

## Agency for Change Podcast: Jason Varga, Executive Director, Cause Collective

Connect with Jason and Cause Collective at:

- Website – <https://www.causecollectivelincoln.org/>
- Join a nonprofit board – [https://www.causecollectivelincoln.org/vnews/display.v/SEC/Community Outreach|Join A Nonprofit Board](https://www.causecollectivelincoln.org/vnews/display.v/SEC/Community+Outreach|Join+A+Nonprofit+Board)
- Find volunteer opportunities in Lincoln – <http://volunteerlnk.org/>

**Jason Varga:** 0:00

The better we know each other, the better we work together.

**Announcer:** 0:06

Welcome to Agency for Change, a podcast from KidGlov that brings you the stories of changemakers who are actively working to improve our communities. In every episode, we'll meet with people who are making a lasting impact in the places we call home.

**Lyn Wineman:** 0:30

Hey everyone, this is Lyn Wineman. Welcome back to another episode of the Agency for Change podcast. All right, I have a lot of friends who are nonprofit executive directors, and one thing I hear from them frequently is that running a nonprofit can be a lonely place. A lot of times you're stretched thin, there's a lot of things that you need to do, and, while you've got a great staff and great supporters, you're always figuring out new ways to get things done based upon what's happening in the world and what's happening in your community. In the community of Lincoln, where I live in Lancaster County, there's a great organization called the Cause Collective. They themselves are a nonprofit, but they're dedicated to strengthening local nonprofits through collaboration, education and advocacy. Today I get to talk with their executive director, Jason Varga. Jason, welcome to the podcast.

**Jason Varga:** 1:34

Thank you, Lyn, it's wonderful to be here.

**Lyn Wineman:** 1:37

I always like talking to you, Jason, and I'd love to have you start just by telling us more about Cause Collective. What is it? What's the mission? Give us an introduction, if you will.

**Jason Varga:** 1:52

I'd love to, and the feeling is mutual. I know we always love our conversations as well. Cause Collective is a nonprofit membership agency, so the quick version we often use is it's akin to a local chamber of

commerce but solely nonprofits. Our mission specifically is to strengthen nonprofits to better serve the community through collaboration, education and advocacy. So in each of those areas, we have several different services that we support our membership with.

**Lyn Wineman: 2:26**

That's great, and I know you have a lot of members too, Jason, which I think it's fantastic. Someone told me the other day that and I haven't double checked this fact so I hope I'm not spreading mistruths but someone told me that Nebraska has more nonprofits per capita than any other state. Have you ever heard of such a fact?

**Jason Varga: 2:50**

Oh, I wish I could confirm that. I'm not sure, but what I can tell you is there's a very healthy and strong nonprofit sector in Lincoln and Nebraska overall and it's 11% of our economy can be attributed to the nonprofit sector in Nebraska. That was a study done by a statewide agency, Nonprofit Association of the Midlands, a few years ago. So we know they make an impact.

**Lyn Wineman: 3:17**

So that is a verifiable fact, and, for our listeners, I'm gonna find out about the other fact, or maybe fact that I shared, and we'll let people know if that's verified too. So, Jason, you talk about your mission as being strengthening nonprofits. Why is that so crucial in this community at this time?

**Jason Varga: 3:38**

It's always a good time for that. It's always crucial. I think you know I'm biased towards all of this, but I've been nonprofits for 25 years, so one of the things especially on a local level, it's especially important that we're in sync with each other.

I know what another agency is doing. I can share that with another agency and that might be doing similar work. There might be some potential collaboration. But just being aware can really help those in need get to the right place sooner. So that creates a stronger and a more efficient nonprofit sector, and our bottom line is we want to help the community. All animals, kids, whatever your focus area is, if we're all talking to each other and we're all understanding what each other do. We're going to get people to the right place sooner and we're going to have a more efficient sector within a local municipality.

**Lyn Wineman: 4:41**

Yeah, you know, one thing I love about nonprofits is different than the for-profit side, they're much more collaborative and partnership oriented versus competition oriented. I mean, very often you'll hear a nonprofit say I'm going to find out what they're doing, or I'm going to find out what they're doing, or I maybe can't. I've got a person or a family or a situation that we can't fully serve, but I'm going to call my friends at this organization and see what they can do. And I think that's a really neat thing and I think your organization does a lot to help foster those relationships. Would that be true?

**Jason Varga: 5:28**

That's so on Lyn. Yeah, and you know, cause Collective can't take full credit and I can't prove that we can take any credit, to be honest. But I like to think that this happens naturally in Lincoln and we're here for the right reasons again, which is to help the community. So, yes, in some sense we are in competition with each other and if that's used as a positive motivator, that's okay. But the bottom line is to support the community, so we want what's best for that person and that may be referring them out to another nonprofit.

