

# Perceptions of Nonprofit Funding Decisions: A Survey of Local Public Administrators and Executive Directors of Community-Based Housing Organizations (CBHOs)

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Published online: 9 June 2009  
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**Abstract** This article compares how local public administrators and executive directors of community-based housing organizations (CBHO) perceive nonprofit funding decisions. The article's findings suggest that both groups shared perceptions about the scope of affordable housing and factors influencing its funding. Yet, important differences existed. Public administrators were ambivalent about nonprofit capacity and affordable housing outcomes. They also underestimated the importance of networks, partnerships, and minority leadership. Professionals in the nonprofit sector underestimated fair housing concerns and overestimated the importance of promoting homeownership. These insights improve our understanding of the connection between funding patterns, public-nonprofit sector relations, local governance, and administrative structures.

**Keywords** Local government · Community-based organizations · Funding decisions · Public-nonprofit sector · Governance

## CBHOs, local government and affordable housing funding

This article grows out of a larger body of research examining the relationship between community-based housing organizations (CBHOs) and local government in American cities. It has been argued that the role of local government in affordable housing policy has been shrinking since the late 1960's. From that time to the present, local government has been embedded in an environment where state and federal support for affordable housing activities has faced a continued downward spiral. Local nonprofits have been called upon to fill the gap created by government's retrenchment in housing policy. Over time a national network of foundations and intermediaries has emerged to provide these organizations with

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technical assistance and financial support to replace some of the lost government resources. This network of nonprofits has taken on an expanded role in the development, rehabilitation, and management of affordable housing in the contemporary period (Vidal 1992; Walker 1993; NCCED 2005).

Through case studies and empirical research, scholars have described how the nonprofit sector has assumed greater responsibility for the implementation of affordable housing policy in the United States. This process has been referred to as the *nonprofitization* (Swanstrom 1999) and *devolution* (Bockmeyer 2003) of affordable housing policies in the United States. Many have argued that this shift in policy has produced a *community development industry system* composed of community-based organizations, nonprofit intermediaries, private sector partners, and governmental agencies at the federal, state, and local levels (Vidal 1992; Yin 1998; Ferguson and Stoutland 1999; Stoutland 1999; Silverman 2001; Frisch and Servon 2006).

A large amount of existing scholarship has focused on nonprofit capacity building within the context of the community development industry system. Glickman and Servon's (1998) work identified five components of nonprofit capacity: resource, organizational, programmatic, networking, and political capacity. Subsequent scholarship has measured each of these types of capacity (Keyes et al. 1996; Schwartz et al. 1996; Nye and Glickman 2000; Glickman and Servon 2003). Despite the attention that scholars have paid to nonprofit capacity building, the phenomenon of CBHO failures, downsizing, and mergers remains salient (Rohe and Bratt 2003; Reingold and Johnson 2003; Bratt and Rohe 2004). A general consensus has formed among scholars that although there is a select group of large, high capacity nonprofits focused on affordable housing development, most organizations are small with limited capacity (Walker 1993; Stoutland 1999; NCCED 2005). This dilemma raises serious questions about the role of local government and nonprofits in affordable housing policy.

This fragile relationship between local government and the nonprofit sector has been aggravated by the continued decline in public sector resources to support affordable housing activities. Recently, scholars have begun to examine how local political and administrative decision-making processes impact CBHO funding (Grobjerg 1993; Marwell 2004; Martin 2004; Marwell 2007; Luksetich 2008; Silverman 2008). This research builds on that emerging body of work. This article's analysis compares local public administrators' perceptions and CBHO executive directors' perceptions of local nonprofit funding decisions.

This article combines the results from two surveys examining local nonprofit funding decisions. One survey examines local public administrators' perceptions of funding decisions for nonprofit affordable housing activities. The other survey examines CBHO executive directors' perceptions of the same decisions. The findings from this article provide insights about the degree to which issues related to funding decisions are salient to both local public administrators and professionals in the nonprofit sector. Both shared many perceptions about the scope of affordable housing, as well as factors influencing its funding. Yet, important differences also existed. For instance, public administrators were somewhat ambivalent about nonprofit capacity and affordable housing outcomes. They also underestimated the importance of networks, partnerships, and minority leadership in affordable housing

processes. On the other hand, professionals in the nonprofit sector were more likely to underestimate fair housing concerns in the affordable housing funding process, while overestimating the importance of promoting homeownership. These insights improve our understanding of the connection between funding patterns, public-nonprofit sector relations, local governance, and administrative structures. As a result, the findings from this research have implications for CBHOs and the nonprofit sector as a whole.

