**Final**

**2011-2013 Legislative Network**

**Transition Report**

**Introduction**

Under very difficult and challenging circumstances, the 2011-2013 Legislative Network Chaired by Chris Pegg, Longview Washington, PNRC, NAHRO’s 2011-2013 Legislative Network has enhanced the association’s ability to communicate with federal decision-makers in Washington in a responsible and ethical manner. The work of the Leg Net has become the centerpiece of the association’s ongoing advocacy efforts. Through the work of this committee, NAHRO has enhanced its position and standing on Capitol Hill and has empowered members to communicate the importance of who they serve, what they do and why they do it to members of Congress and their staff.

**Overarching Priorities**

The 2011-2013 Leg Net has endeavored to complete the goals and objectives outlined in the association’s current strategic plan (see attached). Additionally, based on internal discussions with Leg Net members over the past two years, the committee has focused on the following overarching priorities:

* Reassess the roles and responsibilities of Leg Net members
* Bridge the gap that has existed in regard to the ability to accomplish Leg Net goals in concert with the advocacy goals and objectives of NAHRO Regions and Chapters.
* Build on the progress achieved to date to enlist 535 Congressional District Contacts
* Strengthen the associations capacity to provide quality advocacy education
* Empower Leg Net members w/ tools they can use to inform and advise industry colleagues concerning the current state of play in Washington DC
* Involve key players within the association including commissioners, business partners and others in the work of the Leg Net. Coordinate with our HA partners where possible.
* Communicate monthly on committee business via conference call, encourage webinars and up to date communications methods such as Skype to allow members to participate and advocate with ease and at less cost
* Connect advocacy and the association’s Housing America Campaign wherever possible
* Coordinate with standing committee’s of NAHRO in a more effective manner
* Improve the associations overall administration and management of grass-roots advocacy and communication
* Maximize the efficient use of NAHRO staff

Significant and measureable progress has been made to advance the priorities above and wherever these priorities have dovetailed with the larger goals in the association’s strategic plan; those complimentary objectives have been duly noted over the period of the past two years. It is also safe to say that much more can and should be done to move the Legislative Network to the next level. What follows is a short summary statement on each of the priorities above. These observations are provided in hopes that the 2013-2015 Leg Net can continue to advance the ball and improve the association’s capacity and effectiveness re legislative advocacy:

**Roles and Responsibilities of Leg Net Members**

Leg Net is and should remain a working committee. Those appointed to Leg Net need to know they have a responsibility to the association and its members; to inform and to activate other NAHRO members in their state or region. Leg Net members are conduits to local members of NAHRO and those outside the association who have direct involvement in what we do including Mayors, members of Council etc. If the Leg Net is not executing its primary responsibility to inform others and activate the masses at the local level then it has no purpose. This is particularly important to establish early so new members understand that the Leg Net is not a policy making instrument of the association but has responsibility to strategize and advocate for policies forwarded by other standing committees and adopted by the Board of Governors.

If those who are appointed to be a part of Leg Net simply accept the assignment in order to become better informed about what is happening in Washington yet never use the knowledge they accumulate as a member of Leg Net by involving others and by informing decision-makers;then the group is simply talking to one another . Leg Net acts! Leg Net develops strategies to educate members of Congress and staff for the sole purpose of creating and/or sustaining responsible public policy related to housing and community development needs. The more people we can involve in doing this, the more likely it is that public policy outcomes will result.

The stakes in the period 2013-2015 will no doubt be higher and Leg Net will be called upon and expected as never before to execute its responsibilities in a manner consistent with the above. With this in mind, it will be important to have an open and honest conversation on Day 1 of the new Leg Net about just exactly what is expected. Responsibilities perhaps should be put in writing for all to see. The Committee may want to consider development of a pledge that members will be asked to execute to ensure they understand what they are being called upon to do and that they will to the best of their ability do all in their power to carry out their grassroots responsibilities locally in between national meetings of NAHRO

**Bridge the Gap**

Recognizing that Regions and Chapters of the association are each in their own way unique and different; some with a greater ability than others to effectuate grass-roots advocacy, the 2011-2013 Leg Net has worked hard to provide and sustain a platform to enable Region and Chapters leadership and members to actively participate in the larger work, goals and objectives of the Leg Net and the association as a whole in regard to legislative advocacy. A few examples:

* NAHRO’s Legislative Advocacy Center enables all members of NAHRO to participate in efforts to educate and inform federal decision-makers as quickly and easily as possible;
* The selection of Leg Net members by the NAHRO President and the ability of local leaders to recommend/nominate local members to the Leg Net is intended to ensure that the needs and views of Regions and Chapters of NAHRO and their members are taken into consideration;
* Volunteering to become a CDC enables members at the Region/Chapter level to participate in Leg Net directed activities;
* Leg Net webinars and training provided by NAHRO staff and others enable local leaders and volunteers to be informed and become involved with respect to legislative advocacy activities initiated by the Leg Net.
* Regions and Chapters of NAHRO work with NAHRO staff in the preparation of their own Legislative and Regulatory Agenda submitted to members of Congress and their staff on an annual basis at NAHRO’s Legislative Conference in Washington DC.
* The Leg Net Chair and staff met individually with identified local Regions to create better communication systems and to institutionalize Advocacy in Regions and Chapters.

Over the years we have and will continue to build a solid advocacy platform to involve NAHRO members at all levels, but gaps do remain. For example, not all Regions and Chapters of NAHRO have functioning legislative committees or the specific ability to communicate with and involve local members in grass roots advocacy. Local capacity to initiate/ coordinate grass roots legislative advocacy varies from region to region, state to state. Additionally, the effectiveness and level of involvement of local networks created by Leg Net members varies. Absent a foundation and defined framework, ad hoc networks cobbled together by Leg Net members are far more limited and less effective and are generally inconsistent in regard to grass-roots advocacy activities and actions undertaken by the Leg Net. This framework and agreed upon practices must be defined by Regions and Chapters to achieve consistent Leg Net directed advocacy. Leg Net members working together and on their own simply cannot advocate as effectively as a larger number of local members working together. While we have made progress in the past two years, a better bridge must be created between the work of the National Leg Net and the goals and objectives of local organizations under the NAHRO umbrella. The incoming Chair and Leg Net staff should consider continuing the work already begun to create this consistency across the country.

These concerns and the need to “bridge the gap” with our Regions and Chapters is even more important if we can agree that national advocacy cannot be successful and cannot be sustained with any consistency by 60 individuals acting largely on their own no matter how dedicated and hard working they may be.

**Enlist 535 CDC Volunteers**

Our long standing goal to engage and involve 535 volunteers to staff out our Congressional District Contact program continues but progress towards this goal has been slow. This has proven difficult to achieve, especially in key states such as Florida and New York although work continues in those states. In other cases, thanks to well coordinated efforts between NAHRO national and strong effective local organizations (see above) such as CAHA in California and PAHRA in Pennsylvania, CDC’s are more involved and more active in comparison to years past.

Three initiatives have been undertaken over the past two years to support the growth and involvement of CDC’s:

* There will an on-line registration system to sign-up and communicate with all CDC’s from our Washington offices of NAHRO by the end of 2013.
* We will host our second CDC reception in Cleveland to honor our current CDC’s and to recruit, register and inform new CDC volunteers. The reception is also designed to create a new sense of identity among CDC’s distinct from the Leg Net itself.
* Over the past two years we have held CDC webinars to inform and educate new and existing CDC volunteers.
* We have worked with Regions to assign members responsibility for update and maintenance of the CDC list to ensure its on-going effectiveness and urged them to institutionalize this responsibility for future continuity.

While these steps have been helpful and have supported the growth of the CDC initiative, more must be done under the auspices of the 2013-2015 Leg Net to support and sustain efforts to reach a goal of 535 active and informed CDC volunteers nationwide. Here again success can and will be achieved where Regions and chapters of NAHRO view this as being important and the Leg Net itself takes an active part in initiating the growth and involvement of CDC’s at the local level.

Our staff in the Washington office also must continue to educate, inform and involve CDC’s over the next two years; this is critical. If there are long pauses in communication between CDC’s and the NAHRO staff during the year, interest will wane and we will always be forced to build and rebuild the CDC base and their sense of identity with regard to the work of the Leg Net.