This is a you mentioned in this time too earlier, and this is a, I believe, a particularly strong time in Lincoln yeah there's a lot of new executive directors and they're talking well, they're communicating well. So, again, they're doing that just because they're good people and nice people. But I hope that my hope is that cause Collective can create this in perpetuity, this attitude of working together and understanding that this is enhancing the entire community, including the for-profit business community. If we are stronger as an entire community, that's going to help your business.

**Lyn Wineman: 6:39**

Wow, that is so true. Yeah, so true. Jason, you mentioned something that I've noticed as a kind of a recent phenomenon, maybe in the last year, but I think a lot of executive directors who had been with their organizations for a long time, they made it through the pandemic, which was incredibly stressful. They then made it through a workforce shortage also very, very stressful, and it feels like there's a great changeover right now. A lot of you know, really seasoned executive directors are saying it's time for me to take a rest, which is really sad to see. But it is exciting to see the new people come up, you know, with new relationships and new ideas, and it's got to be fun for you to watch that happen as well.

**Jason Varga: 7:28**

Oh my gosh, it's so much fun. Yeah, and I'm sad to see you know my friends or people I've worked with. But I'm very excited for them, happy for them. It was a stressful time and it's been a little bit of and this has probably happened in other cities too, but little bit of a perfect storm. We had executive directors who were there 20, 30 person yeah, that's a long time I personally can't imagine having the same job for 40 years.

But amazing friend and person and they just really built that agency. So I'm happy for them. But I'm equally excited to see this new generation and that's where, again, my hope is that Cause Collective can shine, particularly to help them expedite their work experience and become a better executive director. You know, anyone can, and there's so much information online and it is very useful. We have a resource page we encourage people to use and it's all over.

Yes, I want you to use those resources yeah and not replace that with knowledge from a you know, an experienced executive director and being willing to pass it on to a new executive director, or encouraging a group of new executive directors within a similar field and understand what each of their businesses their nonprofit businesses do and how they can better work together than the previous group of executive directors did, even if they did a great job, which, to my knowledge, they all did well.

**Lyn Wineman: 8:57**

I think they did an amazing job right.

**Jason Varga:** 9:00

But there's always room to grow and say times change, things change, what we learn about how to better provide our services, how to better treat people. All will always change. That's just because we're human. I love to see them pick those things up and hopefully cause collective can aid them and make that more efficient for them so they can spend more time doing better services than just all the mundane stuff.

**Lyn Wineman:** 9:25

I think that's really cool too, Jason, because I think I've never been a nonprofit executive director, but I've worked with a lot of them right, and my experience in talking with many of them is that it can be a very lonely place right, like there may not be a lot of I don't know, there may not be a lot of people within your organization that can really tell you how to do your job right, which is often the case for somebody who's at the top.

But you've got to report to a board, you still have to run a business, you have to make a payroll, you generally have to pay your rent, you have to file your paperwork and do all of the things you have to prepare for your audits and accreditations, and then, on top of that, most of them have to then go out and also either they're responsible or they have to manage a staff that is going out and fundraising, whether that's through grants or through advocacy or through contracts but it's a different form of business that I think most people aren't as familiar with. So I think in Lincoln and Lancaster County they're very lucky to have Cause Collective and you there to help convene them, bring them together, which I think is a neat thing.

So, Jason, I'm really curious how did you get into this line of work? It seems like you've kind of got a dream job here. You're the, you're the person who's serving the people, who are serving the people, right?

**Jason Varga:** 11:03

I do. I know it's probably sounds cliché, but I do my job. Yeah, I've always enjoyed like just being efficient and getting things done as smoothly and as fast as possible without sacrificing quality of, of course, as much as you can. I may make that mistake, as my staff may atone to, but not when it comes to serving the community of course, but I just love being at a central agency where I can be the one that connects someone to a good job or connects a new ED to an experienced ED that wants to help them say how did you get through this? And that peer-to-peer support is invaluable. The more we learn about that, the more value we find in that kind of support is learning from each other how they got through something.

I've been in nonprofits 25 years now, oh my gosh. Well, I started at Lincoln Public Schools as a para, but oh, really okay that was not related to non-profit work, but technically that was a non-profit absolutely, it was, I think you can count it let's count it.

**Jason Varga:** 12:14

More officially, I started my career at Lincoln Literacy, one of my favorites. I started as I believe my title was Program Coordinator and then Associate Director, bounced around to a couple more, a place called First Project, and then spent a couple years at the Asian Center another popular nonprofit, Absolutely and then ended up here at Cause Collective. So I've been at this agency for 12 years and director for up here at Cause Collective.

**Lyn Wineman:** 12:45

That's amazing. That's great, Jason, and wow, what a great path I think you had to get to this position, because there are several different types of nonprofits in your background to give you that well-rounded feel too, and I think that probably really helped.

