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The Cleveland Ronald McDonald House’s Strength and Weaknesses;

To Fulfill its Social Mission

Seven-year old Micah Mueller was not expected to live through the New Year. With his rare heart condition, hypoplastic left heart syndrome, he was mere days away from death before his Christmas wish had become a Christmas miracle. The Canton, Ohio child and his family were relieved to hear that Micah was to receive a new heart and begin to live a normal life (Jordan, 2015). Micah Mueller and his family used the programs and services provided by the Cleveland Ronald McDonald House, otherwise known as the Cleveland RMH, nonprofit organization for the duration of their stay while Micah received his heart transplant at Cleveland Clinic’s Children’s hospital. These programs effectively lifted additional financial burden so the Mueller family could focus on their child’s healing and achieve peace of mind. Childhood illness is an overwhelming stressor to any family’s well-being. It is the heartbreaking stories like that of little Micah Mueller where families are caught in life or death situations with their children that warrant the need for effective charitable organizations devised to aid the lives of these sufferers. But how do we measure nonprofit effectiveness and the quality of services these organizations provide?

According to Sawhill and Williamson in *Measuring What Matters in Nonprofits*, nonprofit effectiveness can be measured in three ways. The two authors establish the first measurement of nonprofit success is for the charity to “narrowly define its mission so that progress can be measured directly”. This social mission will then have a surface-level complexity where results are easily quantifiable. Evident in the Cleveland RMH’s mission, providing affordable housing to families of hospitalized children can be directly measured with counting the numbers of rooms provided and meals served over a set period of time. The second measurement method is to invest in research and public studies that will analyze abstract thoughts, such as public opinion, to produce reliable qualitative data. The media exposes the public’s opinion on how well the Cleveland RMH can instill hope into its patrons. Sometimes an organization cannot define its mission by simple terms or cannot afford to invest in comprehensive studies, so a third method of measurement is for the nonprofit to develop less significant side missions that when achieved in large numbers reflect well on the organization’s overall success (2001). The Cleveland Ronald McDonald House has many side goals that aim to make the nonprofit recognized for excellence, such as integrating the community in volunteerism, making it an expert candidate for all Sawhill and Williamson methods of measuring nonprofit effectiveness.

After examining public opinion, employee review, and quantifiable data all regarding the organization’s programs and services, it is clear that the Ronald McDonald House of Cleveland is mildly effective in its mission of providing essential services and resources to families of medically challenged children. This paper first describes how the organization achieves effectiveness with regards to its side missions, the organization’s ambition of instilling hope into its patrons and inspiring volunteerism, and then finally discuss to what extent the organization’s effectiveness is undermined when they deny more families than they serve.

In the local community, the Ronald McDonald House performs a critical function as a provider of affordable housing to families of sick children; it is a unique organization locally and worldwide in providing excellent hospitality at such affordable rates. As a result of generous and empathetic service, the community is wholeheartedly supportive, encouraging, and respectful of the organization. Public opinion of the Cleveland RMH can be summarized in a single word: adoring. Not many, if any, sources exist detesting or criticizing the work of the organization. Simple website searches cross examining the Cleveland RMH with keywords that may be expected of a critical article, such as “misconduct” or “scandal,” consistently produce no valid results that illuminate any public mistrust in the Cleveland RMH. Time and time again, articles are published by Fox 19 News, Cleveland 19 News, or The Plain Dealer that tell how the RMH is set to expand, holding a family-fun event, or perhaps receiving a large community donation (McIntyre, 2012; Cleveland 19 Digital Team, 2014; Cleveland 19 News, n.d.). These news stories typically focus on the relationship with the local community and fit accordingly with the Sawhill and Williamson methodology of measuring nonprofit effectiveness; specifically, this form of measurement examines the nonprofit’s side missions to reflect upon its overall success. The Cleveland RMH wishes to further integrate the community with charitable volunteerism and experiences, which it accomplishes through not only its volunteerism programs, but also with its direct interactions with members of the community in such events. With the adoration the community holds for the Cleveland RMH in mind, the nonprofit organization meets standards of effectiveness on the basis of public approval.

Much like that of public opinion, employee reviews of the RMH strongly agree with a favorable evaluation for the Cleveland RMH’s effectiveness. For instance, Indeed.com, a website dedicated to providing job insight from current and previous workers, provides a location for workers to engage and discuss their experiences at the RMH. Nearly all of these visitors comment on the Ronald McDonald House’s programs and how they are “excellent [in] providing vital humanitarian relief to families” and “a loving environment” (Ronald McDonald House Reviews, n.d.). This website strongly reflects upon Sawhill and Williamson’s second method of investing into research to gain quantifiable and qualitative data from the more abstract concept of measuring helpfulness. With its rating system of one to five stars, Indeed.com offers an informal employee and volunteer survey to gather opinions of the nonprofit’s effectiveness. This is a fortunate resource for the Cleveland RMH because they would not have to invest any resources, with the exclusion of time, to obtain these results. The Ronald McDonald House organization as a whole received a near five-star rating from 52 reviews as of November 1st with commenters mentioning the substantial positive work they were able to do.

