The Courage to Think in Decades

What NYAP Can Teach Us About Building Institutions That Last

By Mark Mecum, CEO, Ohio Children's Alliance

Every leader I talk to wants to think and plan long-term. Few feel they have the conditions to do it well, if at all.

There are structural forces in our sector that keep organization leaders from having a fair shot at long-term planning. Organizations, their boards, and their funders typically measure success on 12-month cycles, sometimes quarterly or monthly. That includes grant performance, value-based performance, and licensing and certification compliance. Meanwhile, community needs are pushing organizations to expand, staff need advancement and competitive pay, and similar organizations compete for the same contracts and workforce. All of it feeds a mantra I hear often: if you're not growing, you're dying.

There isn't much patience in our industry, and that constant pressure makes long-term planning hard to pull off. I've heard from many CEOs that long-term thinking is theoretically nice but genuine long-term planning is structurally impossible. I have met a few leaders who have pursued it anyway.

The Recipe for Long-Term Planning at NYAP

National Youth Advocate Program has been thinking in decades since 1978. Sharon Marconi, Senior Vice President and Chief Program Officer, has served NYAP for twenty-five years. I met with her this summer to learn how NYAP became one of the largest child and family service organizations in the state and the country. Four ingredients came up again and again: a founding conviction, mission as a decision filter, leadership continuity, and operational efficiency.

The first is a founding conviction that is clear and compelling. NYAP's began with its founder, Mubarak Awad, and a single principle of keeping communities intact and families rooted, even in crisis. Sharon explained that this belief, shaped by Awad's upbringing and decades of peace activism, ran through his leadership. Whether he was organizing nonviolent resistance in Palestine or building family-based care here, the conviction was the same, and it was contagious. Today, NYAP's staff believe families are the bedrock of resilience, and their programming shows it.

The second is mission as a decision filter. Sharon told me NYAP says no to money that doesn't align with its mission, and yes to difficult states to operate in, like Nevada and Louisiana, because it made a commitment to kids there. When a program closes or performance lags, she doesn't blame funders, policy, or market conditions. She asks, "What did we do wrong?" That's a refreshing and humble example of their mission at work. Holding yourself accountable for outcomes of programs and ventures, not just the effort put in.

The third is leadership continuity. Executive turnover in our sector runs three to five years; this week alone I learned of three CEO changes among Alliance member agencies. Sharon is 25 years in. Marvena Twigg, their President and CEO, is at 30. Awad led for 26 before her and is still involved. The stability runs below the C-suite too: when Sharon ran NYAP's Ohio region, her leadership team had almost no turnover for a decade. She explained that this is how institutional knowledge accumulates, how culture

has time to spread, and how an organization scales without losing its identity. It's how a founding conviction survives into the next generation of leaders.

And the fourth ingredient is operational efficiency. Sharon said NYAP strives to strip out everything that doesn't put staff in front of kids and families. Examples include unnecessary steps related to documentation and case notes. She explained that NYAP grows carefully, invests in infrastructure that keeps operations lean, and says no to expansion they can't resource well. This is a model for disciplined and patient growth, used in a sector built for urgency.

At Scale But Still Constrained

Over the past decade, NYAP's annual revenue grew from $48 million to $279 million, a 482% increase, all while operating on thin margins. Sharon credits long-term planning for that growth, built on those same four ingredients: conviction, mission discipline, stable leadership, and lean operations.

And yet, despite being one of the largest organizations in our sector, NYAP faces many of the same constraints as agencies a fraction of its size. Its margins stay thin. It doesn't chase every opportunity, and it makes careful choices about where not to go.

My most important takeaway is that scale alone does not buy security, and that lesson applies to the whole sector. The funding and contracting structures we've built, government budget cycles, short-term grants, quarterly performance reports, and fee-for-service payment, were designed to address urgent needs and ensure fiscal accountability. These same structures make it hard to invest in leadership development, build an endowment, or invest in the technology we'll need. They reward short-term growth over long-term system change. NYAP has succeeded by swimming against that current.

Advocacy to Fuel Long-Term Planning

Our state will keep struggling with our hardest problems, including out-of-state placement, boarding in children services and hospitals, custody relinquishment, youth homelessness, and youth suicide, as long as we fund and measure community-based organizations on such a short-term basis. Change is worth considering at several levels.

Contractually, multi-year agreements with holistic performance measures send a different message than funding tied to quarterly or narrow metrics. Longer engagements let organizations build something that lasts, invest in talent, and knit together local continuums of care, similar to what we are seeing in communities with OhioRISE CME programs.

Foundations and donors can keep leaning into the sustainability of nonprofits. Funding succession planning and leadership development helps organizations hold on to experienced talent for decades. The NYAP story, and a good deal of research on organizational culture, point in the same direction: continuity compounds an organization's capacity to produce impact. Some Ohio funders already invest here: the Columbus Foundation funds nonprofit capacity building and sector infrastructure, and Interact for Health recently committed up to $2 million to nonprofit sustainability and organizational resilience.

From the governance angle, boards can measure success against mission and long-term position, not just growth or absence of financial loss. By grading leadership teams on multi-year goals, we start to protect them from short-term pressure.

I’m inspired by the commitment and innovation I see across Ohio, and hopeful that as we learn from each other we can shape a sector where the outcomes we care about are achieved, even if the milestones are celebrated far beyond our individual careers.