

Executive Summary 2017 Friends Assessment 2017

In early 2017, the National Wildlife Refuge Association conducted an assessment of Friends groups nationwide. Questions ranged from membership, to board functionality, to working with the Service and local community. Board members from over 200 Friends groups were sent the survey with 565 individuals responding from 128 groups.

The big take-aways were not earth shattering, but rather verified what we thought we knew – that Friends have wonderful and productive relationships with their Service partners but have challenges with basic nonprofit capacity building such as membership, board recruitment and retention, fundraising and membership. Below is a brief summary.

Membership and Boards

The average size of a Friends group membership is 258. Responders' comments include that having a membership in itself is a struggle and thus, many have abandoned memberships entirely and make memberships free. These groups sustain themselves on donations. Only a few groups have a membership recruitment and retention plan. Many would like to move membership sign ups online. About half of responders believe their membership is stable or growing.

Nearly 70% do not think their board members reflect the demographic make-up of their community (age, income, gender, education, religion, ethnicity) and only 17% feel their board members reflect the diversity of stakeholder interests in the community (hunting, photography, environmental education, etc...). Responders would like assistance with diversification because many don't know where to start.

Fundraising

Friends fundraise in many ways but membership and donations comprise the largest sources of funding followed by foundation grants and general fundraising. 42% of responders think their revenue is growing. Most feel that lack of resources (funding) for the Service has negative impacts in everything they do: lack of staff that can work with the Friends, closed buildings, no on-site staff. This also impacts their ability to fundraise. Most groups feel they lack the fundraising skills – and time - necessary to be successful in their goals.

Communications

Friends nationwide are communicating in the digital age although most feel they could do better. 90% of respondents have a website and have someone with sufficient skills to maintain it. About half feel their website is up to date; 25% feel it is “mostly” up to date. 87% of groups have a presence on social media and almost all of those have a Facebook page.

Organizational Health

Only 28% of Friends believe their group is “vibrant” as defined by the Service in Conserving the Future; 34% feel they are not and 38% are in the middle. 37% believe that their group is stable; 24% do not; 39% are not sure.

Most Friends have someone on their board experienced with non-profit governance and nearly all have a mission statement and use it as the organization's foundation and focus. Only about 15% responded that they have a system for setting annual or long-term goals but 80% establish and monitor an annual budget. Less than half responded that they have a strategic plan – about 25% replied they didn't know. About half responded that don't believe they have an accurate way to evaluate their accomplishments.

Administrative Documents: Almost all groups maintain by-laws and position descriptions for officers; numbers decline for financial policies and procedures and codes of conduct. Under 50% have a manual for new board members. About half of groups have their accounts audited or reviewed annually – 25% do not – others weren't sure.

Over half of respondents said that their boards do not contribute more than an annual membership fee.

Relationship with the Service and the Refuge Association

Friends overwhelmingly (90%) feel that their programs are planned and organized with the Service and believe that their partnership with the Service is “strong & effective.” Many comments reflected that station leadership is an integral key to the success of the partnership in setting the tone.

70% think that the Service site staff appreciates and welcomes their group – only 13% do not. Half of responders believe the Service staff they work with understand the roles and responsibilities of their group – (including legal constraints); 30% are unsure, 20% do not feel the Service staff understand. Most say that local Service staff regularly attend board meetings – about 25% say that Service staff regularly attend Executive Committee meetings (*could be a red flag*) and Committee Meetings (*could be ok depending on the subjects covered*). Flipping the question, only about 10% of the respondents said they regularly attend Service staff meetings. Note – it is the belief of the Refuge Association and non-profit experts that Executive Sessions are vital to the health and well-being of a highly functioning nonprofit board. They allow sensitive subjects to be discussed and allow for the growth of the organization without undue outside influence.

Training conducted by the Service and the Refuge Association are greatly valued, especially programs like Friends Academy, Mentoring, and Regional training. Many said that any and all trainings are extremely valuable. About half were aware of the Service’s Mentoring Program; 25% were not. Majority of respondents feel the most beneficial thing the Refuge Association does is advocacy, but many don’t know enough about the organization to answer.

Friends’ Identified Areas of Needing Assistance

Responders repeatedly recognized that one of the greatest obstacles preventing Friends from growing is a lack of Service funding resulting in lack of staff, closed buildings, lack of programs, etc... Increased awareness of their local refuge and the Refuge System would help recruit new members and donors in their community. Responders requested help in making the refuge more fun and rewarding - thus, people will want to join. Responders also requested a streamlining process for volunteering for the Service. One respondent wrote, “If you get a new mower, have a staff person show you the difference from the old one, without taking a meaningless Department of Interior on-line test.”

Overwhelming request for more training opportunities for board members on fundraising, marketing, membership and assistance with attracting younger board members. Friends also suggested that Service staff could promote Friends with Service volunteers and maybe have Friends organize more volunteer events.

Groups with no on-site staff are desperate for help – how can the Service, the Refuge Association and other Friends groups help these groups stay motivated and vibrant when funding has essentially been shut off to their station?

Areas to Improve

The majority of respondents say they do not have frequent (if ever) direct contact with Friends from other organizations. Many said that they used to have this connection but lack of Regional and National workshops makes it difficult.

Friends also requested more recognition – that they exist and more of an acknowledgment of what they do.

The National Wildlife Refuge Association has shared these findings with the Service. Together, Friends, the Service and the Refuge Association can build an unparalleled grassroots base of support for wildlife conservation in the United States. The Refuge Association is creating a Five-Year Friends Empowerment Plan based largely on the findings of this assessment. Our first step is to hire a Friends Program Director in early 2018 and then we will build a team of experts in the fields of development, online communications, community engagement, and nonprofit capacity building over the next five years.

We welcome you to join us as we empower refuge Friends nationwide!