

2026 *PULSE* CHECK

Mid-Year Insights from Northeast Ohio's Nonprofit Chief Executives

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2026 So Far | A Note from BVU's President & CEO

We are taking stock of where Northeast Ohio's nonprofit sector stands - not from headlines or anecdotes, but from the leaders living it day to day. This mid-year report draws on our monthly Nonprofit Pulse surveys, with nearly 80 chief executives responding to each.

Together they tell one story: leaders know what needs to happen on funding, governance, AI, and partnerships...but the people, dollars, and board readiness aren't keeping pace. The patterns outlined won't surprise anyone, but naming them with numbers and voices lets us compare notes, share what's working, and act together.

Use this report however serves you best. Bring it to your next board meeting to drive discussion on how you can help. Pull a stat for a funder conversation. Share a voice from the field with a peer wrestling with the same thing.

As always, please reach out if we can help you make a bigger difference.



Elizabeth Voudouris

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THE BIG PICTURE

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BOARD DISCUSSION GUIDE

Leaders have a clear sense of what's needed on funding, governance, AI, and partnerships.

The people, dollars, and board readiness aren't keeping pace.



61%

name financial
sustainability as their top
constraint



60%

cite failure of the board to
hold board members
accountable



82%

lack a formal
AI use policy



73%

are in informal
partnerships today

“It's a continuum of capacity, burnout, and bandwidth due to growing demand for services.”

Three Main Trends

Capacity constraints are the common theme

Money, people, and boards are all stretched at once.

61% name financial sustainability as their top constraint · Feb

49% cite staff capacity & burnout · Feb

60% see board accountability failures · Mar

“We can't recruit fast enough to replace the people leaving — the leadership pipeline just isn't there.”

— Feb 2026 respondent

AI adoption is outrunning governance

Leaders are putting AI to work. Boards and policies haven't caught up.

46% have identified specific AI use cases · Apr

18% have a formal AI use policy · Apr

25% say their board has discussed AI risks · Apr

“We do not rely on it heavily, but I feel we may need a formal AI policy in the near future.”

— Apr 2026 respondent

Strategic alliances are central to how we operate

Soft collaboration is universal; obstacles to going deeper are relational, not legal.

73% are in informal partnerships today · May

22% are exploring or completed a merger · May

39% fear losing organizational identity · May

“We have not found a partner that has enough things in common with us for us to pursue a meaningful conversation.”

— May 2026 respondent

Five Questions Asked

Across Feb–May 2026, we asked nonprofit leaders five questions about the state of their work.

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What is currently the greatest constraint on your organization's progress and ability to achieve its mission?

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Do any of these governance mistakes resonate with your experience?

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As AI tools become part of everyday work, how prepared is your nonprofit to manage its use responsibly and effectively?

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What kind of partnerships is your organization currently considering, exploring, or already doing?

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What barriers are you facing in pursuing deeper collaboration?

What is currently the greatest constraint on your organization's progress and ability to achieve its mission?

Financial pressure & burnout are intertwined, reinforcing a 2025 finding that 84% of leaders had seen a decline in philanthropic support.

