

CHALLENGING GRANTMAKERS TO STRENGTHEN COMMUNITIES



Strengthening Democracy, Increasing Opportunities

IMPACTS OF ADVOCACY, ORGANIZING, AND
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE GULF/MIDSOUTH REGION

by Frontline
Solutions

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Frontline Solutions (helpingchange happen.com) is a social change organization that invests in the pipeline of social change leaders; provides consulting services to institutions in the nonprofit, government and philanthropic sectors; and engages in field-building in three areas of expertise: education, social innovation, and males of color. The researchers and writers for this report were:



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I. Executive Summary

Many grantmakers at the local, regional and national levels seek to make a difference in the American South. Their strategies may range along a continuum that includes social services, community economic development, resident-led decision-making, parent engagement, coalition building and public policy. Often, nonprofits employ multiple strategies in combination. Many forces shape and affect their success, including cultural, economic and political factors that are unique to the South. Yet, perceptions of the South as underresourced and limited in capacity may lead to an underestimation of what grantmakers and nonprofits can accomplish when they work together to tackle serious challenges.

When funders invest in policy advocacy and constituent engagement, what difference does it make for local communities? What part does this support play in realizing policy reform and community change? How can the impact of this support be measured?

This report, the seventh from the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy's (NCRP) Grantmaking for Community Impact Project, sought to answer these questions by studying advocacy, organizing and civic engagement in the four states of Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi, which collectively make up a region referred to here as the Gulf/Midsouth. The report describes, measures and, where possible, monetizes the policy impacts – achieved largely with foundation support – of 20 community organizations across the four states during a five-year period (2005-2009). Researchers also studied the activities of five major coalitions in which many of the groups participated.

The data collected by NCRP offer a compelling case for funder-supported advocacy and organizing.

Despite perceptions of limited capacity and impact, the 20 organizations achieved tremendous benefits for the communities they serve and engage. Key findings include:

- > Collectively, the groups garnered more than \$4.7 billion in benefits for underserved communities during five years.
- > The groups achieved many equally important impacts that cannot be monetized but have significant benefit for their communities and states, such as advancing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) and immigrant rights and protecting communities from environmental threats.
- > The 20 organizations also demonstrated a striking depth and breadth of civic engagement. Collectively, they trained more than 31,000 constituents and helped 98,000 people communicate with policymakers – thus ensuring that the voice of the most disenfranchised was heard at every level of government, including being counted in the census and shaping redistricting.
- > Foundations played a critical role in supporting this tremendous impact, providing 78 percent of all funding for policy and civic engagement.

For every dollar invested in advocacy and organizing (\$41.9 million total), the groups garnered \$114 in benefits for their communities and states. A few specific examples of impact are:

- > Ending life without parole for nonviolent offenders in Alabama, thereby conserving more than \$113 million for the state.
- > Saving low-wage borrowers more than \$45 million each year by curbing predatory payday lending practices in Arkansas.

- > Dramatically increasing state funding for public schools in Mississippi, so that more students will graduate high school and become economically independent, which ultimately will save taxpayers millions of dollars.
- > Through legal advocacy, ensuring that tens of thousands of minority homeowners in Louisiana could rebuild and recover from the disasters of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, leading to more than \$2 billion in additional compensation.

The researchers also found that five themes captured how the organizations went about their work and why they succeeded, often against formidable obstacles:

1. Despite significant underinvestment, the South's uniquely innovative, flexible and interconnected institutions have maximized extremely limited resources to achieve significant advocacy and programmatic impacts.
2. Organizational coalitions necessarily have been an integral part of the Gulf/Midsouth region's advocacy and organizing infrastructure.
3. Workshops and trainings are a linchpin strategy for constituency engagement and leadership development in the Gulf/Midsouth region.
4. The nonprofit infrastructure in the region consists of many organizations that, due to factors of capacity, geography and the diverse needs of their constituency, play the dual function of offering direct services while engaging their clients as a base for advocacy.
5. Geographic isolation and historic underinvestment in the region's rural areas have necessitated sophisticated community mobilization strategies.

