Written Documents for Community Groups: Policies and Procedures

Joe Heimlich, Professor and Extension Specialist, Community Development
Cindy Bond, Assistant Professor and Extension Educator, Community Development

Introduction

Every day of our lives, we participate in groups. Groups have many different forms: formal, informal, organized, structured, ad-hoc, local, national and every other form imaginable. Groups may range from having a narrowly defined to a broad focus. One of the ways a group addresses its purpose is by having guidelines for how the organization makes decisions and does its work.

What Are Policies and Procedures?

Policies and procedures, sometimes referred to as standard operating procedures, are dated documents that can be simply amended as needed by the organization. They can be separated collections (policies or procedures) or included in a single document. These collections of decisions made by the organization over time indicate the organization's day-to-day operations.

Policies and procedures are more than a collection of notes or minutes from meetings. They are an organized, agreed upon collection of decisions about ways of doing work. Not all policies come from voted agreements, and not all procedures come from the governing body of the group. Often, committees develop their means of doing their work, such as recruitment of members or the nominations process. The procedures, when captured in the procedures manual, explain how the committee does its work. These procedures can be changed and improved upon by later committees, and any changes are also captured in the manual.

Policies and procedures are changed more easily than bylaws, which must be voted on by the full group. Policies and procedures can be changed by the body that sets them: policies can be changed by a board vote or a governing committee decision. Procedures can be altered with notes about changes made in the procedures by the group doing the work.

Why Have Written Policies and Procedures?

Policies in an organization emerge over time. Many decisions by a board are about doing work for the group, and when the board or group votes on how to do something or how to make a decision, that becomes a policy. With volunteer turnover, it is easy to have a governing group without the historical knowledge of decisions made in the past. Policy and procedure manuals become the institutional history for the group.

Written policies and procedures have several important functions:

• For governance purposes, these documents can be basic communications tools for those making decisions or doing work for the organization or group. These documents can become a valuable training resource for new volunteers, including board members and committee chairs.

• Consistency is a dominant reason why a group captures its policies and procedures. As mentioned above, written documents help a group know what has been discussed in the past and what was decided in terms of what should be done and how it should be done.

• As a tool for making decisions, these written documents provide transparency. Everyone knows what decisions have been made, so there is a clear guideline for how to do the work of a committee, board, or group.

• These documents provide the framework for accountability and compliance by members of the group. Policies and procedures set boundaries for jobs, provide more detail in terms of job descriptions for the volunteers than are included in the bylaws, and help the group meet federal and state expectations.
What Should Be Included in Policies and Procedures?

There are several items that should be included in policies and procedures:

- issues and concerns
- limitations
- membership criteria including eligibility, dues, exceptions and responsibilities
- committee duties and responsibilities
- meeting times, dates and locations
- ethical operations of the organization
- an equity or nondiscrimination clause
- job descriptions and responsibilities of the board members

The written procedures should outline what issues and concerns the group will address and how they will address them. This is operationalized from the "what" and "why" in the bylaws and further clarifies the normal activity arena of the organization. Operating procedures allow for additional detail on the way the group will patrol or monitor its activities. In addition, a group may elect to identify how it will provide for contingency or emergency issues that may arise.

Limitations will assist the organization to direct its energy and resources only towards its mission and purpose. If a member brings an idea, project or concern before the organization, the documents might assist the organization in determining if the issue falls within the organization's scope of concern. The limitations can also elaborate on what are viewed as non-appropriate activities.

Although outlined in the bylaws, membership criteria can be more fully presented in the policies and procedures. How a group operationalizes its definitions of membership can shift over time, even while the official delimitations of membership do not. Classes of membership may alter with one clear example being a change in the meaning/definition of "family" for many organizations shifting from the image of a nuclear family, to reflecting a wide diversity of configurations. If membership has any standards, they are identified in these documents.

Many organizations also use the policies and procedures to create explicit responsibilities of members and to clearly define and operationalize the types of memberships enabled through the bylaws. By including these roles of general membership, discrepancies in members' expectations of each other are eliminated and the organization has a tool for dropping members from its roster if expectations are not met. Some organizations also include job descriptions of members along with officers, board members, committee chairs and other assigned roles in their procedural manuals or handbooks.

If dues are levied, the specific amount of yearly dues and the calendar of collection deadlines are included with the membership discussion. This also covers any potential delineation of dues by class; exemptions from dues; de facto or honorary memberships; and term memberships (such as "life" or "multiple year"). Should either the dues schedule or the date of levying dues have reason to be changed, the executive committee has the authority to do so as long as that authority is defined in the bylaws, and as long as the process is presented in the procedures manual.

While the bylaws outline any standing (or ongoing) committees, these documents further designate how these committees function. Policies include the allowance and procedure for creating special committees, task forces, working groups or panels. The procedures can define meeting expectations for all committees, areas of concern, limitations, number of members, tenure on committees and the expected results a committee is to produce. How individuals are elected or appointed to the committee should be included. If the members are appointed, it must be stated who appoints the members and how the time schedule for those appointments is defined. If the members are elected, then the procedures state when the election is held, the number of people that must vote or be present and the length of the term. The procedures should also include a section of how to remove individuals (appointed or elected) should the membership deem such action necessary.

