

Building a Community Organization: New Spaces for Social Change

Nadine Dolby

Abstract

In this critical reflection, I discuss my dual roles as a president of a local nonprofit organization and a full professor at my university. I reflect on how I moved from a volunteer at an animal shelter to a community leader, discuss the organization I founded in 2019, and explore the various, daily intersections between these two roles and experiences.

I am an active member of my community: I have lived in Greater Lafayette, Indiana, for almost 20 years and am president of a local nonprofit, Animal Advocates of Greater Lafayette (AAGL), which I founded in 2019. I am also a full professor at Purdue University. In this critical reflection on community engagement, I discuss why I decided to start a nonprofit organization and explore my experiences at the nexus of the community and the university. Every day, I negotiate and move between these different, overlapping worlds as I chart new possibilities for what it means to be an engaged scholar and community leader. In the concluding section, I provide suggestions and potential first steps for faculty who are interested in founding a nonprofit in their own communities.

Beginnings: From Volunteer to Community Leader

For many years, my community work was primarily volunteering. By July of 2018, I had volunteered at my local animal shelter for ten years. I had started helping at the shelter to support my neighbor, Linda, who was a cat lover, long-time shelter volunteer, and board member. Linda had advanced multiple sclerosis and I assisted her once a week with lifting cats from cages to her lap so she could brush them, and chased after the cats when they escaped her lap for adventures around the shelter. Over the years, my weekly commitment with Linda had grown to multiple shifts per week doing various tasks, with increased responsibility and comfort in the environment. Yet, in my role as faculty, I was engrossed in the nonstop responsibilities of my position at Purdue and had little time to think about other ways of engaging with the community.

Then, on a sweltering summer day in the shelter's parking lot, I stopped to talk to a woman who was parked in her car with the windows rolled

down. She was in tears as she told me that she was homeless and living in her un-airconditioned car. She had just surrendered her two dogs—her family—to the shelter, as she knew they were suffering in the heat and felt that she had no other options. Yet, she could not manage to leave the parking lot: she knew her family was inside. She returned to the parking lot many times that summer, wanting to be close to her dogs, and perhaps hoping for a miracle so she could go inside and take them home with her. Eventually, the weather grew colder, and I stopped seeing her in the shelter parking lot.

In a decade of volunteering, I had helped thousands of pets and had talked with just as many people. I often assisted with adoptions, and those conversations were uplifting. But over the years, more difficult, troubling, and challenging conversations accumulated. I learned about families that had to surrender their pets because of rental restrictions, inability to afford veterinary care for an aging pet, or simply basic food, supplies, and annual vaccines (Arluke & Rowan, 2020; Guenther, 2020; Human Animal Support Services, 2023). During the summer of 2018, as I witnessed the woman's silent prayers and tears for her dogs, I decided that it was time to move beyond the limits of volunteering at an animal shelter and begin to use my knowledge and experience as a qualitative researcher, educator, activist, and tenured faculty member to take steps to address the systemic inequities in our community and beyond, and to make changes that would lead to greater equity and justice for both humans and animals.

Animal Advocates of Greater Lafayette (AAGL) launched in the summer 2019 with a series of public meetings that were open to all, and attracted participants from multiple neighborhoods of varying demographics throughout Greater Lafayette (two cities, Lafayette and West Lafayette,

and the surrounding Tippecanoe County areas). As fall 2019 started, we focused on educational classes through local community centers and nonprofit organizations, drawing on my background and experience as an educator. Our classes covered basic topics on pet care, protecting pets from hazards during the holidays, and pet behavior, among other themes. Our face-to-face classes came to an abrupt halt in the spring of 2020 as everything closed down during the COVID-19 pandemic. With no other shelters or rescues coming forward to help a community in desperate need of pet food, AAGL pivoted to fulfilling this essential need during a national emergency. Throughout 2020, we distributed over 40,000 pounds of pet food in eight drive-through pantries, in the process garnering significant media coverage and community support and involvement. AAGL incorporated as a 501c3 nonprofit organization in May of 2020.