Finally, there must be ways to maintain a sense of purpose and identity among CDC’s throughout the year. We cannot simply rely on CDC’s on an ad hoc basis if and when the need arises and expect a group as large as 535 individuals to perform effectively. A defined program and a more specific sense of purpose must be created. For example, there is no specific connection between the role of the CDCs and Leg Net during the March Legislative Conference. The 2013-2015 Leg Net should discuss this and create a program and/or provide tools which allow CDC’s to become actively involved in the 2014 Legislative Conference. We would urge new Leg Net members to consider ways to reach out to and involve Emerging Leaders as CDC members where possible.

**Provide Quality Advocacy Education**

Providing quality advocacy education to all NAHRO members has been a goal of the association and the Leg Network for many years. In recent years and through the term of the 2011-2013 Leg Net we have sought out the services and expertise of outside trainers and organizations such as the Public Affairs Council (PAC) to provide quality training to all members of NAHRO. With the retention of experienced staff from Advocacy Associates and in connection with the firms ongoing work with the NAHRO CR team this year, we utilized the services of nationally recognized advocacy trainer (Stephanie Vance) in connection with specifically defined advocacy training sessions during NAHRO conferences (most recently at the NAHRO Summer Conference in Denver). These sessions to date have been well received!

Having Advocacy Associates under contract this year helped support the work of the NAHRO staff in the area of training and education and will enable the association to expand and improve our advocacy offerings on into calendar 2014 under the auspices of the Leg Net. Going forward, training will be designed in cooperation with Advocacy Associates to meet the needs of Leg Net members, CDC’s and NAHRO member’s and will be tailored to meet the individual needs of all three groups. Stephanie Vance will continue to work with NAHRO staff (Bohm, Hembree) and the in-coming Leg Net Committee in designing future training sessions and will conduct those sessions at future NAHRO conferences and in concert with grass roots advocacy needs in relation to the direction of the Congress. NAHRO staff will continue to provide training on an as needed basis at national conferences, by webinar and at regional and chapter meetings of the association based upon demand.

NAHRO staff will rely on the 2013-2015 Leg Net for input and guidance in regard to future training needs at all levels of engagement (national, regional, and local).

**Communications Tools You Can Use**

Over the past two years we have continued to create/ make available tools Leg Net members can use to make their work as advocates and organizers easier and more effective. Among the advancements are:

* Accelerated use of the NAHRO Advocacy Center including more timely use in connection with specific legislative occurrences on the Hill
* Incentives to expand the use of the Advocacy Center including Chris Pegg’s Chairwoman’s Challenge, call in days etc.
* We have expanded the use of Skype and conference calls to enable local NAHRO members to communicate with Hill staff effectively yet less expensively
* NAHRO staff have used social media, notably Twitter, to greater advantage in communicating the interests of NAHRO members to members of Congress and their staff.

The need to communicate with Congress will increase over the next two years. The 2013-2015 Leg net will need to find additional ways to educate and inform members of Congress and their staff at less cost given current budget pressures. Our ability to utilize technology in connection with a specifically tailored advocacy strategy will be a top priority for the 2013-2015 term. The 2013-2015 Leg Net will need to find ways to advance and accelerate grass roots advocacy initiatives within the association writ large utilizing communications tools that maximize time and efficiency and at the same time save limited dollars.

In addition, our ability to communicate more effectively and more efficiently with Regions and Chapters of NAHRO (as noted above) relative to grass roots advocacy will also be critical. Success in this regard during 2013-2105 will likely be tied to the expanded use of the same communications tools and technology we are now using to communicate with the Hill as noted above.

**Involve Key Players within the Association**

We have learned over the years that we cannot rely solely on a finite number of Executive Directors and authority staff to advance our positions on Capitol Hill. We know we must find ways to better utilize the talents and experience of our Commissioners, our industry partners, our business partners and vendors, non-traditional partners and service providers at both the national and local levels and our residents. Over the years we have attempted to better connect with and better inform housing authority commissioners given their insights and connection to local, state and national affairs and where we have succeeded in doing so, good things have happened but more needs to be done to expand the role of commissioners when it comes to legislative advocacy.

In 2012, the 2011-2013 Leg Net took the first steps towards the development of a more defined legislative strategy through development of closer working relationships with our business partners. This effort unfortunately was undermined as a result of a NAHRO staff departure in January of 2013, a loss we have not recovered from in regard to our outreach to and work with business partners. More needs to be done in this regard as well.

