

# Strengthening Democracy, Increasing Opportunities

## IMPACTS OF ADVOCACY, ORGANIZING AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN NEW MEXICO

### Executive Summary

by Lisa Rangelhi

When ordinary residents participate in the democratic process, society as a whole benefits. In New Mexico, tens of thousands of people are getting involved in civic life and improving their communities. These individuals are part of a growing movement of nonprofits and community institutions that organize and advocate for residents who long have been shut out of decision making on issues that affect them. Together, they are reweaving the social fabric and achieving broad community-wide impacts.

This report is the first in a series to be produced in regions around the country over the coming years. It demonstrates that in New Mexico, local and state organizations leveraged foundation resources to secure billions of dollars in benefits for New Mexicans. The groups also brought large numbers of lower-income people, native Americans, Latinos, African Americans, immigrants, farmers, women, youth and others into public life, developing their leadership skills and their capacity to organize and advocate for change. The monetary impacts and increased civic participation benefit all of New Mexico, helping state and local governments and other institutions more effectively support and strengthen individuals and communities.

NCRP studied 14 organizations that work with underrepresented constituencies in New Mexico to organize and advocate on a range of issues, including civil rights, education, environmental justice, health, housing, low-wage worker issues, and poverty. The report examined the groups' accomplishments over a five-year period (2003–2007) and found that:

- > The total dollar amount of benefits accruing to the groups' constituencies and the broader public was more than **\$2.6 billion**.
- > For every dollar invested in the 14 groups for advocacy and

organizing (\$16.6 million total), the groups garnered more than **\$157** in benefits for New Mexico communities.

For the organizations, New Mexico residents, policymakers and the foundations that supported these efforts, the impact of each victory on individual lives also is significant. For example, many low-wage workers now enjoy bigger paychecks, improving the quality of their families' lives. More children have accessible health care through Medicaid. Homebuyers now can obtain more affordable mortgages, stabilizing their housing situation. Teachers are getting higher pay and staying in their jobs longer, which aids student learning. Lower-income families are saving more money and buying assets. Many workers are getting larger tax refunds. Communities have a greater say in decisions that affect the air they breathe and the water they drink. People who faced barriers to public services because of their race, ethnic background, or the language they spoke now are better able to obtain those supports.

New Mexico's overall economy benefits from the ripple effects of these changes. When more money goes into workers' pockets, into the health care system, and into the bank accounts of families, that money often has a measurable multiplier effect as it recirculates throughout state and local economies. For example, every new dollar in state Medicaid funds results in \$4.74 of business activity. These types of economic benefits are documented throughout the report.

Civic engagement has its own ripple effect, beyond the direct benefits to individuals who participate. Research shows that communities with more engaged residents are stronger economically, politically and socially than communities in which residents are disconnected from each other and from civic institutions. Also, foundation investments in the capacity of organizations to participate in democracy add up to more than the sum of their parts, as

organizations leverage that capacity in future campaigns and in collaboration with other groups to achieve scale, enabling them to take on bigger issues at higher levels of policy making. This report highlights many examples of coalition efforts that united diverse constituencies, in alliance with policymakers to achieve policy change.

Foundation investments played a critical role in supporting the engagement of New Mexico residents and nonprofit organizations in the democratic process to achieve significant impacts. Each grantmaker that funded these groups saw the value of developing strong community and nonprofit leaders who can organize and advocate successfully today and tomorrow in ways that help the foundation achieve its mission and leverage the impact of each individual grant.

If foundations truly want to maximize their impact and effectiveness, NCRP recommends providing general operating support and multiyear funding to effective organizations like the ones featured in this report so that disadvantaged residents can advocate and organize to strengthen their communities.



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