

Nonprofits Insurance Alliance 30th Anniversary Stories: Stephanie Larsen



Nonprofits need a supportive and knowledgeable insurer that understands the complex funding streams that comprise 501(c)(3) budgets. If you've ever called the Finance department at NIA, you might have spoken to Stephanie Larsen, who has worked with NIA for 19 years and recognizes the challenges nonprofits face in managing their budgets.

Now as the Accounts Receivable Team Lead, Stephanie describes her journey to helping nonprofits keep their insurance coverages.

How did you find yourself working at NIA?

Before NIA, I was working at an independent insurance brokerage for a few years, where I obtained my insurance brokers license. I was young and relatively new to the workforce, and I learned a lot about interacting with customers. That independent brokerage sold pretty much everything from commercial, to property, to health insurance—actually, I think nonprofit insurance was the *only* type they didn't sell!

But we were also pushing products that didn't *need* to be sold. We sometimes were hounding clients to purchase coverages that they already had or that didn't interest them. That practice didn't sit well with me, which was one of the many reasons I didn't want to continue with the agency.

So when I was recruited to NIA, I could immediately see that it was a *drastically* different place. As a 501(c)(3), NIA operates with a completely different mindset. Most insurance companies charge for every little interaction and every little endorsement. We don't do that.

What does your typical day in the Finance department look like?

I'm the 'fixer' in some senses. My team is primarily responsible for billing our members and brokers for premiums. Some of the nonprofits we insure are small or volunteer-run and need extra attention. I help give direction in extenuating circumstances, where maybe we need to extend the due date or accept a smaller portion because the member is waiting for funding.

I also oversee the policies and procedures that relate to accounts receivable. Recently, we introduced autopay, after several members and brokers requested it. With the implementation of autopay, there've been a slew of new processes and procedures that I manage in order to make sure operations are running smoothly and practically.

How do you communicate with members to discover and meet their needs?

Often the communication is a result of a missed payment. We're unique compared to a typical company—not just to an insurance company, but to *any company*—because we do really try to go out of our way to make sure it's convenient for members to keep their insurance coverage paid. So, if a member misses a payment, in most cases, we're reaching out to help them work around obstacles rather than penalizing them. Our smaller members can be short-staffed, so keeping track of payment due dates can be hard to manage for them. Autopay has been a great option because then the nonprofit doesn't have to worry about remembering the payment.

Autopay was a change brought about by NIA members. Would you say that NIA's members have a lot of impact on how NIA operates, even in the Finance department?

Yes, we take comments from members into consideration. For example, we lowered the finance rate to a nominal 3% based on feedback from members and our ability to absorb the change. We want members to feel like they're getting value in our services and that we're not overcharging them.

Currently, I'm making some changes on the member statements based on feedback from a member who found some of the information on the statement confusing and difficult to locate. I felt she had some great points, and I will be using her feedback to improve the language on the statements.

What is NIA's approach to working with members through billing challenges?

The key is to get to the root of the problem and find a solution that works for everyone. A lot of times, if you try to speak with a smile in your voice, it really changes the direction of how the interaction is going to go!

I would also say *patience*. It's easy to feel frustrated with somebody and to think, "They're angry with me," when really, that's not the case. It's important to recognize that maybe the member is stressed because of overwhelming challenges in the organization, and they really need their insurance, but it's just *one more thing* they have to take care of.

Listening, recognizing that there's a problem, and letting members know we will do our best to find a solution goes a long way. It reinforces that we have the nonprofit's best interest at heart.

Working in the Finance department, do you have any memorable experiences with members?

I've always appreciated the latitude that our AR Accountants have, individually, to work with members. Our CFO and Controller are very supportive. We have the freedom to look at an account and come up with a viable payment arrangement to accommodate the member's circumstance, whether the solution is extending a due date, accepting a partial payment, or—in some cases—both, to make sure our members stay properly insured.

Allowing our employees to have this autonomy to work with the members has always been rewarding and helps to contribute to our unusually low collection balance. It's a testament to us that we're able to work just as well with members struggling with payments as members who are on top of it.

I once spoke to a really small organization—an animal rescue run by two people. The member was super frantic because she didn't have the funds to pay the insurance, but she knew that she needed the insurance. Over the phone, I could literally hear puppies in the background! And she

said, "I'm really sorry. I don't know what to do. I have to be honest with you: It's either food for the animals, or it's the insurance... and I have to feed the animals." Obviously, that tugged some heartstrings, particularly with puppies barking in the background.

For me to be able to say, "You know what? When are you expecting the next round of funding to come in?" and to be able to work with her and formulate a plan allowing the nonprofit to continue taking care of the animals *and* keep their insurance active was extremely rewarding. It's another example of how NIA's dedication to the nonprofit sector extends to our Finance department.

Has your volunteer work shed light on NIA members' experiences?

I started a Girl Scout troop two years ago! When I was a Girl Scout myself, it was a fun way to get into community service and learn new skills. And I have a daughter, so I looked for a troop, and... they didn't have any to join. So, I started one!

We've done food drives for our local food bank and donated money to a small animal shelter. When we donated to the food bank, we took a tour of the facility, and the Girl Scouts developed a better understanding of where their food donations were going and why it's important to help their community. It's been fun to empower little girls to be leaders and know they have agency to create change!

That initiative shed light on what it's like to start a nonprofit: You try to gather a group of people and empower them to come up with ideas for bettering the community. I can also see the challenges. I have 12 girls in the troop, and sometimes they all have different views, which compels me to bring ideas together in a cohesive, productive way.

I would imagine some nonprofits experience similar challenges and rewards, which gives me perspective. I know I'm teaching these girls to make a positive impact on their community and world as they grow. That experience is very influential on the way I see our members.

Bio

Stephanie Larsen is a Santa Cruz local and has been with NIA for 19 years helping streamline the billing processes and procedures. She also works with IT to help enhance the billing system, billing experience on the portal, and member payment options. Stephanie enjoys the beach and spending time with her family, friends, and fluffy black cat.