



Board members of the Canadian Advocacy Network say its volunteers act as a sounding board for charities and nonprofits, offering strategic advice to help get their messages to the public and government. From left to right, Patrick Kennedy, Earncliffe Strategy Group, Katlyn Harrison, Summa Strategies, Philip Cartwright, Global Public Affairs, and Joanne Pitkin of FleishmanHillard. *The Hill Times* photograph by Samantha Wright Allen

# Pro-bono lobbying group grows as it fills ‘gap’ for nonprofits

The organization has almost doubled the number of its volunteers and clients in the last year, and has expanded to Toronto.

BY SAMANTHA WRIGHT ALLEN

Five years ago the Canadian Advocacy Network was just an idea shared over drinks between three Ottawa consultants, aware that a gap existed among nonprofits trying to enter—or missing entirely—from public policy discussions.

“We had a sense that there was a need for this—that this was an area where there was a gap, but this was [also] an area where [charities] didn’t know what they didn’t know,” said Patrick Kennedy, principal at Earncliffe Strategy Group, discussing the origins of the network over a breakfast with some of its earliest members.

Since it launched and incorporated in early 2014, members of the pro-bono lobbying and public affairs group say the intervening years have proved there’s a clear market for the support they offer. The Canadian Advocacy Network (CAN) connects nonprofits who successfully apply for help from its network of volunteers, who offer strategic advice, third-party oversight, communications strategies, and contacts.

“There are a lot of under-resourced nonprofits and charities that can’t afford it. In some cases they’re lucky to have an executive director who is a jack of all trades who does everything including public affairs,” said Global Public Affairs vice-president Philip Cartwright, who with Mr. Kennedy represent two of the three origi-

nal founders still on the board of directors. They’re also familiar faces in the local industry, with Mr. Cartwright last month taking over from Mr. Kennedy as president of Government Relations Institute of Canada.

CAN has grown bigger than what Josh McJannett, who now runs Dominion City Brewing Co., originally presented to the two. At the time Mr. McJannett said the genesis wasn’t to “redeem lobbying” but rather that policy is only “as good as the information you have available to you.”

The first couple years were slow growth, slowly building and bringing in volunteers and clients. But in the last year the client list has almost doubled to about 45, something they credit to word of mouth. And what started as a plan among a trio has broadened to a board of seven members and 57 volunteers.

This year CAN expanded to Toronto, where seven volunteers work with one of the original board members, Sean McGurran, a former associate at the law firm Fasken Martineau, which gave the group seed money in the very beginning. He is now an associate at Cassels Brock & Blackwell LLP.

The network offers both public affairs and government relations support to charities that operate at the municipal, provincial, and national levels, though many of its clients are focused on the federal government, including the Canadian Alliance for Sex Work Law



The Canadian Advocacy Network helped the Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada prepare for its annual YOUTH in Office event, giving the youth a rundown of what happens on the Hill and hosting a Twitter chat with participants about their priorities for government. *Photograph courtesy of Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada*

Reform, Adoption Council of Canada, Independent Living Canada, Canada Bikes, Ladies Learning Code, Canada World Youth, Canadian Parents for French, and Brain Tumour Foundation of Canada.

“The driving mentality and thought behind CAN is that public policy belongs to everybody, not just those who can afford it,” added network chair Katlyn Harrison, a senior consultant at Summa Strategies. “It doesn’t make their cause any less valuable. I think that was why CAN was created and people started stepping up.”

## ‘A little bit of guidance is extremely helpful’

Ms. Harrison has watched as the Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada’s research and public policy director went from a newcomer to the trade to one of CAN’s volunteers.

“Before, we would go in with five-page briefs on what we were asking,” said Rachel Gouin, who had a background in fundraising before she turned to public policy.

“I’ve seen certainly an evolution in how they approach their government communications,” said Ms. Harrison. “It used to be very context heavy, lots of paper, and really now we have it down to the few key bullets.”

Ms. Gouin has been working with CAN ever since she saw the group profiled by *The Hill Times* in March 2014, soon after it launched.

“I think it’s hard to be in the loop and know how to keep on top of what government is saying, what their priorities are. And the staff changes so fast: how do you know who to speak to, and who might be amenable to your message?” said Ms. Gouin.

CAN gave guidance on who to meet, and help reviewing and tightening documents, so political asks were linked to government priorities. The volunteers stay firmly in that advisory role, drawing the line at doing any work that would count as a registrable activity.

Ms. Gouin said she’s seen it “over and over” throughout her career in nonprofits: some “savvy” groups have resources and wherewithal to lobby government, “but others are just struggling.”

Ms. Gouin’s organization registered to lobby in March 2014 and has filed reports for 69 communications with the federal government since then.

Often nonprofits without government relations staff don’t realize that speaking to government is very different than speaking to donors, Ms. Gouin said.

“They forget to mention what are the links to government, how is this helping the government advance its agenda.”

Like Ms. Gouin, Jesse Clarke was fairly new to her role as director of government partnerships before connecting with CAN.

“We had a good portfolio, but what we didn’t have were a lot of relationships,” beyond one or two “high level” connections, said Ms. Clarke, who works with Pathways to Education Canada, which offers support to youth from lower-income neighbourhoods to help them complete high school.

She’d worked in government relations for international NGOs and was a federal civil servant for many years, but having Mr. Cartwright as a sounding board helps her brainstorm and bring fresh ideas to the portfolio.

“When I joined in 2014 we had good relationships with our funding departments, with the direct bureaucrats,” but not much beyond that, said Ms. Clarke.

Now her network crosses departments and ministers, and includes advisers in the Prime Minister’s Office, she said.

Budget 2017 was a big win for Pathways, earning it renewed annual funding of \$9.5-million over four years for a total of \$38-million.

CAN helped them build a strategy to develop a stronger relationship with government, to “lay a foundation for renewal,” she said.

In October 2016 the group registered to lobby, reporting five meetings ahead of the budget, including with Employment Minister Patricia Hajdu and other advisers in her department.

Ms. Clarke said lobbying can feel like a “grey area” for nonprofits who don’t see themselves as the same as lobbying firms, but want to speak to government nonetheless.

In most cases, a registered charity can’t spend more than 10 per cent of its resources on political activities, which must be “non-partisan and connected and subordinate to the charity’s purposes.”

CAN was forming in the years following former prime minister Stephen Harper’s 2012 budget, which funded audits of registered charities’ political activities. That—and the regulatory regime monitoring lobbying activity—meant many charities were wary to reach out to government.

“Just because there’s these rules in place doesn’t mean you don’t engage,” said Ms. Harrison.

Ms. Clarke echoed that sentiment, especially in a new government environment where Liberals are calling on more groups to give feedback.

“We also have to be in a better position to respond to those consultation opportunities that are out there and take advantage of them,” she said.

swallen@hilltimes.com  
*The Hill Times*