Nonprofits can do more

Nonprofits could do a lot more.

Ingrid Monroy of Houston founded the nonprofit Mikey’s Place, named after her son, to help families with special-needs children connect with camps and service providers. Photographer: Joe Center

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The 211 Texas/United Way Helpline is experiencing unprecedented growth. Call volume has increased nearly tenfold, going from 97,618 calls handled in 2002 to 935,022 calls in 2013. And this year is on track to surpass even that. In 2012, the helpline's top five call requests were for food,
medical/prescription, rent/mortgage, utilities and shelter — basic services that all humans need to survive and which the government safety net doesn't come close to meeting.

In this era of cutbacks in some public services, it is hard to imagine how our community would function without the resources and workforce of nonprofit organizations. The great human need — as well as quality-of-life needs such as green space and the arts — drives the proliferation of these agencies. But what happens when there are too many nonprofits trying to do the same thing? It may seem counterintuitive, but a glut of nonprofits, whatever their causes, is not necessarily a good thing. Competition can put a premium on the use of best practices, but it can also result in inefficiency because the organizations end up competing for volunteers and, especially, donors.

Houston, with about 15,182 nonprofits in our midst, is rightly known for both its business-oriented culture and its spirit of generosity. That mix gives us an edge in striking the right balance between nonprofit competition and efficiency. To that end, Houston has witnessed two successful nonprofit mergers in recent years. The Houston Parks Board merged in 2009 with Park People, a nonprofit citizen's organization for parks advocacy. "By coming together, we are able to combine the Parks Board's expertise in park acquisition and park construction projects with the Park People's strength in advocacy," said board Chairman Jim Elkins. Elkins is now deceased.

Similarly, in 2008, End Hunger Network, a food rescue organization that operated the Red Barrel program, was a great fit for a merger with the Houston Food Bank, the largest source of food for hunger relief charities in Southeast Texas.
Mergers are often directed by active board members who know their nonprofit and its areas of expertise and can spot an attractive nonprofit candidate for a merger.

In the nonprofit sector, the mission is to have an impact on social issues, which can only be effectively addressed when people collaborate.

Our resources are scarce and growing scarcer. Nonprofits must be inventive about ways to work together.