**Jason Varga:** 13:02

It did. Yeah, yeah, it was really nice that experience just being along. Again. I worked with experienced staff and directors and to help me get to me, get me where I am today.

**Lyn Wineman:** 13:13

That's fantastic. So, Jason, how does the philosophy of Cause Collective shape the way you operate and interact with your members?

**Jason Varga:** 13:23

Wow, oh, that's the best question I've ever had

**Lyn Wineman:** 13:28

Oh gold star to Maddy and Brooke who helped me write questions. Best question you've ever had.

**Jason Varga:** 13:37

Well, we have. You know, anyone who has an office or provides services and is registered as a nonprofit within Lancaster County is eligible for membership.

**Lyn Wineman:** 13:48

That's great.

**Jason Varga:** 13:49

So we let them sign up. We have an application process, so we want the ones that are interested to align with our values. You know we try to, as best we can take a strong stance on equity and inclusion and hold to those values. So we support that as much as we can. We emphasize the importance of ethics in running a business and running a nonprofit. You know, we cannot hold them accountable, but we want to help support them and help them realize the value to those values and the philosophy of those ethics

that we try and instill and support, and we want them to come to us for support with that as well too, and I absolutely do not claim to be the expert on all these area of expertise.

**Lyn Wineman:** 14:38

I think that would be impossible, Jason right, Like I think it would be too much for one person to hold all that information.

**Jason Varga:** 14:45

Yeah, I know a little bit about a lot of things, but I don't know a lot about anything necessarily but I can help them find someone that is. We have a great support group of executive director, volunteers and other levels of staff who volunteer and say, hey, let me connect you with this person. They've been through this, I know they've been through this to support you with that, and that's where a lot of the collaboration and networking comes in.

**Lyn Wineman:** 15:11

That's great. So, Jason, what's on the horizon for you? Do you have any upcoming initiatives or outreach efforts that you're focused on at Cause Collective?

**Jason Varga:** 15:28

So much. I'm excited, and part of this is due to our growth. We've been just fortunate to double in size in the last five years. We now have over 170 nonprofit members. That's great. I don't count the staff I probably should, but there's, you know, thousands of people that work.

**Lyn Wineman:** 15:43

Yeah, but 170 different nonprofits who are supported by your organization, that's, that's really big. Congratulations.

**Jason Varga:** 15:52

I love it. I love it. It's just, it's fun. So one of the things of many that's coming up that we've discovered is it's can be challenging to encourage people to join a board of directors. One, just the the myths that surround it. A lot of people who would make wonderful boards, board of directors on a non-profit, just think they're not qualified and that, of course, 100 of the population is not probably a good fit for each agency.

But I just think there's thousands of people in Lincoln we want to get the word out to that say hey, let me show you a few things. It's important to know certain things about your role there, but it's all pretty easy. And you would probably make a good board member. So we actually have a page on our website called Join a Nonprofit Board where our members can submit openings if they have one. And then our job at Cause Collective is to drive the community there and we're actually in the middle of a marketing campaign that's not quite ready to be out yet, but we're getting some help with that to drive the community there and see something that they like and then they make that first contact. So we provide

trainings for our members, but also for our corporate sponsors, and if you have a group large enough I don't have a specific number, but if you have a group large enough who is interested in just learning more about being on a board, we'll come out and give you some coaching or some advice and we encourage you to join.

**Lyn Wineman: 17:31**

That's great, Jason. You know to kind of give some support to anybody who might be listening that's thinking about joining a board. You know, in my experience, being on a board is a great way to learn new things and maybe even flex those muscles that you don't get to use every day, right? So if there's some skill or talent that you have or interest that you have, being on a nonprofit board can be a great way to lean into that. And I've heard so many people since the pandemic who've really said you know, I want to make a difference. Being on a board is such a great way to make a difference, so that's awesome. Shout out to you for that. I'm curious, since we're talking about this and it's on your website, for our listeners who would like to learn more, what's the best way for them to connect with Cause Collective?

**Jason Varga: 18:33**

The best way is to visit our website at [causecollectivelincoln.org](http://causecollectivelincoln.org).

**Lyn Wineman: 18:39**

Great. We'll have that in the show notes on our KidGlov website as well for anybody who didn't get it and wants to just hop over there and click that link, and then I imagine, when you launch the board campaign, that'll be prominently on your website as well. And probably on your social media too, and all the places.

**Jason Varga: 19:03**

That page is up. Now they can visit that page. Oh fantastic. There's a button called community outreach and there's five things listed under there. One of them is join a board. But yes, it's upon us, me and my staff to help get the word out. So we're working on that. But it's, it's ready to go, if anyone wants to go check that out.