## Methods and sample

This study compares the results of two national surveys. Each of the survey included questions about: CBHO performance in affordable housing, factors influencing CBHO funding decisions, and local government structure. The first survey was mailed to the directors of planning departments and/or municipal housing agencies in U.S. cities with populations over 100,000 ( $N=243$ ). This survey was administered between November 2006 and February 2007. At the end of that period a 42.8% ( $n=104$ ) response rate was reached. The survey included a total of 70 questions. The second survey was mailed to the all executive directors of Neighborhood Housing Services (NHS) organizations across the U.S. ( $N=241$ ). NHS organizations are a type of CBHO funded by the national intermediary NeighborWorks® America. In 1978 Congress created Neighborwork® America<sup>1</sup> to serve as an intermediary organization for a national network of NHS organizations. Neighborworks® America provides operating support and technical assistance to local nonprofits that are engaged in affordable housing activities. The second survey was administered between May 2007 and October 2007. At the end of that period a 44% ( $n=107$ ) response rate was reached. The survey included a total of 56 questions.

There were 41 duplicate questions asked across both surveys. Among those questions, six measured perceptions of CBHO affordable housing outcomes, 21 measured perceptions of factors influencing CBHO funding decisions by local government, and 15 measured general characteristics of state and local government. These questions formed the basis for the comparison of how local government and nonprofits perceive the decision-making process surrounding nonprofit funding. Independent sample t-tests were calculated for each of the duplicate questions asked across the surveys. The results from this analysis are discussed in the remainder of this article.

Table 1 displays the characteristics of local government supportive policies for affordable housing for the cities where surveys were completed. The table provides information for three broad categories: state and local public finance mechanisms, local program and/or policy coordination with CBHOs, and local equity measures. These three categories of variables provide a framework for analyzing the context in which local nonprofit funding decisions are made.

The first category of variables measured in Table 1 summarizes the scope of state and local public finance mechanisms designed to support affordable housing

<sup>1</sup> Neighborworks® American was originally called the Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation. It changed its name to Neighborworks® America in 2005.

**Table 1** Independent sample t-test results comparing characteristics of local government supportive policies for affordable housing ( $n=484$ )

	Percent NHS organizations	Percent public administrators
<i>State and local public finance mechanisms</i>		
Percent located in a state with a housing trust fund	73.1	65.1
Percent earmarking local revenue from local taxes and/or fees for affordable housing	36.8	31.1
Percent in a city with a housing trust fund	28.2	26.2
<i>Local program and/or policy coordination with CBHOs</i>		
Percent coordinating mortgage finance and/or down payment assistance programs with CBHOs	76.2	85.2
Percent coordinating homeownership training programs with CBHOs	69.2**	87.1**
Percent coordinating fair housing enforcement with CBHOs	52.9#	66.0#
Percent coordinating code enforcement with CBHOs	43.4	45.1
Percent of cities where CBHOs administer Section 8 or other rental assistance programs	41.1*	26.5*
Percent that have used eminent domain powers in coordination with CBHO development efforts	30.2	20.8
Percent coordinating landlord training programs with CBHOs	23.3**	44.0**
<i>Local equity measures</i>		
Percent with fair housing ordinances	78.9	69.3
Percent with a human rights, civil rights, or race relations commission	67.3	59.4
Percent with living wage ordinance	28.2#	18.0#
Percent with rent control ordinances	14.3	12.8

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ , # $p < .10$ 

activities. The most prevalent type of public finance mechanism for cities where each type of respondent was located was the existence of a state housing trust fund. The vast majority of the respondents in both groups were located in states where housing trust funds had been created to provide resources for affordable housing. In contrast, most cities did not earmark local revenue for affordable housing, and most cities did not have local housing trust funds in place. This data suggests that local public finance mechanisms were relatively limited in all of the cities surveyed. Although local government had limited own-source revenue earmarked for affordable housing activities, it still played an important role in distributing affordable housing funds that were available through intergovernmental transfers from federal and state programs. These programs included sources such as the community development block grant program (CDBG), the HOME block grant program, and the low income housing tax credit program (LIHTC).

