

Implications of Nonprofit Leadership Literature on an Appalachian Agency

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CMST 554

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11/30/2025

Nonprofit Leadership Literature: Appalachian Implications

KCEOC Community Action Partnership was established in Knox County, Kentucky in 1964 as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson’s “war on poverty.” The agency offers a number of programs aimed at addressing poverty in a region that has grown from one to 16 counties. Economic development, job training, childcare services, housing and utility assistance, and summer food programs are among the many services KCEOC provides. Although KCEOC has been working to fight poverty for over 60 years, nearly all of the counties it serves exist in states of persistent poverty according to the United States Census Bureau (Benson, 2023). Many Knox Countians and others served by the agency have come to rely on its services. How can an agency dedicated to ending poverty succeed in a region where poverty has long been the norm? In this review, we will discuss how existing literature on nonprofit leadership can better inform leaders at KCEOC.

A Brief Review

In her 2024 paper on CCA mission statements, Emily Kane found that how agencies define poverty varied across the roughly 1000 agencies operating in the U.S. Some agencies, like KCEOC, take an individualistic approach to fighting poverty and often reflect this in their mission statements. CAAs in areas “that include a greater proportion of people of color—especially Black people—and greater support for the Republican presidential candidate” (Kane, 2024) tended to emphasize individual effort as the solution to poverty. This likewise reinforces the idea that poverty is the fault of the individual with little regard to structural and local issues beyond the individual’s control. KCEOC, for its part, bucks the mission statement trend despite being in a heavily Republican area; “KCEOC Community Action Partnership is dedicated to recognizing human potential, improving communities, and creating opportunities for change”

(KCEOC). Despite this, the “bootstraps” mentality that permeates the area often hinders community engagement and involvement with the agency.

The concept of narrative resilience is discussed by Okamoto (2020) as being a valuable tool for nonprofits to develop stronger roots in the community. Her findings were based on the study of an Appalachian nonprofit fighting food insecurity, a service KCEOC also provides. Narrative resilience is broken down into three pillars: an appreciation for local history, commemoration of local heroes, and taking a pragmatic approach to dealing with current issues. Implementing the pillars of narrative resilience could help KCEOC leadership breakthrough local opinion and begin to address the structural issues causing poverty in the area rather than fighting poverty at the individual level. For example, focusing on the significant amount of wealth extracted and removed from the region by the coal industry and the lingering health and economic effects of the industry’s leaving could convince locals that there is more to the region’s poverty than a lack of individual effort.

KCEOC leadership has generally taken a behind-the-scenes approach when it comes to local affairs. Matthews (2019) argues that nonprofits benefit when leadership is active in civic governance and makes efforts to ensure accurate community representation in the organization’s own leadership. I believe the reluctance of KCEOC leadership to take an active role in local governance has caused it to lose control of the narrative around poverty in the region and minimized the agency’s voice in the community. There is a sense of separation between the agency and local governments when it comes to agency events, fundraisers, and even local events the agency participates in. In Matthews’ study, nonprofit leaders mentioned that “they had been contacted by political candidates seeking constituent support because study participants were seen as having political influence” (2019).

In its 2024 Annual Report, KCEOC reported 1,166 volunteers in the last year (KCEOC). A significant number for rural Appalachia but roughly 3,000 fewer than the previous year and more in-line with volunteer numbers seen during the Covid-19 pandemic. Volunteer engagement and retention are vital to nonprofits and provide a block of citizens that leadership could apply the ideas described by Mathews and Okamoto too. “Effective leadership enhances volunteer retention and fosters deeper organizational commitment and satisfaction, contributing to the sustained volunteer engagement and operational success of NPOs” (Benevene, Et Al 2024). For KCEOC’s long-term survival, this decrease in volunteer numbers must not become a trend. Furthermore, fostering volunteer engagement and retention could go far beyond the agency’s current uses for volunteers, and be used to address shortcomings with the findings of studies by Okamoto and Mathews.

As noted above, research regarding rural nonprofits is lacking. Jayme Walters found this to be the case six years ago, “Nonetheless, the needs, desires, and assets of nonprofits located in rural areas have been limitedly scrutinized” (Walters, 2019). Walters’s also notes that while rural nonprofits like KCEOC provide valuable, and necessary, services when government assistance falls short, they often lack the financial assets and organizational capacity to meet their missions. Over the last year, cuts to federal programs have trickled down to KCEOC, endanger programs that provide food and utility assistance to an already distressed population. Should these cuts continue, it is difficult to say if KCEOC has the capacity to make up the difference or if its clients will see less food and colder winters.

Research question: How can KCEOC leadership apply organizational leadership principles to better communicate its mission?