After much discussion, the 2011-2013 Leg Net positioned itself to advance a strategy to more directly work with residents in the context of legislative advocacy. Again because of staffing limitations we are behind schedule in delivering a plan to the Leg Net to review relative to resident supported advocacy. There are in the development of this plan several questions and concerns that must be addressed BEFORE launching any new and concerted effort to involve residents in our larger grass roots efforts. Staff will be in a position to work with the incoming Leg Net on this objective early on in calendar 2014.

Finally, efforts to involve industry partners in our own advocacy should be explored in connection with our ongoing efforts with the same partners in Housing America. The Housing America goal of working with local affiliates of our national Housing America partners has not been explored fully and could be fertile ground for the 2013-2015 Leg Net to explore more closely with the incoming Housing America Task Force.

**Coordinate Grassroots Advocacy Initiatives with Housing America Goals and Objectives 2013-2015**

Housing America remains a separate but important part of the Associations overall advocacy planning. This partnership needs to be further developed in a coordinated or defined fashion where both the Leg Net and the Housing America Task Force are working off of a combined plan that meets the needs and objectives of both entities. This point has been raised in 2013 and should be further explored by the 2013-2015 Leg Net/HA Task Force.

***The following points should be considered in regard to the broader discussion relative to administration of the Leg Net activities and resources necessary to accomplish Leg Net goals 2013-2015***:

* How can we improve coordination with NAHRO standing committee’s?
* What is the best method to administer and manage grass-roots advocacy and communication throughout the Association and across the country?
* How can we best utilize limited NAHRO staff?
* What is the best structure for the Leg Net as we move forward? Does the growth in the size of the Leg Net help and/or hinder our work?

**Coordinate With NAHRO Standing Committees**

One of Chairwoman Pegg’s goals over the past two years was to coordinate the work and to improve lines of communication between Leg Net and the Standing Committee’s of NAHRO. This effort started with the transmittal of Standing Committee recommendations to the Leg Net as quickly as possible. The purpose behind the transmittal was to examine and discuss what Leg Net could and should do where appropriate. If a defined advocacy strategy to advance the goals of the resolution were found to be necessary, Leg Net would discuss the issue and examine possible approaches given the resources at our disposal.

We have not in truth maximized this aspect of who we are and what we do. Time at most of our meetings is so condensed that worthy discussions such as this do not happen. The 2013-2015 Leg Net might consider setting aside time for this as a regular agenda item in future meetings.

**Management of Grassroots Advocacy and Communications**:

The 2013-20015 Leg Net should explore how best to grow, manage and administer “a volunteer army of advocates” more effectively and in a more consistent, organized manner given the limitations on staff time especially while Congress is in session. For example, not all NAHRO members want or need to be involved in advocacy per say. With this in mind, we should have an up to date listing (by Region or State) of who we should be contacting within the membership. We should establish protocols known to all about how often those individuals want to be contacted (strictly as it relates to advocacy) and we should have up to date contact information for those same individuals. We should specifically define going forward what we want the masses who want to be involved in advocacy are to do vs. what we want or expect from our CDC’s.

We should also test the appetite and tolerance for communications via social media v e-mail; we should also establish what information staff in Washington should provide to these individuals on a need to know basis.

**Efficient Use of NAHRO Staff:**

The Leg Net has always enjoyed a positive and productive working relationship with NAHRO staff. Staff are relied upon to provide information including the new and popular ” Friday night Wrap-up”, training, communications and messaging support, tools, and more. The staff plays a key role in NAHRO’s Legislative Conference, prepares alerts and writes on a bi-weekly basis for the Monitor.

Leg Net in its current form has been active for almost 10 years. Staff/committee expectations have been established over that time period on an ad hoc basis. Those things that have worked to cement the working relationship between staff and the Leg Net remain, including our monthly calls. Things the have not worked have been disposed of and this active consideration of what works and what doesn’t should continue. All members of Leg Net should clearly understand what is expected of them, people with new ideas should express them, and things that are not useful and take up staff time should be disposed of. After 10 years, it may be time to examine where this committee has been and where it is going in part to strengthen and enrich the relationship between Leg Net and NAHRO staff going forward. We should continue to look for ways to improve and build upon that relationship to ensure the ongoing success of the committee.