The procedures is a good place to include specific information about meeting times, dates and locations, especially since a yearly schedule is mandatory in some states for NGO status. The meeting itself is stated in the bylaws, but the process for holding the meeting is presented in greater detail in the procedures. Information on how membership is notified (or not) of standing meetings and special meetings can be elaborated on in this section. If special requirements for the location of meetings exists (within a neighborhood, specifics on accessibility, etc.), they can be highlighted here.

A major function of these documents is to address the ethical operations of the organization. The policies must address what constitutes a conflict of interest, special considerations, voting and exceptions to any clauses of the bylaws or other guidance documents. Outlining ethical operations in the procedures will help the organization protect itself from itself. Some groups label this as "standards of behavior" for membership.

One of the items that is contained within these guidance documents for some organizations is the equity or nondiscrimination clause. This clause indicates that
no person will be discriminated against based on race, color, creed, religion, national origin, age, handicap, gender, sexual orientation or veteran status or whatever is appropriate to at least meet, if not exceed, the legal requirements. This type of statement is part of federal mandates for businesses, organizations, groups and individuals receiving federal monies, to acquire solicitation permits and to receive any public money or other support.

All members should have access to a copy of the governance documents, including the bylaws. All officers and governing members need to have the most current copy of the policies and procedures in their possession. The procedures are called "dated documents" because they are identified by the most recent version through the date printed on the cover and as a header or footer on each page. Through this dating, it is easy to ensure that the most current version is being used. The secretary's file maintains an historical copy of all the versions of governance documents.

The policies and procedures should clearly define who are the officers and/or board members in the organization. These documents should also define the job descriptions and responsibilities of the board members. The SOP/PAP should define the duties of each person and, like the bylaws, describe the limitations of the officers as well. Some organizations have moved to very specific job descriptions for officers, which are included in the SOP/ PAR. As an example, it is assumed that the president or chair of an organization can or should accept the duties of other officers' in their absence. This is a limitation that should be clearly communicated through the SOP/ PAR. If the organization does not want this to happen, then the SOP/PAP is the document to ensure proper responsibilities are carried out.

Leaving the operating procedures to one individual to remember and implement can be disastrous. It is not in the best interest of the group to allow one individual to interpret the operating procedures. The best way to ensure that consistency and equality is maintained is to have written documents.

How Are Policies and Procedures Written?

Like bylaws, it is useful to have policies and procedures examples from several different organizations. However, these governance documents are distinct to the organization and should reflect the uniqueness of the organization. Again, other examples can be used to selectively adapt the most appropriate parts, but the individuality of the organization should be foremost when writing these documents.

A solid starting place for policies is to go through all prior minutes and capture every motion approved by the board or organization. Many of these will fall into policies. Organizing these decisions into usable documents then requires creating appropriate categories for policies and the affiliated procedures.

For established organizations or groups, procedures can be started by having existing committees and working groups capture the way they function. This is especially true for committees that do annual work (nominations, conference/annual meeting, banquet, etc.), as this work is often very specific and detailed in its procedures.

One technique for writing procedures for new groups or for new sections of a procedures manual is to get a small group together for a brainstorming session. Have everyone write on note cards (one idea per card) all the problems they have experienced in groups in which they have been or are a part. After a few minutes, the people read their cards, one at a time. When all ideas have been shared, the group keeps talking. The new ideas that grow from the discussion are also recorded on note cards, one idea per card. The cards can then be separated into clusters related to the ideas shared above. As the procedures are written, all these ideas are covered so that this group can learn from the problems or mistakes of others.

Like bylaws, the policies and procedures should be reviewed regularly. Any change in the bylaws causes a corresponding change in the policies, which also change the procedures. Regular review will ensure that the SOP/PAP accurately reflects the bylaws and the functioning of the group.

Summary

Policies and procedures, or standard operating procedures, are essential documents for ongoing organizations. To ensure equality, fairness and consistency, these written documents complement one another to describe an organization and how it functions. For an organization to continue, the members must agree on how they will function in an organized manner, and consensus on organized behavior is reflected in the written documentation of policies and procedures. These documents define the parameters of the organization's concern, the boundaries of operation, expanse of authority and accepted behaviors of members. To use an old example, bylaws create the boundaries of the parking lot while the policies and procedures are the painted parking spaces within the lot. While these documents may not solve all problems that arise in an organization, these guidance documents allow for a process to address problems or concerns.
In addition to policies and procedures, an organization should operate under a concise, current set of bylaws that reflect the way the organization conducts its business. If you would like to know more about bylaws, please refer to the fact sheet "Written Documents for Community Groups: Bylaws."

**Resources**


Grant Thornton. (ND). "Not-for-profit organizations board member handbook." Chicago, IL: Grant Thornton LLP.