Reflection and Discussion

In my three years covering news in Knox County, at no point did KCEOC leadership take an active role in civic governance as recommended by Mathews (2019). It is my view that this unwillingness to take a vocal position on local issues, and issues at the state and national level, has hindered the agency. Knox County votes overwhelmingly republican, and the individualistic view of poverty described by Kane (2024) is prominent in the area. Having worked for KCEOC's LiHEAP heating assistance program, there was a clear sense among many of the applicants that they were ashamed to be in the position of needing help. While KCEOC staff and volunteers made efforts to in person to combat this stigma, the agency does little to communicate this publicly. Using the pillars of narrative resilience (Okamoto, 2020) and taking a more vocal role in local leadership would allow the agency to push back on the idea that Knox County's impoverished population is the solely result of individual shortcomings and not related to systemic and structural issues that have plagued the region for generations.

Reframing the narrative around poverty in Knox County, and the entire region, would help KCEOC better connect with its existing and potential clients. It would also help engage and retain volunteers that are vital to the operation of programs like LiHEAP, Summer Feeding, and fundraisers. Benevene's conclusion that a robust volunteer pool is vital to a nonprofit's success (Benevene, ET Al, 2024) is supported by Walters' (2024) findings on the economic struggles facing rural nonprofits. If KCEOC is to pick up any of the slack left by federal cuts, it will need to make use of every possible penny saved. Leadership must make greater efforts to engage with the community to build and retain a cadre of reliable and trained volunteers who can guide applicants through often tedious application processes; as well as providing a labor force that can cover the agency's many programs.

My biggest take away from the literature discussed here is that KCEOC leadership has a visibility issue. The agency is engrained in Knox County and the surrounding area. Its logo dots the region on preschools, offices, shelters, and vehicles. Members of high rank attend chamber of commerce meetings, serve on committees dedicated to combating drug use and putting on the local festival. Every so often leadership meets with local officials to sign some yearly proclamation honoring the agency weatherization program or declaring a day of community action; a picture is taken for the paper and nobody cares. What KCEOC leaders don't do is attend council meetings to speak about policies or needs. They don't engage with the community to explain why the programs so many rely on are now underfunded or at risk of ending altogether. Having covered the area extensively as a reporter, worked for the agency, and having lived in Knox County most of my life, I believe KCEOC leadership is simply afraid to ruffle feathers. "From Reagan's presidency through George H. W. Bush's, policing the poor and protecting taxpayer dollars from supposed fraud and abuse were emphasized over providing security to, and protecting the rights of, economically vulnerable individuals and families (Kane, 2024). Knox County is still largely committed to this idea that the poor should be policed over supported. Recently, the construction of a new library was a major sticking point for many locals who often questioned why Knox County needed a library at all; never minding that the local library is a major resource for those in poverty and the area's children. KCEOC leadership's unwillingness to challenge this idea leaves many unwilling to even accept the agency's help and others believing the funding KCEOC gets is nothing more than a waste of their tax dollars.

Okamoto's ideas on appreciating a region's history and commemorating its heroes would be most effective in resetting the narrative. Though its mission statement doesn't say it outright, the mission of KCEOC remains to combat poverty. The agency should work with local schools,

universities, governments, and other organizations to better explain the historical reasons for the region's poverty. Knox Countians know that good paying jobs left with the decline of coal; but they don't understand how much of the wealth generated from coal mining left the region entirely. They have a poor understanding as well of the lingering health effects of mining operations in the area, from Black Lung to water pollution. Drugs are a chief concern for the area, but the story of big pharma flooding the region with opioids is little understood; and related itself to the brutal effects of mining coal. These are just two prominent examples of structural causes of Appalachian poverty, as opposed to individual failures in mass. While significant wealth has been extracted from Appalachia, and studies have shown great need in the region, seldom does that wealth find its way back despite the efforts of groups to educate lawmakers. "While the work of these entities has and continues to be pivotal in rural development, this study, along with others, illustrates that rural policy efforts may not be translating into financial investment (i.e., grants) to rural nonprofits as they receive few federal and foundation dollars (Walters, 2024).

Conclusion

How can KCEOC fight poverty in a region defined by that poverty? By taking a more active role in local civics, KCEOC can better inform local leaders about its needs and the issues that hinder the area. Through narrative resilience, KCEOC can better define the cause of poverty in the region and fight local stigmas around poverty. As the federal government cuts funding to programs offered by the agency, its leadership must take a more visible role in the community to better communicate the reasons behind the changes, its needs, and to better engage with the community. This will allow leaders to better retain volunteers, whose work will become more important to the agency as budgets tighten.

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