Philosophically, AAGL takes an assets-based approach to family support: we work to meet families' needs, but always assume that pets are loved and cared for, and families need just a little help to make it through a rough patch. To the public, we often explain our approach as "neighbors helping neighbors," emphasizing the collaborative nature of our organization and the reality that any of us might find ourselves in the position of needing help at some point. In more academic terms, this approach is often referred to as "mutual aid" (Kropotkin, 1902/2010) and is generally considered part of an assets-based approach to community work (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1996). Pets are part of our families, and our social policies should reflect and honor that reality (Clancy, 2014).

Current Programs and Services: AAGL's Mission and Activities

Currently in our fourth year, AAGL is still a young organization. We are committed to working with the community through individuals, families, organizations, neighborhoods, and businesses to provide support to families to keep pets out of shelters and with the people who love them. Practically, we attempt to assist with food and supplies, rides to the veterinarian, support for community cat caretakers, emergency veterinary care funds, spays and neuters, and rehoming pets. Over a regular calendar year, AAGL sponsors numerous events throughout our community, always in partnership with other nonprofits, local businesses, and veterinary practices. Every holiday season, we partner with our local Habitat

for Humanity ReStore on "Presents for Pets," an event where low-income children and families can choose a present for their pet(s), make a card, and decorate a gift bag. On Valentine's Day, AAGL organizes an event called "Heart to Heart," delivering pet presents to low-income seniors throughout our community, along with a Valentine's Day card handmade by teens, through our partnership with a local library. We also regularly partner with a local cat café and cat rescues on "Love a Paw," an educational and outreach event focused on why cats need their claws, and with local dog rescues and dog parks on "Get Your Leash On," focused on the dangers of retractable leashes. AAGL's new initiative, "People and Paws: Happy and Healthy Together," provides pet vaccines and wellness exams for low-income seniors and their pets, through our partnership with Area IV Agency on Aging and Community Action Programs, Inc., multiple veterinary practices, and nursing and veterinary programs at Purdue. At AAGL's first "People and Paws" event in October 2023, thirty Purdue students volunteered, including veterinary students, veterinary nursing students, nursing students, and an undergraduate pet-focused organization called A Cause for Paws.

Negotiating Different Worlds

When I founded AAGL, I knew that I wanted to take an approach that engages *with* communities, not *serves* communities. As faculty are well aware, grants to work with local communities are generally tied to a human service approach based on creating clients instead of true partners. As Pearl (2019) suggests, it was time for me to push out of my comfort zone in order to interrupt the accepted approaches to working across the university-community divide.

Despite the fact that AAGL exists as a separate nonprofit organization, outside of my university affiliation, there are still many ways that I work within my own assets and positionality to make change. For example, AAGL works with university-based organizations and units. Over the past few years, AAGL has been supported by student organizations who have invited us to speak and have organized fundraisers and donation drives. AAGL has also donated pet food to the on-campus, student-run food pantry.

At times I make connections to university-based programs in community—not university—settings. For example, in the spring of 2023, I made a presentation about AAGL to a local nonprofit organization working with individuals and families

experiencing homelessness in our community. Many nursing students attended the presentation, as they were doing a scheduled rotation at the emergency shelter that day. Through subsequent conversations with the School of Nursing at Purdue, nursing students volunteered at AAGL's recent "People and Paws" event and provided human health screenings for attendees.

In addition, AAGL has collaborated with the Shelter Medicine Program in the College of Veterinary Medicine at Purdue, working with the veterinarians, staff, and students on multiple projects. I regularly teach courses related to pets and society in the Honors College at Purdue. In 2021, I received a Jefferson Award for Public Service from Purdue for my work with AAGL: thus, I have institutional support, despite my untraditional approach to community engagement.

Starting a Nonprofit as a Faculty Member

Faculty are accustomed to juggling many different roles and responsibilities: generally research, teaching, and service. The exact amount of time that faculty invest in each of these activities depends on the type of institution, and for those in tenure-track positions, the specific institutional requirements for tenure and promotion. In my case, I waited until I was a full professor to begin the process of thinking about starting a nonprofit, knowing the significant time commitment that would be involved.