The second category of variables measured in Table 1 summarizes the scope of local program and/or policy coordination with CBHOs. The two most prevalent form of coordination that took place between local government and nonprofits in the cities surveyed involved mortgage finance and/or down payment assistance programs, and homeownership training programs. These types of coordination were present in over

two thirds of the cities. The prevalence of coordination among these types of programs highlights the emphasis that local government placed on homeownership strategies to address affordable housing issues. The other area where coordination with CBHOs was identified in over half of the cities surveyed was fair housing enforcement. The prevalence of this type of coordination may be a reflection of requirements for such enforcement among participants in the CDBG program. In contrast, there was noticeably less coordination between local government and CBHOs in areas such as code enforcement, the administration of rental assistance programs, the use of eminent domain powers, and landlord training programs.

There were also statistically significant differences between responses from executive directors of NHS organizations and local public administrators. These differences were found in four areas. Cities where local public administrators were surveyed were more likely to coordinate homeownership training programs, fair housing enforcement, and landlord training programs with CBHOs. It is possible that these differences reflected the role that municipalities play in redistributing CDBG, HOME and other federal funds. These differences also suggest that some of the public administrators surveyed were located in cities with greater access to these resources than cities where the CBHOs in the sample of NHS organizations were found. In contrast, cities where NHS organizations were located were more likely to coordinate rental assistance programs between local government and CBHOs. This suggests that rental housing assistance and rental property management played a larger role in the activities of CBHOs in the NHS cities.

The third category of variables measured in Table 1 summarizes the scope of equity measures adopted by local government. The presence of local equity measures provides insights about the scope of social inequality in a community and how public policy has been used to address it. The two most prevalent local equity measures adopted in the cities were fair housing ordinances and the creation of commissions focusing on human rights, civil rights, or race relations. These types of measures indicate that concerns about fair housing and inequality along the lines of race and class were salient in most of the cities surveyed. In contrast, living wage ordinances and rent control measures were not widely used by the cities. This may be a reflection of the lack of federal and state mandates for such measures. Some scholars have suggested that rent control and living wage ordinances are not as prevalent for these reasons and due to their incompatibility with market-based housing and economic development strategies (Niebanck 1986; Gilderbloom 1987; Martin 2001; Kempers 2002; Luce 2004).

There were statistically significant differences between respondents from CBHOs and respondents from local government in relation to one type of equity measure. Cities where NHS organizations were located were more likely to report that living wage ordinances were adopted. This may suggest that income inequality and poverty were more acute in these cities. It also may suggest that NHS and other nonprofit organizations in these cities created space for advocacy activities that led to the adoption this type of equity measure. One piece of evidence that supports the possibility that a critical mass of nonprofits was present in the NHS cities is that the average number of CBHOs was slightly higher in these cities. The average number of CBHOs reported in NHS cities was 9.6, while the average number reported in cities where local public administrators were surveyed was 7.5. However,

when an independent sample t-tests was calculated this difference was not statistically significant.

One other difference was found between the two groups surveyed. There was a noticeable difference between the governance and administrative structures of the cities from which NHS executive directors and local public administrators responded. In the NHS cities, 61.9% of local governments adopted the mayor-council form, while 17.1% had adopted a council-manager form of government. In contrast, 38.5% of local governments in cities from which local public administrators responded adopted the mayor-council form, while 52.4% had adopted a council-manager form of government. This indicates that the NHS cities were more likely to have governance structures based on ward systems and traditional patronage politics, and less likely to be have adopted municipal reforms aimed at promoting professional management. This also suggests that nonprofit funding decisions would be more heavily influenced by political considerations in NHS cities.