61%

Cite financial sustainability & revenue uncertainty as a top constraint

49%

Name staff capacity & burnout as a critical pressure point

22%

Point to board engagement or effectiveness as a constraint

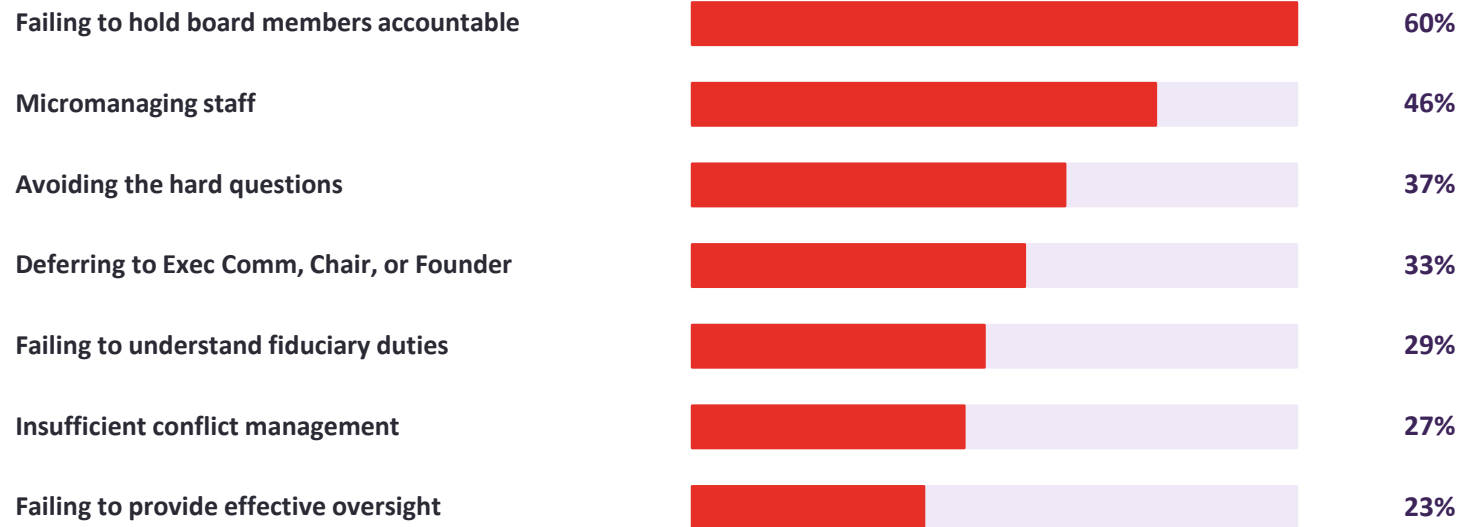


"I don't think anyone is talking enough about the imminent financial cliff that many nonprofits are facing."

n ≈ 80 respondents • select up to 2 • 23 open comments

Do any of these governance mistakes resonate with your experience?

In 2025, only 44% of leaders were confident their boards understood and fulfilled their role amid current challenges.



There is a gap between knowing what the board's role is and engaging in it.

As AI tools become part of everyday work, how prepared is your nonprofit to manage its use responsibly and effectively?

A prior pulse found 73% expected AI to increase efficiency but only 7% had created internal AI policies. The policy gap is closing (now 18%), but adoption still outruns governance.

46%

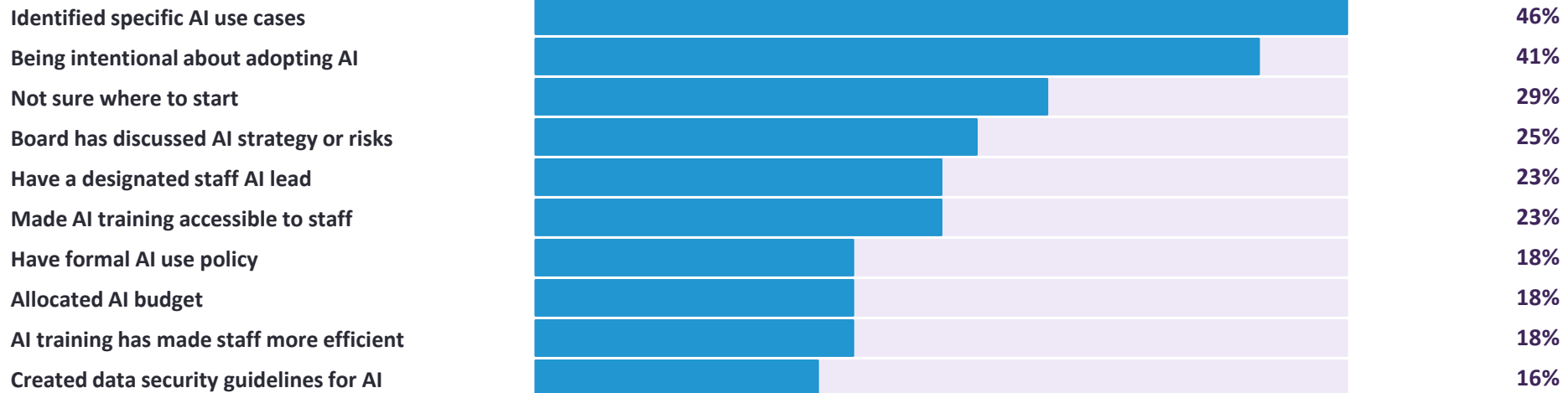
Have identified specific AI use cases
(drafting, research, data)

29%

Say they're not sure where
to start with AI

18%

Have a formal AI use policy or
acceptable use guidelines



What kind of partnerships is your organization currently considering, exploring, or already doing?

