

Nationally, nonprofit boards are stalled on diversity

By: [Anne Wallace Allen](#)



*1A tabby cat at the Idaho Humane Society. The board of the nonprofit, one of the largest in Idaho, is made up of 14 women and just three men. Nationally, most nonprofit board directors are older white males, according to a report from BoardSource.*

For all of the progress the nation has made with diversity and inclusion in the last several years, it turns out that when it comes to nonprofit organization boards, little has changed. Most nonprofit board chairmen are older white males, and in fact, most directors also fit that demographic.

That's a problem, experts say, because that demographic does not closely resemble most communities nationwide, particularly the communities those nonprofits serve.

A 2017 study by BoardSource, a Washington, D.C.-based not-for-profit that supports, trains and educates nonprofit leaders, found that nationally, 90 percent of nonprofit board chairmen are white, while 84 percent of board members are white. Fifty-eight percent of board chairmen are men and 52 percent of directors are men, and a plurality of board chairs and board members are over the age of 50.

The national "Leading with Intent" study also found that boards are no more diverse than they were two years ago, and current recruitment priorities indicate this is unlikely to change. Despite reporting dissatisfaction with current board demographics, "boards are not prioritizing demographics in their recruitment practices," the report concluded.

Michael A. Satz, executive officer at University of Idaho in Boise and Southwest Idaho, identified that recruitment shortfall as one of the largest obstacles to finding diverse members.

"Simply saying 'Hey, we want more diversity' isn't enough," Satz said. "You have to build relationships with these communities. You have to expand your personal networks to include these people. You have to build trust, find commonalities, and THEN invite them to be on your team," he said.

“As a minority, I can tell you that we know when we are the token diverse person and it takes more than that to get us to the goal of having diversity in leadership,” Satz said.

The study’s authors said diversity on boards has largely remained unchanged, with people of color and ethnic minorities never representing more than 18 percent of board membership.

Nonprofit leaders in Idaho are making an effort to create diverse boards, said Amy Little, the CEO of the Idaho Nonprofit Center.

“A lot of people are having trouble filling their board positions because they are thinking, ‘I have got to do a better job of making sure my board reflects the community I serve,’” Little said. “I hear it anecdotally.”

Little noted that [Serve Idaho’s March 28-29 annual conference](#) will focus on diversity and inclusion in the volunteer world.

“It is great we are starting to have these conversations,” Little said.

The BoardSource study said a board’s composition is a reflection of its values, and boards supervise nearly 1.6 million nonprofits nationwide. Those chairmen and directors are providing financial oversight, helping with fundraising and assisting in hiring decisions.

Like Satz, Toni Carter, diversity and inclusion lead in the HR department at the Idaho National Laboratory, said there are candidates available, if nonprofit leaders are willing to go outside of their networks.

“You have to go outside your small network,” Carter said. “They may not be in your neighborhood. If you really want to diversify, be open to having folks Skype with you, or use a Google platform, or a Microsoft platform, if you can’t find the person in your immediate area.”

“Some nonprofits think you have to have an in-person meeting, but that’s not always true,” Carter said.

*Velvet Spicer of the Rochester Business Journal, a BridgeTower publication, contributed to this story.*