It is vital to ask yourself questions about why you are starting the organization, what its focus/purpose/mission will be, how it meets an existing community need that is currently not addressed by other nonprofits, and if there are other organizations in your community that will partner with you. Also assess your university-based resources: Are there units and student organizations that may be willing to support your initial activities?

I took my first steps towards starting AAGL in the summer of 2019 by holding a series of introductory meetings at various locations in my community, advertising primarily through the neighborhood social networking site, Nextdoor. These meetings generated many strong ideas, and gave me a beginning sense of how the community might receive and support this new approach to animal and human welfare and wellbeing. I launched the organization through providing community-based educational programs, drawing on my own strengths and experience as an educator and my familiarity with professional tasks such as grant writing and team organizing. I would suggest

that faculty thinking of starting a new nonprofit similarly reflect on their own strengths and use those as a basis for the organization's activities, so that it is not necessary to acquire (too many) new skills at the beginning.

From 2019 to 2020, I was primarily focused on the first steps of building the organization, which required flexibility as the mission slowly emerged. COVID changed AAGL's core activity, as in-person classes and activities shut down in the spring of 2020 and we pivoted to providing pet food to meet an urgent and unfilled community need. Our initial years of "Presents for Pets" and "Heart to Heart" were also constrained by social-distancing restrictions that eliminated in-person activities. Since the gradual return to normal life and activities beginning in 2021, AAGL has been able to build on our earlier successful programs and firmly establish a three-part mission of "keeping pets out of shelters, keeping families together, and celebrating the human-animal bond." Flexibility and persistence were absolutely necessary to the slow process of solidifying this mission during a global pandemic.

Administrative and logistical issues certainly are critical components of beginning a new organization. For example, AAGL needed a logo, 501c3 status, a bank account, a website, social media accounts, and a brochure. The board members needed business cards and AAGL needed print outreach materials such as banners for events. Public speaking is also a skill that is useful in outreach and fundraising activities: I have spoken to dozens of organizations, churches, and Purdue student organizations about AAGL.

On a normal day, my calendar is full of meetings, coffee dates, teaching, research, and activities that reflect my dual faculty and community roles—often seamlessly intersecting in new and unexpected ways. Establishing a community organization is an uncommon, though potentially transformative, approach for faculty who are interested in working with communities for social change. As Porter et al. (2023) argue, there is power and possibility through working in liminal spaces. Despite the challenges, there are abundant opportunities for creativity, passion, and new approaches, unhindered by the structures and limits of fully university-based practices.

References

Arluke, A. & Rowan, A. (2020). *Underdogs: Pets, people, and poverty*. University of Georgia Press.

Clancy, E.A. (2014). Animals as community stakeholders: Inclusion of pets in social policy and practice. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*, 95(4), 285–289. <https://doi.org/10.1606/1044-3894.2014.95.33>

Guenther, K.M. (2020). *The lives and deaths of shelter animals*. Stanford University Press.

Human Animal Support Services. (2023). *About Human Animal Support Services*. Retrieved January 18, 2024, from <https://www.humananimalsupportservices.org/about-hass>

Kretzmann, J. & McKnight, J.P. (1996). Assets-based community development. *National Civic Review*, 84(4), 23–29.

Kropotkin, P. (2010). *Mutual aid: A factor of evolution*. Kessinger Publishing. (Original work published 1902)

Pearl, A. (2019). From the Associate Editor: Getting comfortable with being uncomfortable. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 12(1), 7. <https://doi.org/10.54656/UQRO9777>

Porter, L., Beers, D., LeBlanc, J., Meza, D., & Koubek, E. (2023). Navigating liminal spaces in university-community engagement: Risky collaboration in times of crisis. *Journal of Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 15(2), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.54656/jces.v15i2.537>

About the Author

Nadine Dolby is president of Animal Advocates of Greater Lafayette, and a professor of curriculum studies at Purdue University.