### Local public administrators' and CBHO executive directors' perceptions

The survey responses of local public administrators and NHS executive directors revealed a number of important distinctions about how the affordable housing activities of CBHOs were perceived. In particular, local public administrators and NHS executive directors had differing expectations for CBHO performance and differing views about the quality of work done by CBHOs. These attitudes influenced the degree to which each group believed various factors influenced local decisions to fund CBHOs.

Table 2 compares NHS directors' and local public administrators' perceptions of CBHO performance in their respective cities. Three dimensions of affordable housing outcomes are measured. Table 2 indicates that the executive directors of NHS organizations had higher expectations for CBHO output along each of the dimensions measured. However, when independent sample t-tests were calculated only one of these differences was statistically significant. This was the number of rental units that each group of respondents expected a high capacity CBHO to manage. The executive directors of NHS organizations believe that a high capacity CBHO should be able to manage more rental units than local public administrators.

**Table 2** Independent sample t-test results comparing respondents' perception of CBHO performance ( $n=484$ )

	Mean expected for high capacity CBHOs by NHS organizations	Mean expected for high capacity CBHOs by public administrators
Number of new housing units produced annually	390.1	102.2
Number of existing housing units rehabilitated annually	112.7	108.3
Number of rental units managed annually	1439.3**	443.7**

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ , # $p < .10$

Higher expectations for CBHO output may have been influenced by a number of factors. As nonprofits, NHS organizations may have more first hand information about their peers. Of course, NHS organizations may also have a tendency to overstate the capacity of fellow nonprofit sector organizations. On the other hand, local public administrators may view the work of CBHOs more critically due to their position in the funding process and experience with nonprofit, public, and private sector implementation of affordable housing activities.

The executive directors of NHS organizations and local public administrators were asked to compare the relative quality of work on affordable housing done by nonprofit, public sector, and private sector organizations. There were noticeable differences reported by each group of respondents. When NHS directors were asked to compare the quality of work in the nonprofit sector to the public sector, 79.8% believed that nonprofits did better work than the public sector, 2% believed the public sector did better work, and 18.2% believe that the work done in each sector was about the same. In contrast, when local public administrators were asked to compare the quality of work in the nonprofit sector to the public sector, 32.3% believed that nonprofits did better work than the public sector, 29.2% believed the public sector did better work, and 38.5% believe that the work done in each sector was about the same. Despite the obvious biases that each group of respondents has with respect to this question, it is clear that local public administrators were less inclined to rate the quality of work in the nonprofit sector higher than that of the public sector.

A more telling contrast emerged when the executive directors of NHS organizations and local public administrators were asked to compare the relative quality of work on affordable housing done by nonprofits to similar work done by private sector organizations. In this set of responses, 75.8% of NHS executive directors believed that nonprofits did better work than the private sector, 7.1% believed the private sector did better work, and 17.1% believe that the work done in each sector was about the same. In contrast, when local public administrators were asked to compare the quality of work in the nonprofit sector to the private sector, 32.7% believed that nonprofits did better work than the private sector, 31.7% believed the private sector did better work, and 35.6% believe that the work done in each sector was about the same. In this comparison, the NHS executive directors maintained their preference for nonprofits, while public administrators remained relatively indifferent concerning the quality of work across sectors. This suggests that a strong preference for a particular type of affordable housing developer existed among nonprofits.

The contrast between the perceptions of NHS executive directors and local public administrators was further illuminated when they were asked about the overall impact that funding of nonprofit organizations had on the availability of resources for affordable housing activities. Among NHS directors, 90.6% believed that nonprofit funding has added to the overall pool of resources, 7.5% felt that it had no effect on the pool of resources, and 1.9% believed funding nonprofits had resulted in a reduction of available resources for other affordable housing needs in their cities. In contrast, 73% of local public administrators believed that nonprofit funding has added to the overall pool of resources, 16% felt that it had no effect on the pool of resources, and 11% believed funding nonprofits had resulted in a reduction of available resources for other affordable housing needs in their cities. This suggests that local public administrators were more likely to perceive nonprofits as a source

of competition for funding. This is a troubling finding, given the downward trajectory of funding for affordable housing in contemporary American cities.

