



THOUGHT LEADERS

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Like all businesses trying to survive the Covid-19 pandemic, nonprofit organizations are reporting mixed degrees of success and struggle as they navigate the reality of what a new normal will be.

Five nonprofit leaders shared their insights during a Thought Leaders discussion on May 14, hosted virtually by Hodgson Russ LLP attorneys Patricia Sandison, Nicole Tzetzio and Marla Waiss.

While some organizations have shifted to online programming or more limited service delivery, others have found ways to continue connecting with their constituents and clients at the same or greater levels than before. But that doesn't mean they aren't seeing changes in how they staff, where they work and who they're serving.

Four of the five organizations have experienced a pandemic before, even if it was under a different leader: The Albright-Knox Art Gallery, the Buffalo History Museum, Catholic Charities of Buffalo and the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo are more than 100 years old, all having made it through the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918.

Compared to the challenges facing the leaders in that era, today's nonprofits and all businesses are in a much better position thanks to technology.

"When you are an institution that's 157 years old, you are immediately aware of the fact the organization has weathered several wars, pandemics, economic downturns, upturns and what have you," said Janne Sirén, Peggy Pierce Elfvin director of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. "That history gives us strength."

To be sure, the challenges faced by three participating cultural group leaders are vastly different than those voiced by a foundation CEO and a social-services agency executive.

The Albright-Knox is in a better position than would have been predicted. That's because the museum already had shut down its main campus in the fall and introduced mobile and virtual programming in preparation for the ongoing AK360 expansion.

"Our business model was not based on ticketing or parking or café or restaurant revenue (during the bridge period)," Sirén said. "We were well positioned for something like this."

THE COMMUNITY BENEFITS

Right: Melissa Brown, executive director of the Buffalo History Museum. Below: Steve Schumer, president and CEO, Catholic Charities of Buffalo, and Clotilde Perez-Bode Dedecker, president and CEO, Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo.



JOED VIERA



JOED VIERA



COURTESY COMMUNITY FOUNDATION FOR GREATER BUFFALO

► HODGSON'S TAKE

"I want to give a shout-out to the not-for-profits. They're so often fiscally restrained, and they're constantly working to serve the community."

MARLA WAISS,
partner, Hodgson Russ LLP



with MELISSA BROWN, STEPHANIE CROCKETT, CLOTILDE PEREZ-BODE DEDECKER, STEVE SCHUMER, and JANNE SIRÉN

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ATTORNEYS

Nonprofits fight through the unexpected but missions remain intact



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COURTESY ALBRIGHT-KNOX ART GALLERY

Above: Stephanie Crockatt, executive director of the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy. Left: Janne Sirén, director of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery.



“Every (nonprofit) I work with is running toward the fire to help everyone else.”

PATRICIA SANDISON,
partner, Hodgson Russ LLP

Still, Sirén worries about whether \$28 million in government funding for the project will come through as promised since city, county and state budgets are under financial strain due to public-health concerns.

Philanthropy certainly will play a role moving forward as health and human-service organizations face the triple threat of reductions in earned revenue, reduced contributions and canceled events and the specter of public-sector/government cuts, said Clotilde Perez-Bode Dedecker, president and CEO, Community Foundation.

She pointed to projections so far from Erie County for a \$220 million deficit for 2020, with cuts expected from state government as well.

“So the unknown and the uncertainty of the public dollars, as Janne has mentioned, is very real and very threatening, and there is no way philanthropy can backfill those gaps,” she said. “So I do think that moving forward from the pandemic will necessitate innovation and new levels of collaboration so we can address disparities that happen with intentionality and build back better, because this cannot be about survival of the fittest. The community will lose. We can and must do better. We need to innovate and collaborate.”

Steve Schumer, president and CEO of Catholic Charities, worries too about whether the agency will meet annual fundraising goals, and what could happen to the 50-plus social-service programs if the fundraising campaign ends up short by millions.

That’s at a time when its programs are seeing unprecedented demand for everything from food to mental-health services. Employees are working overtime to meet those needs, some remotely, while food pantry and health-care workers continue to put themselves at risk by reporting to work.

Meantime, the Catholic Appeal has a very real chance of missing its goal: Already, it’s off by about \$2 million with six weeks to go. And that puts additional matching-grant dollars in jeopardy.

“Every dollar we get through the Appeal, we multiply that by six or eight times, so if the Appeal missed by \$1 million, it’s a substantial impact on our ability to leverage those dollars in the community,” Schumer said. “In the plainest English, it means we’re

going to be able to provide less service to the community at a time when the community needs more service.”

Nonprofits are trying to figure out their place during the pandemic, both in terms of services and programs and how to best keep supporters engaged in the safest ways possible.

Melissa Brown is executive director of the Buffalo History Museum, which is now reaching out to the community in recognition that the pandemic itself is a historic event, asking for stories to include in its *Chronicling Covid-19* initiative. And unlike artifacts of past exhibits, this one could be largely digital, relying on recordings, emails and social media.

“A lot of people do think history is what happened to people 200 years ago, not what’s happening now,” she said. “In another 100 years, people are going to want to understand the perspective of where we were at this time.”

Meanwhile, the Buffalo Olmsted Parks Conservancy is working to help ensure people have access to parks, while managing potential crowd situations and encourage social distancing.

The parks have seen a 40 percent surge in visitors, but accommodations such as bathrooms and concessions remain closed. But the grass keeps growing and grounds need to be maintained, said Stephanie Crockatt, executive director, despite lack of revenue from event rentals and limited revenue from golf.

“We’re seeing a lot of challenges, but we hope the people who are out using the parks will appreciate them,” said Crockatt. “We ask them (to) ‘sustain what’s sustaining you.’”

► CLOSER LOOK AT THOUGHT LEADERS

Thought Leaders is an ongoing series of discussions with Western New York business leaders and attorneys at Hodgson Russ LLP.

Ten times a year, leaders in diverse industries meet for a roundtable discussion moderated by Business First journalists.

The conversations are usually held in the law firm’s Pearl Street offices in Buffalo, but have shifted to a virtual format during the Covid-19 crisis.