

NEWS LOBBYING



Members of the Canadian Advocacy Network's advisory board meet to discuss the launch of their pro bono lobbying service. From left: Josh McJannett, Ann Marie Pullen, Patrick Kennedy, Alayne Crawford, Michel Liboiron, Phil Cartwright and Katlyn Harrison. *The Hill Times* photograph by Jake Wright

Lobbyists looking to give back with new pro bono advocacy organization

A group of young Ottawa lobbyists is launching a pro bono service offering their unique skills on a volunteer basis to organizations that wouldn't otherwise be able to afford them.

BY MARK BURGESS

The popular characterization of lobbying might be some mix of behind-the-scenes string-pulling for corporate interests and public schmoozing with politicians, but a group of government relations workers in Ottawa is showing the profession also has a heart.

A group of young Ottawa lobbyists is launching a pro bono service offering their unique skills on a volunteer basis to organizations that wouldn't otherwise be able to afford them. The Canadian Advocacy Network (CAN) has already been working with a few clients and is officially launching this week.

The idea was born during that traditional lobbyist pastime that serves as a Petri dish for some of the profession's most profound insights: lunch.

Josh McJannett, a government affairs director at Rogers Communications, shared some thoughts he'd been mulling with Philip Cartwright and Patrick Kennedy, two industry colleagues, about a year-and-a-half ago. Mr. McJannett was already doing some volunteer work with a non-profit and talked about connecting other

groups with professionals willing to donate some of their time.

"We didn't set out to redeem lobbying, necessarily, but we did start from a point that said advocacy and lobbying is honorable," Mr. McJannett said in an interview. "That may generate groans and eye rolls in certain circles," he continued, but being able to present a case to government is an important part of any democracy.

"Good policy, in our view, relies on information, it feeds on that. The policy you make is only as good as the information you have available to you. We figured there are good voices who've got meaningful things to contribute who maybe don't necessarily have the time or the resources or the experience to use the megaphone that's afforded to them properly or as effectively as they might like. To the extent that we work in this professionally, we thought, 'Give what you're good at.'"

The three reached out to their own networks and found not only interest in the idea but that several colleagues were already doing similar work on their own. Through a series of informal meetings a plan was formalized and a group of 10 committed to forming

CAN's advisory board.

The group decided the most valuable service to provide would be a meeting point where those professionals looking to share their skills could connect with the organizations that could most use them.

The Canadian Advocacy Network has now incorporated and its founders received some seed money from law firm Fasken Martineau (where advisory board member Sean McGurran is an associate) and pitched in individually to cover the rest of what was needed in terms of start-up costs. They cleared their involvement with their respective employers and CAN's website, what will serve as the meeting point, launched this week.

Now they need some organizations seeking their help.

"In talking to charities and not-for-profits, the feedback we got from them was there would definitely be—especially in Ottawa because so many of those national organizations are based there—that there would be a market for it," said Phil Cartwright, a director at consulting firm Global Public Affairs, in an interview.

The group has already started working with WaterCan, the

Adoption Council of Canada, SOS Children's Villages Canada, and an organization advocating for organ and tissue donation.

Katlyn Harrison, a consultant at Summa Strategies and a member of CAN's advisory board, started doing volunteer work with SOS through a former roommate who works there.

The organization's communications director, Graeme Burk, said he's been benefiting from the advice on connecting with journalists and editorial boards. Most non-profits, like SOS, have the communications person doing whatever government relations work they can muster, he said, since most of the resources rightfully go to their work overseas. Government relations can seem daunting to the uninitiated.

"It's knowing who are the best people to talk to, where are the places, where the conversations are happening, where can we best connect with the conversations in advocacy that matter," Mr. Burk said in an interview. "Those things sound easy, but they're actually not. I can write a letter to the minister in charge of a portfolio, but you're not necessarily going to get an audience. It's just finding a way in."

CAN has developed an application process on its website for groups interested in its services and for lobbyists who want to offer them. The organizations identify areas they're seeking help with, from basic government relations to developing advocacy plans to logistical support for events to suggestions for building partnerships or coalitions with like-minded organizations.

"On the other side, the people that want to volunteer some time are putting in their own applications, and they then have access to the list of organizations that applied. If there's a particular group that is interesting to them, they then practically reach out," Mr. Cartwright said.

CAN will facilitate the match-making but once the lobbyist and

organization are connected it's up to them to develop and maintain the partnership. The level of commitment is also for them to determine but would probably be around three to five hours per month. Ideally the relationships would be long-term to allow for planning and strategy.

There are other lobbyists already sharing their skills with organizations looking to benefit from them. Elizabeth Roscoe, Hill and Knowlton Strategies' national service leader, served on the board of the United Way for several years where she helped with advocacy and public policy. She listed off several colleagues doing similar work with other organizations.

"A number of not-for-profit and charitable organizations look to recruit GR specialists onto their boards," she said in an interview. "So that's another way where the industry members and leaders give back."

The Government Relations Institute of Canada (GRIC), a lobbyist association, has also offered government relations workshops to charities and non-profits for nominal fees, Ms. Roscoe said.

Most in the lobbying business come from government work, either partisan or the public service, and don't entirely leave that motivation behind upon entering the private sector, Mr. McJannett said.

"That's maybe partly an explanation for why I think so many people in this industry already, often quietly, give a lot of their time and a lot of their efforts to different causes. I think [CAN] is just one more facet to enable more of that," he said.

Former lobbyist Sean Moore founded the Advocacy School, where he and other professionals offer advocacy and government relations training to corporate and non-profit clients. Although it offers some pro bono services, the school works primarily with organizations that have the resources to pay for the training, and the resources to follow through on it, he said.

"The demand for help with public policy advocacy is pretty substantial and I agree there's a difference between the demand for the service or the demand for the help and the ability to pay for the help," Mr. Moore said. "I think anyone involved in this is always trying to find ways of meeting that demand whether it's paid or not."

Having another organization offering pro bono advocacy services and building organizations' capacity to participate in the public policy process is a good idea, he said.

Mr. Cartwright and Ms. Harrison both said their firms have done some pro bono work and have offered special rates for certain organizations unable to pay more. CAN won't replace that type of full-time public affairs support, they said, and its volunteers will do their homework to make sure the organizations requesting assistance really can't afford to pay for it.

Mr. McJannett said the legal industry, which has done a good job of fostering a pro bono ethic into the profession, could be a model for lobbyists.

"Pro bono work is a professional expectation if you're going to be a lawyer, and you learn that coming up through law school," he said. "I think it would do well for our industry to have that same kind of expectation. All the pieces are already there and hopefully the Canadian Advocacy Network is another piece of the puzzle."

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