Table 3 presents data for the factors influencing the funding of nonprofit housing organizations by local government. Respondents scored each factor on a ten point

**Table 3** Independent sample t-test results for factors influencing the funding of nonprofit housing organization by local government ( $n=484$ )

	Average score for NHS organizations	Average score for public administrators
<i>Nonprofit governance and structure</i>		
Members of a nonprofit's governing board must include individuals from low-income and minority groups	7.5	7.3
Nonprofit incorporates a high level of public participation into its governance structure	7.0	7.0
Nonprofit must have minority group members in leadership positions on its staff	6.3***	5.0***
Nonprofit certified as a community housing development organization (CHDO)	6.3	6.6
<i>Scope of nonprofit networks and partnerships</i>		
Nonprofit's track record working on affordable housing projects with local government	8.9**	8.3**
Nonprofit has the support of local elected officials	7.7***	6.1***
Nonprofit is engaged in partnerships with public sector agencies	6.6**	5.3**
Nonprofit is engaged in partnerships with other nonprofits	6.5***	4.7***
Nonprofit is engaged in partnerships with neighborhood-based organizations	6.5***	5.3***
Nonprofit is engaged in partnerships with national foundations and/or intermediary organizations	6.3***	4.3***
Nonprofit is engaged in partnerships with local foundations and/or intermediary organizations	5.6***	4.1***
Nonprofit is engaged in partnerships with private sector organizations	5.6***	4.2***
Nonprofit is engaged in partnerships with faith-based organizations	3.3	3.0
<i>A Nonprofit's affordable housing strategy</i>		
Nonprofit must have an affordable housing strategy that promotes fair housing goals and curbs housing discrimination	8.2**	8.9**
Nonprofit must have an affordable housing strategy compatible with the city's comprehensive plan	8.1	8.4
Nonprofit must have an affordable housing strategy that increases homeownership opportunities for low-income households	7.8#	7.2#
Nonprofit must have an affordable housing strategy compatible with the plans of neighborhood-based organization and/or neighborhood councils	7.5	7.3
Nonprofit must have an affordable housing strategy that increases the number of rental units available to low-income individuals	7.0	7.2
Nonprofit must have an affordable housing strategy that targets special needs populations (elderly, disabled, homeless)	6.1	5.9

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ , # $p < .10$



scale, where factors perceived to be extremely important received ten points and factors perceived not to be important received one point. A total of 19 factors were scored along three dimensions measuring the importance of a nonprofit's: governance structure, the scope of its networks and partnerships, and its affordable housing strategy. There were a number of significant differences in how NHS directors and local public administrators scored these factors. These differences highlight areas where funding strategies and priorities conflict across sectors.

The first dimension considered was a nonprofit's governance structure. It was encouraging to find that NHS directors and local public administrators had similar views about the importance of this dimension of nonprofit funding. Both groups placed a relatively high degree of importance on the inclusion of disenfranchised groups on nonprofit boards and public participation in nonprofit governance. However, there was a significant difference in the degree to which the two groups prioritized the need for minority group members to be in leadership positions and on the staff of nonprofits. Local public administrators placed less emphasis on this dimension of nonprofit governance in relation to funding decisions.

The second dimension considered was the scope of a nonprofit's networks and partnerships. With the exception of one factor, NHS directors and local public administrators had dissimilar views about the importance of each component of this dimension of nonprofit funding. Across the board, NHS directors felt that networks and partnerships were more influential in local government decisions about funding. Some of the biggest discrepancies related to the relative importance placed on support from local elected officials, partnerships with other nonprofits, partnerships with foundations and intermediary organizations, and partnerships with private sector organizations.

The third dimension considered among the factors influencing the funding of nonprofit housing organizations by local government was a nonprofit's affordable housing strategy. There was much more agreement among NHS directors and local public administrators on the influence of these factors on local funding decisions for nonprofit housing organizations. For the most part, both groups believed funding decisions hinged on the presence of affordable housing strategies that: expanded access to affordable housing, fit in with existing municipal and neighborhood plans, and targeted underserved populations. However, there were significant differences in the degree to which NHS directors and local public administrators believed strategies related to fair housing and homeownership impacted funding decisions. Local public administrators placed greater emphasis on the ability of a nonprofit's housing strategy to complement fair housing efforts. NHS executive directors placed slightly more emphasis on strategies aimed at enhancing homeownership.