73%

Are in informal partnerships or referral relationships today

22%

Are actively exploring or recently completed a merger or acquisition

10%

Are not currently exploring any deeper collaboration

WHAT LEADERS ARE CURRENTLY DOING OR EXPLORING



Strategic alliances are central to how we operate. We don't see another way to meet the needs of our community.

What barriers are you facing in pursuing deeper collaboration?

Partnership is already the norm; nearly 3 in 4 leaders are in informal partnerships. The question isn't whether to collaborate, it's how and with whom.

45%

Cite finding the right partner as a barrier

39%

Worry about identity / brand loss

34%

Cite staff or cultural fit concerns



What Leaders Told Us – In Their Own Words.

Six verbatim comments from the Feb–May 2026 pulse surveys.

FINANCE · FEB 2026

“I don't think anyone is talking enough about the imminent financial cliff that many nonprofits are facing.”

WORKFORCE · FEB 2026

“Beyond staff capacity - it's workforce availability in general.

Candidates are ghosting frequently and the caliber of new hires is poor, causing significant turnover.”

GOVERNANCE · MAR 2026

“My dysfunctional board doesn't follow its own Code of Regulations except when convenient and keeps recycling the same small group through leadership roles...and I have no power to change it.”

AI ETHICS · APR 2026

“We are against the propagation of AI - it's extremely toxic to the environment, takes jobs from people, and is often inaccurate. We need a clear policy that protects clients, donors, and staff.”

MERGERS · MAY 2026

“Not every organization is built for the long haul, and some have to hang it up. The organization you're merging into is doing you a favor - don't overplay your hand. Play to win on your own or negotiate with humility.”

PARTNERSHIPS · MAY 2026

“The Mayor sounded the alarm four years ago - no one responded to whether we have too many CDCs. Here we are realizing it's a conversation, but our hands may be caught in the cookie jar because we caught on late.”

Prompts to Bring This Data into Board Conversations

CAPACITY & FINANCE

1. If 61% of our peers cite financial sustainability as their top constraint, what's our own financial cliff scenario? And how close are we to it?
2. What support does our staff need that we are not currently providing? Who would notice if a key person left next month?
3. Where are we on the continuum of growing capacity vs. preserving capacity? What's the evidence?

BOARD GOVERNANCE

1. Which two of these board pitfalls feel most familiar: failing to hold members accountable, micromanaging, avoiding hard questions, or deferring to a few?
2. What 'hard question' are we currently avoiding as a board?
3. When was the last time we held a fellow board member accountable for a commitment they didn't keep?

AI READINESS

1. Has this board ever formally discussed AI strategy, risks, or ethical use? What did we decide?
2. Do we know how staff are currently using AI tools? Do they have written guidance?
3. What's our risk tolerance for AI touching client or donor data, and do staff know it?

PARTNERSHIPS

1. Which, if any, of these are we actively exploring: informal partnerships, alliances, shared services, or mergers?
2. If we were a target for a merger, who would we want to merge with and why?
3. What 1–2 organizations could we credibly co-deliver programming with in the next 12 months?

Results from a monthly anonymous survey of 500+ nonprofit chief executives focusing on challenges and opportunities of our sector.



74% said executive orders will impact their ability to fulfill their mission.

WHAT AREAS ARE DECREASING?

37% say SPONSORSHIPS

32% say FOUNDATIONS

31% say INDIVIDUALS

84% are experiencing a decline in philanthropic support.

60% do NOT have a contingency plan to cover the shortfall.

When asked what type of funding would most strengthen their organization...

50% said unrestricted, while **30%** selected multi-year.

55% have a strategic plan that effectively guides their organization.

38% have an outdated, unused, or incomplete strategic plan.

64% have a code of ethics signed by all board, staff, and volunteers.



HOW ARE BOARDS DOING?

only **35%**

CONFIDENT THEIR BOARD MEMBERS ARE PRODUCTIVELY ENGAGED AS AMBASSADORS AND/OR FUNDRAISERS

CONFIDENT THEIR BOARD UNDERSTANDS AND FULFILLS ITS ROLE GIVEN THE CURRENT CHALLENGES

only **46%**

52% **HAVE A REQUIRED ANNUAL CONTRIBUTION FOR BOARD MEMBERS**

FEWER THAN HALF REPORTED 100% BOARD GIVING "PERSONALLY SIGNIFICANT" MINIMUM CONTRIBUTIONS WERE MOST COMMON, FOLLOWED BY \$500 AND \$1,000

CONDUCT A FORMAL BOARD ASSESSMENT EVERY THREE YEARS

47%