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Memphis - Modeling the Way

Thanks to the Memphis City Council, a new standard of positive public leadership has been set for the rest of the country. Memphis, like other cities across the nation, faces a budget shortfall as it deals with the aftermath of the Great Recession that began in 2007. But unlike other cities that have tried to bully nonprofits to hand over part of their tax-exempt contributions to local government, the Memphis City Council took a different approach. It treated the city's valued nonprofits with respect by inviting them to help the city forge solutions for the common good. City leaders expressly recognized the valuable role that nonprofits play in the community as engaged civic leaders and problem solvers – and is asking for their help.

In establishing a committee to work with nonprofits, Council members are seeking to better understand their nonprofit partners and find solutions that help Memphis while maintaining the important and enriching services that nonprofits provide. And, in taking this respectful partnership approach of recognizing that nonprofits and governments are serving the same constituents and same communities, Council members unveiled “the Memphis model” of respect and collaboration that policymakers in other parts of the country can follow.

The Memphis model is values-based. It is elegant in its openness. Yet, sadly, compared with how Boston, Pittsburgh, and other cities have been mistreating and seeking to intimidate nonprofits – such as by sending them mock tax bills to pay (when state constitutions and laws clearly declare the organizations tax-exempt) – the Memphis approach is notable for doing the right thing. That's why we take the

time to write in praise of the Memphis City Council and its efforts to collaborate with local nonprofit leaders to solve the problems that the city faces.

Nonprofits save governments millions of dollars by delivering services once provided by government, but now in a more efficient and effective manner. Nonprofits also raise the quality of life in and around Memphis which, incidentally, increase property and other tax receipts and help reduce the budget gap facing public officials. And nonprofits do it while being among the hardest hit by the economy: dwindling individual donations, dried-up endowments, late payments on government contracts, and exponential growth in people needing nonprofits' programs and services. Nonprofits and their employees already have been enduring an unimaginable strain in continuing to provide services, without government adding additional burdens by demanding new payments.

We hope that public leaders elsewhere will follow the powerful Memphis model of asking nonprofits - rather than telling, bullying, or attempting to shame them—to help solve a community problem. As Nancy McGee of the Alliance for Nonprofit Excellence in Memphis said, "No one in government should feel embarrassed about asking nonprofits to help in new or expanded ways. At the same time, no local nonprofit organization should feel in any way compelled, as has been the case in cities like Boston and Pittsburgh, to divert essential and needed resources away from their missions of improving life in Memphis."

Nonprofits and policymakers achieve more when recognizing each other as partners in serving our communities. We thank the City Council for its vision and leadership, and wish everyone success in modeling how it can be done so more cities will follow Memphis' lead.