Furthermore, the authors determined that findings from the data would not be understood properly without contextualizing advocacy, organizing and civic engagement for the Gulf/Midsouth region. Thus, the following eight considerations frame the results:

1. The Civil Rights Movement has had a noticeable impact on the brand of advocacy and organizing in the Gulf/Midsouth region.
2. The hurricanes of 2005 and 2008 changed the face of advocacy and organizing in the region.
3. Advocacy and organizing in the region has been hindered by a dearth of philanthropic institutions that invest in social justice.
4. Rural life is not the exception but the predominant

reality for the great majority of those living in the Gulf/Midsouth.

5. The Gulf/Midsouth, like the rest of the American South, is no longer ethnically defined by African Americans and whites.
6. Advocacy and organizing strategies face diminishing returns if they do not acknowledge systemic racial disparities.
7. The political environment in the region has both necessitated reactive efforts and hindered the development of a proactive agenda.
8. Organizations in the Gulf/Midsouth are both dynamic and depleted.

Through its study of the 20 groups, and with direct input from funders who work closely with the region's advocacy and organizing sector, NCRP arrived at four recommendations for grantmakers:

1. Work toward building the region's advocacy and organizing infrastructure.
2. Make nimble and flexible investments in organizations working in rural communities.
3. Help transform the sector by supporting organizations with people of color in executive and board leadership.
4. Invest in the organizing potential of a strong base or constituency.

Finally, NCRP urges grantmakers and community leaders to use this report to educate others about the ways in which philanthropic dollars can be leveraged for significant community benefit. The research has demonstrated in all four states (a) the clear need to address inequities, (b) the capacity of community leaders to achieve change (confirmed by proven impact), and (c) the opportunity to make change happen through funder-nonprofit partnerships.

Impressively, the featured organizations achieved much with the resources they had. Yet, they and their peers in these four states and throughout the South still have a long way to go to overcome a long history of structural racism, underinvestment and poverty. Creating better schools, healthier communities, vibrant rural economies and a fully engaged citizenry will require many more resources and even greater capacity. Together, foundation and nonprofit leaders can make these hopes a reality.

STRENGTHENING DEMOCRACY, INCREASING OPPORTUNITIES

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Funding advocacy and advocates is the most direct route to supporting enduring social change for the poor, the disenfranchised and the most vulnerable among us, including the youngest and oldest in our communities.

—Gara LaMarche, President and CEO
The Atlantic Philanthropies*

The National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) aims to ensure that philanthropic institutions practice Philanthropy at Its Best® – philanthropy that serves the public good, supports nonprofit effectiveness and responds to those in our society with the least wealth, opportunity and power. NCRP believes that one of the most effective ways to address the needs of the disenfranchised is by providing support for advocacy, community organizing and civic engagement.

NCRP's *Criteria for Philanthropy at Its Best*, published in March 2009, challenges grantmakers to promote the American values of opportunity and inclusion by contributing to a strong, participatory democracy that engages all communities. One way they can accomplish that is by providing at least 25 percent of their grant dollars for advocacy, organizing and civic engagement. This aspirational goal is one of ten benchmarks in Criteria.

Many grantmakers invest in advocacy, organizing and civic engagement as a way to advance their missions and strengthen communities. A sizable number of foundations, however, have not seriously considered investing in these strategies, partly because they have difficulty measuring impact and fully understanding how effective these strategies can be. The Grantmaking for Community Impact Project (GCIP) addresses these concerns by highlighting the positive impact that communities have seen through funder-supported nonpartisan advocacy and organizing.

To provide foundations with useful information that can help them consider supporting these strategies at higher levels, each GCIP report documents impact and demonstrates how advocacy, community organizing and civic engagement result in community-wide benefits and can advance a foundation's mission. This report on the Gulf/Midsouth Region is the seventh in the series.

Additional information is available online at www.ncrp.org.

* The Atlantic Philanthropies (2008). *Why Supporting Advocacy Makes Sense for Foundations*. Atlantic Reports, Investing in Change.

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