## **Discussion and policy recommendations**

The findings from this study raise a number of questions about the future of nonprofit housing organizations in American cities. Some of the data suggest that local government is not completely convinced that the nonprofit sector is able to meet the challenge of providing for the affordable housing needs of its poorest citizens. There is a certain degree of ambivalence about the role of nonprofit housing

organizations, with local public administrators viewing the public and private sector as equally equipped to meet this challenge. This disposition may be further reinforced by a sense of cross-sector competition for scarce affordable housing resources. Alternatively, increased scarcity may accelerate the trend toward cross-sector collaboration. In essence, as resources decline, a tipping point may be reached where increased levels of collaboration are requisite.

Another finding indicates that nonprofit housing organizations are somewhat ahead of the curve in areas related to staff and leadership development. The executive directors of NHS organizations were more apt to consider the presence of minority leaders and staff as a contributing factor to nonprofit affordable housing activities. This may be a reflection of the recognition of a need for sensitivity to community values and concerns in the affordable housing development process. The question of why this difference was present and the potential benefits that minority staff brings to nonprofit activities requires further exploration. However, this is a distinguishing characteristic of the nonprofits surveyed for this study. The potential to combine local employment and leadership development with community-based affordable housing activities offers an additional rationale for implementing affordable housing policy through nonprofits. This is particularly important to consider in an environment where local public administrators are somewhat ambivalent about which sector they prefer to implement such policy.

On of the more surprising findings of this study involved the disagreement over the importance of networks and partnerships in the decision-making process to fund nonprofit housing organizations. Again, this seems to be an area where the nonprofit sector is somewhat ahead of the curve. This difference may be a reflection of the degree to which resource scarcity has penetrated the work of nonprofits. It may also be a reflection of a growing emphasis on partnerships among funding agencies that nonprofits interact with outside of government. More research is necessary to determine the degree to which the emerging culture of collaboration and partnerships in the nonprofit sector has penetrated other sectors.

Another unexpected finding involved the degree to which nonprofits underestimate the importance of strategies to address fair housing issues to potential funders. This represents a missed opportunity for nonprofit housing organizations on two fronts. First, nonprofits may be overlooking opportunities to work with government on an area of mutual interest. This may be particularly true in urban areas where a large percentage of the population is low-income, minority, disabled, homeless, or elderly. The mutual interest of nonprofits and government in expanding access to affordable housing to members of disenfranchised groups should be more closely paired with fair housing concerns. Second, an expanded focus on fair housing could help nonprofits link programmatic activities with advocacy work. The ability to link advocacy with affordable housing programs is increasingly important in an era defined by scarce resources.

The finding that nonprofits overemphasized the importance of homeownership strategies in local government funding decisions was also revealing. This suggests that NHS directors are overlooking the need for affordable rental property in American cities. This is a particularly important finding given the growing credit and foreclosure crisis in American cities. This finding suggests that nonprofits housing organizations should reposition themselves and take on a more central role in

crafting a strategy for affordable housing development that balances the goal of homeownership with the demand for affordable rental property.

Finally, the results from this study indicate that fertile ground exists for expanding the scope of coordination between local public administrators and their counterparts in the nonprofit sector. The survey results indicate that these two groups share many perceptions about the scope and direction of affordable housing activity, as well as the factors influencing its funding. Given this shared perspective, the strengthening of a coalition between local public administrators and professionals in the nonprofit sector could expand their ability to shape the development of urban housing and social policies.

**Acknowledgement** This research was supported in part by a small research grant from the Baldy Center for Law & Social Policy at the University at Buffalo. I would like to thank Maddi Zachacz, CaTyra Pollard, and Michael Grimble for assistance with database development and the compilation of the mailing list for this research. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers from Public Organization Review for their comments.

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