front desk staff asked for donations. "The phone folks were taught to stress that it was a donation," says Gonzalez, "and to figure out what the donation would be with the client so she could be prepared to bring a donation if she could. If the client had no money it was OK." Gonzalez says that very few clients did not make a donation, and some gave more than the suggested amount.

The main lesson from these two organizations' experiences is that everyone who cares about your work should be asked to make a contribution to your work on a regular basis. Not only will doing so increase the number of prospective donors you have and the amount of money coming in, it will also increase people's feeling of ownership of your organization and make them feel more invested in your work.

"Most of the time people feel really invested and honored to be able to contribute," says Viturro. "It helps with their relationship with the organization, and they want to see other people have access to the services that they used." ■

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Rona Fernandez is a fundraising consultant with Klein and Roth Consulting. Join Rona on March 16th to learn how to create a culture of fundraising at your organization. Call 888-458-8588 x304 or visit [grassrootsfundraising.org/webinars](http://grassrootsfundraising.org/webinars) to register today!