

## From A to Z: Where Outsourcing Accounting Services Counts the Most

### Managing a Nonprofit Budget

Nonprofits shared an optimistic growth outlook in 2021 when it came to investing strategically in innovation and digital and technology initiatives to advance their missions in their communities, according to the Nonprofit Leaders Survey on 2021 Trends. Over two-hundred nonprofit leaders were surveyed, and not surprisingly, Financial Priorities was one of the top five concerns. In those surveyed, 19% were focused on operating reserves, 17% on cash flow, 16% on accurate reporting, and 14% on funding to expand. To Sara Jones, taking on her new role as Executive Director at the Great North Innocence Project (formerly Innocence Project of Minnesota), all these areas were of immediate concern.

Affiliated with the National Innocence Project, the Great North Innocence Project (GN-IP) fights diligently to give freedom back to those who are wrongfully convicted of crimes. GN-IP does this by providing free legal services to inmates through the post-conviction court process to trial. GN-IP staff, law students, investigators, and volunteer attorneys spend thousands of hours carefully analyzing these cases to uncover any new evidence proving actual innocence. Operationally, there are a lot of moving parts in managing donor funds correctly and transparently.

This can include handling expenses, fees, identifying and remedying, as needed, any common accounting weaknesses, preparing for audits as well as oversight, compliance, and more. When Sara started her role at the organization, one of her first goals was to review the health of their financial systems. "When I came into the position at the GN-IP, I was made aware that the bookkeeper wanted to retire," says Jones. "This prompted a conversation about the internal processes and controls and how these job responsibilities could be both improved and become more efficient."



"When starting the new position at GN-IP, I didn't have a lot of experience in managing the intricacies of a budget. All In One Accounting has provided clarity and clear processes to the team, especially important when COVID hit, and teams were working virtually."

Sara Jones, Executive Director

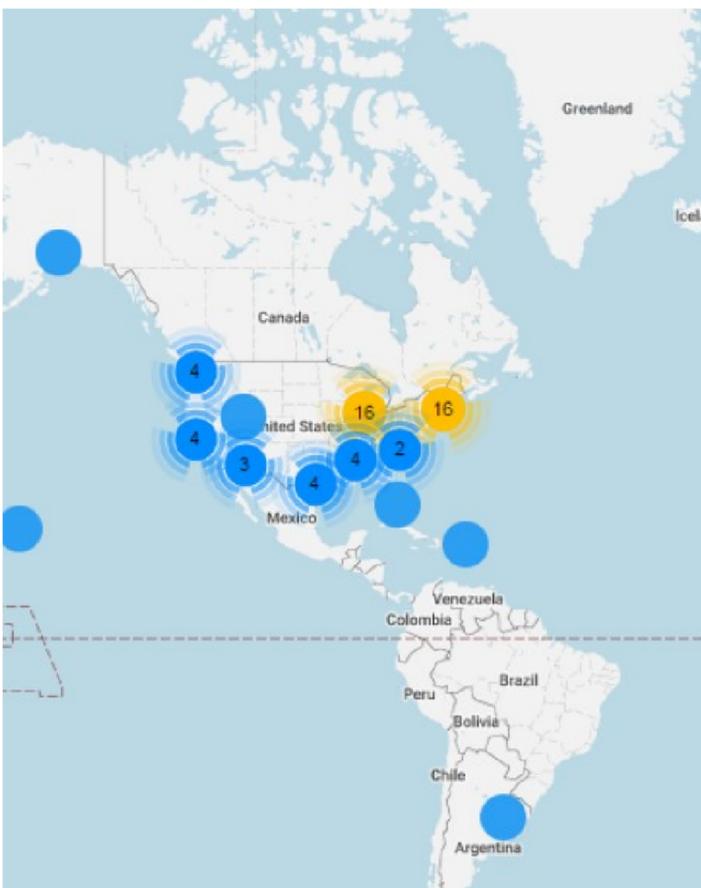


[greatnorthinnocenceproject.org](http://greatnorthinnocenceproject.org)

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Sara Jones



The Great North Innocence Project is a founding member of the Innocence Network, an affiliation of organizations worldwide.

Sara discovered that some of the current processes were not efficient, and that some aspects weren't compliant with all requirements as a fiduciary. Systems were jumbled, there were unnecessary steps involved, and some internal controls were missing.

This is where word of mouth paid off for Sara Jones. As she and her team began exploring accounting resourcing options, a conversation with her neighbor opened the door to All In One Accounting (AIOA). The neighbor was interviewing at AIOA and had been impressed with all the resources and services AIOA offered to clients, in a wide range of industries. Jones soon discovered AIOA could provide the accounting know-how she needed to organize and maintain a robust accounting system that would support their critical work. The GN-IP has been happily collaborating with AIOA since the first part of 2019.

"AIOA has been fantastic to work with and has given us ease in areas of uncertainty," Jones said, providing peace of mind for her and her staff to focus on the critical work of their organization.

### Prepping for GN-IP's First Audit

Sara joined the team at a time when the organization was becoming more financially complex. At the same time their bookkeeper retired, their annual budget had doubled, and they were required to have an audit for the first time as a result. AIOA created new processes and internal controls for the GN-IP team to follow, documenting everything required for the pending audit. This document helped determine the necessary division of responsibilities, addressing all the key steps and solidifying the role everyone was to play going forward (I.e., regarding who processes incoming donations, who makes deposits, who communicates with vendors).

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AIOA's staffing model before and during the pandemic worked very smoothly for Sara and her team. Most of the time all work was done remotely, but staff was present onsite when needed, like during the audit. Their AIOA Controller was there during the onsite visit, to answer questions and ensure everything ran smoothly without any blips.

### Streamlining Process for Future Growth

"AIOA has provided clarity and process to how we do invoices, track donations, and prepare for upcoming audits," said Jones, acknowledging it has given the team confidence when speaking with donors, grantors, the board, and third-party organizations.

"Additionally, the work we implemented together—new steps to manage all aspects of the process, resulting in faster processing, meeting compliance requirements, no audit issues, errors, etc., prior to the Covid pandemic—was instrumental in alleviating a lot of potential stress amongst the team since we were already working many of our processes virtually."

Originally, the nonprofit implemented two resources from AIOA, an Accountant, and a Controller to handle the various responsibilities. Recognizing GN-IP's operational progress, Cynthia Holden, AIOA Controller, was brought on in 2020 and consolidated the Accountant and Controller roles into one, dedicated resource, a proactive measure the nonprofit acknowledges has kept their fiscal operations healthy, despite the uncertainties of the pandemic.

"We recognize the challenges Sara and her team face when trying to balance budgetary considerations with operational needs," said Cynthia. "Consolidating from two resources to one blended service has increased the efficiency of the operations, supporting their fiscal responsibility to their board and all relevant stakeholders."

Exemplary nonprofits like GN-IP need time to deliver on their mission without getting bogged down by the complex accounting systems that are legally required to provide accurate and transparent reporting.

### In Conclusion

"AIOA has proactively improved our financial operations and helped the growth of Great North Innocence Project," said Sara. From the simple to the complex, the teams work together to solve problems. "If Cynthia doesn't know, she draws on the expertise of AIOA's talented resource base. They have simplified everything, and made it accessible online, creating an efficient and compliant system. GN-IP has completed three audits since partnering with AIOA and all have been clean audits."

In the end, having an accounting partner that speaks the unique language of the nonprofit world, with the expertise to navigate the pitfalls, will ultimately, as in the case of Great North Innocence Project, help them continue their mission to change countless lives forever.