Although employee and volunteer opinion may be heavily biased to support their organization as it directly reflects the support of their own actions, the Cleveland RMH employees still critique their work and always aim to provide a better service. Such effort can be seen in the addition of new programs and services that focus on the community’s and the nonprofit’s patrons’ aid. In a recent interview with Director of Programs and Services for the Cleveland RMH, Alisa Powell, Mrs. Powell had mentioned that they are always trying to improve upon their services. Such is the reason for the addition of new programs and services such as the Happy Wheels program, the Family Room program, and the Red Tree House program. She added on that even though the Cleveland RMH does not turn away a family for inability to pay for their room, she recognized that many families are turned away for the nonprofit’s lack of availability for its services, such as room and board. As she addressed a weakness in the nonprofits effectiveness, she further explained that they are trying to remedy the situation and increase efficiency with their expansion planned to open this year (A. Powel, personal communication, September 28, 2015).

From the first method of Sawhill and Williamson’s nonprofit effectiveness measurement strategies, there comes the ability to gather more quantifiable data. The Cleveland RMH was more than enthusiastic to provide extensive information that they have gathered over their years of operation. The data detailing the occupancy statistics for August of 2015 provides a direct measurement for the evaluation of nonprofit effectiveness. The social mission of the Cleveland RMH is narrowly defined so results can be measured from number of people whom utilized the nonprofit’s services. For the month of August, the average length of stay was 18 nights for all families that were granted a room. According to USA today, a thrifty plan of three meals a day for a family of four can amount to $21 per day (Hellmich, 2013). In conjunction with the lowest advertised cost of any Cleveland area hotel reported by Kayak.com at $45 per night, the average Cleveland RMH patron saves almost $1,200 over the course of their stay (2015). This is a huge relief of financial burden that effectively instills hope and peace of mind for the family, while adhering to the nonprofit’s social mission of providing affordable housing and essential services such as meals. However large this sum may seem, it is miniscule in comparison to the estimated amount saved by international families over their average 82 night stay amounting to $5,400. The Cleveland RMH is so completely committed to their social mission that they did not collect $121,706 of fees for their patrons between August and January of 2015 to keep their services affordable and in line with their ideals (Cleveland Ronald McDonald House, 2015). This increases their effectiveness because they are offering a plan that keeps the housing affordable and essential services to an absolute minimum cost, so families of medically challenged children can realistically continue to use the Cleveland RMH’s services. Whether a family is staying for one night or a few months, the Ronald McDonald House is effectively lifting financial burden with its programs, so families can focus on the healing process of their children.

Even though the Ronald McDonald House is addressing this tragic social concern, the work they conduct is their biggest strength and their weakness, resulting in the overall mildly effective rating. The Cleveland RMH is surely a provider of amazing charitable work, but it is not keeping up with the high demand that the organization faces daily. From January to the end of August, 2015, the Cleveland RMH served 625 families and 833 guests of these families and guests from the surrounding communities. However large this number may be, it is unfortunately dwarfed by the number of families the nonprofit must turn away. Over the same period of time, the nonprofit turned away 749 families for their lack of room availability. The Cleveland Ronald McDonald House is technically fulfilling its mission by servicing some families, but its efficiency rating is reduced because it is also technically turning more families away than it is providing service to. Therefore, because of this ratio that leans towards turning more people away than it helps, the Ronald McDonald House is only somewhat effective. This is due to the organization’s small room count with respect to its demand. From August to the start of the year, rooms were occupied 96.4% of the time, which may seem efficient, but means there were 685 instances of unoccupied rooms in 8 months, which could have been more efficiently used for other families that were turned away (Cleveland Ronald McDonald House, 2015). To address these problems, the Cleveland RMH is expanding to include many new rooms by the end of 2015 and refers these rejected families to local hotels that offer decent discounts regarding the family’s circumstances (A. Powel, personal communication, September 28, 2015). What matters is the Cleveland RMH is trying to become more effective in its service.

Through examination of public opinion, employee review, quantifiable data, and the Cleveland RMH’s program-weaknesses, there is a clear evidence to evaluate the nonprofit’s effectiveness as mildly proficient. Public opinion is wholeheartedly in support of practically any decision the Cleveland RMH has made to date while the community has been greatly involved in the nonprofit’s activities. Employees have remarked upon their experiences as enlightening, and extremely helpful to its patrons, while statistical data would support the Cleveland RMH as saving its patrons from additional and substantial financial burden. Sawhill and Williamson would most likely see all three of their methods in action to measure the effectiveness of the Cleveland RMH. With each argument in mind, the Cleveland RMH should only be ranked as mildly effective in its mission because its weakness of turning more people away than it serves is alarming and unfortunate. Yet, advocates of the Cleveland RMH would like to make known that they want to attend to and fix this problem. One way to solve this problem is to provide a charitable donation yourself so this organization can continue to expand and address in larger parts this saddening social concern.

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