**Lyn Wineman: 19:31**

That's fantastic. Well, I hope we can help you get that word out as well, Jason. Jason, another question for you. I'm just curious. You know, not necessarily completely related to Cause Collective, but what advice would you give to anybody who is really passionate about making a difference in their communities and do want to effectively engage and support local nonprofits? I'm guessing number one is going to be volunteer for a board.

**Jason Varga: 19:52**

I have to say that, yes, that's my, you know, within the nonprofit world. That's my passion. I love helping boards. I love helping encourage people to do that. So, yes, I am absolutely biased towards joining the

board and you don't need any experience. We love to encourage people with lived experience who have been served by a nonprofit. They make great board members too.

However, in addition yes, there's lots of ways and there's lots of opportunities volunteer opportunities too. There's a new website that just came out pretty recently that's run by United Way in Lancaster County called [volunteerInk.org](http://volunteerInk.org). So if you want some different opportunities, there's a lot of listings on there from a wide variety of nonprofits. That's great. We like to work with puppies, cats, people, any of those areas. There's probably some opportunities on there, so that's a great place to start.

**Lyn Wineman: 20:50**

That sounds great. We'll get that in the show notes as well. [VolunteerInk.org](http://VolunteerInk.org), we'll get that in there it does seem like beings, as though it's mid-afternoon on a Wednesday. Jason, I am thinking volunteering to help with puppies would be incredibly stress relieving, wouldn't it? Seems like such a good idea at this very moment, I think.

**Jason Varga: 21:13**

Yeah, I had a meeting yesterday and someone there brought their dog and it just made my day.

**Lyn Wineman: 21:19**

Yeah, all right. So, Jason, I'm going to put you on the hot seat. Next I'm going to ask you my favorite question. We've asked it on every podcast. I am really inspired by motivational quotes and I would love a Jason Varga original quote to inspire our audience.

**Jason Varga: 21:38**

All right, I can do this, and any of my friends in the nonprofit world are going to laugh because I say this all the time but it's so applicable to what we do at Cross Collective. I just love this one. So which is? The better we know each other, the better we work together.

I love that because it has a double meaning to me, in which we talked about earlier that the value to nonprofits, understanding what each other do and getting the people they serve to the right place sooner, and it creates a more efficient nonprofit sector. There's not too many of one service. It helps balance things out, but it's also about building the trust and morale. One of our main services is a monthly meeting for our members, and it's much harder to be mean-spirited and dislike people and not work together if you've met them in person.

**Lyn Wineman: 22:32**

Yes, so true.

**Jason Varga: 22:34**

We've met and you and I have met several times. Having that again, that competition can be motivating, but with a good intent and the purpose of supporting each other, is much easier when you've met

people in person and you know them. So by knowing each other, we're going to work together better and again, the whole community for-profits, nonprofits, those in need are going to be better off because we're working together and strengthening each other.

**Lyn Wineman:** 23:05

That's beautiful. I love it. Let's see if I get this right. The better we know each other, the better we work together. Really strong, Jason. I love it. I love it. So, Jason, this has been a fun conversation. We knew it would be, but as we wrap up this time together today, I'd love to hear what is the most important thing you would like our listeners to remember about the work that you're doing.

**Jason Varga:** 23:31

That's a good question too, I think, gosh. I think I'd love them to understand the importance and how built into our culture it is to be engaged in your community. We have our board match page. There's a volunteer LNK page, and never under any sense of pressure, we don't want anyone to do what they're not prepared for or not comfortable with, but it is part of our culture. The nonprofits are here to stay. That's how we work and there is always some way that you can be involved. You may not have discovered it yet, but everyone has a place to be engaged civically or support their community. So I'd love to encourage everyone, even if they think they're not ready or they've never done it before. Find out how.

If you're not sure, contact me, I'll help you get on that path on my own time, but there's so much need we have in our community and I think there's enough people to support that need once we get everyone involved.

**Lyn Wineman:** 24:35

That's fantastic, Jason. Thank you for that. Thank you for the conversation today. I fully believe the world needs more people like you, more organizations like Cause Collective, more nonprofits like the 170 who make up your membership. So just thank you for taking time out of your day today.

**Jason Varga:** 24:54

Thank you for having me. It's always fun to talk with you, Lyn.

**Lyn Wineman:** 24:58

I agree, Jason. Thanks a lot.

**Announcer:** 25:02

We hope you enjoyed today's Agency for Change podcast. To hear all our interviews with those who are making a positive change in our communities or to nominate a changemaker you'd love to hear from. Visit [kidglov.com](http://kidglov.com) at [K-I-D-G-L-O-V.com](http://K-I-D-G-L-O-V.com) to get in touch, as always. If you like what you've heard today, be sure to rate, review, subscribe and share. Thanks for listening and we'll see you next time.