

# Eye on Local Advocacy In the Nation's Capital

By Rick Cohen

**Effective  
advocacy  
in the  
Washington  
metropolitan  
region is  
as daunting  
as it is vital.**

*Affordable housing advocates met with Washington, D.C., city councilmembers and Mayor Anthony Williams during a recent Council Education Day. Local and regional advocacy efforts like this one are routinely among the least well-supported by regional funders.  
Photo Credit: Susan Phipps/ Manna, Inc.*

Since 2000, the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy has been “mapping” local and regional public policy advocacy groups, beginning with more than 70 groups in California and continuing with nonprofit advocates in New York City and most recently in the Washington metropolitan area. The results of these studies should be a wake-up call to foundations interested in advancing nonprofit advocacy.

In an era of federal devolution, the demands on local and state advocates are greater than ever—but few nonprofit groups that engage in public policy advocacy are flush with philanthropic cash. Nationally, only 1.6 percent of nonprofits counted by the Internal Revenue Service cited any lobbying expenditures on their form 990s filed in 1999, and lobbying costs accounted for only 0.08 percent of total nonprofit expenditures.

The District of Columbia is a great example. According to IRS data, the District ranks second only to California in the number of nonprofits that lobby and second to New York in nonprofits’ lobbying expenditures. But the groups in Washington advocate on national issues; few spend much time or effort on issues affecting the District or suburban Maryland and Virginia.

Working with the region’s grantmakers, NCRP looked at more than 44,000 Maryland, Virginia, and Washington nonprofits with 501(c)(3) tax status and annual budgets over \$25,000. It found that

fewer than 0.3 percent of them are substantively engaged in local public policy advocacy in the metropolitan region.

There are plenty of issues for local policy advocates in the Washington area: a housing crisis, civil rights challenges, urban sprawl, and the conversion and loss of public and nonprofit health care resources, as well as the continuing economic and employment reverberations of the Sept. 11 terrorist attack on the Pentagon.

Strategic philanthropy deployed for advocacy can make tremendous progress in addressing pressing social problems. A grant that helps a nonprofit educate policy-makers about the lack of affordable housing—and advocate for specific policy solutions—may end up putting roofs over far more heads than would yet another direct-service grant to build an individual dwelling. Make no mistake, direct service is crucial—but it should not be at the expense of supporting nonprofit advocacy that can bring about lasting change.

Effective advocacy in the Washington metropolitan region is as daunting as it is vital. In addition to funding challenges, nonprofit advocates have to navigate the public policy shoals of two states, several counties and various municipalities—and the odd federally disenfranchised status of the District of Columbia itself.

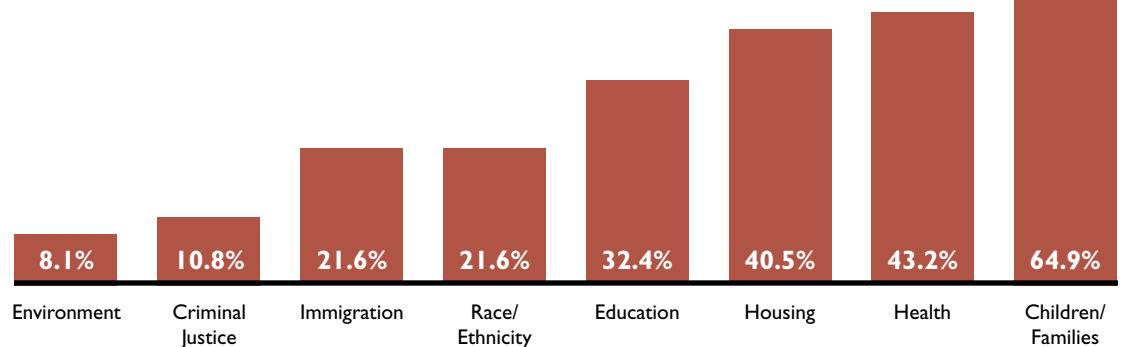
Foundations associated with the regional Washington Grantmakers established the Community Capacity Fund to provide grants to advocacy organizations that mainly address labor and immigration issues in the wake of Sept. 11. With the cooperation of CCF funders, NCRP initiated a broader examination of the condition of local and regional advocacy organizations in the metropolitan area.

NCRP surveyed 118 local and regional advocacy groups in 2002, generating a survey response rate of more than 30 percent. The results show advances in nonprofit advocacy capacity and



## Issue Priorities of Metro Washington, D.C., Local/Regional Advocacy Groups

Percent of Survey Respondents



**Direct service is crucial—but it should not be at the expense of supporting nonprofit advocacy that can bring about lasting change.**

ongoing grantmaking challenges for foundations. Ten findings stand out:

- 1. Advocacy goes where funders fund:** Two-thirds of the survey respondents emphasized advocacy on children, youth and family issues. As some noted, these are “benign” topics popular with funders. In comparison, only 8 percent mentioned an interest in environmental advocacy, 10 percent in issues of sexual orientation and gender identity, and a little over 20 percent in race and ethnicity concerns.
- 2. Advocacy remains under funders’ radar screens:** Funders were surprised initially by how many advocacy groups NCRP uncovered, far more than the handful they expected. Despite numerous challenges, for the most part they are staffed (an average of 7-7.5 full-time employees) and they are professionalizing, with the vast majority offering staff health benefits (over 80 percent) and pension benefits (over 70 percent).
- 3. Racial/ethnic disparities in staffing persist:** Unfortunately, staff diversity in these organizations failed to reflect the populations most at risk in the region: Approximately one-fourth of the staff members were African American, about 14 percent were Latino, and fewer than 10 percent were Asian American or Pacific Islander.
- 4. Difficult fundraising futures are foreseen:** Only one-fourth of the advocates indicated “strong” future funding prospects. Nearly one-

half expressed concern about future revenues in the face of recession and the tumultuous stock market, voicing special concern about foundation grantmaking. In the past, they reported, when foundations cut back, support for advocacy was the first item to go.

- 5. Reliance on foundations is heavy:** Three out of four groups received foundation funding. On average, foundations accounted for more than 40 percent of the organizations’ budgets, about twice as much as the next largest income source, government grants. Without foundation support, there won’t be much nonprofit advocacy in the region.
- 6. Legal barriers are not an obstacle, but funding is:** The groups did not report being hamstrung by fears about the legality of their advocacy. Even the use of government grants or provision of government-funded human services did not stop advocacy. It is a lack of funding—not funder-imposed constraints—that impedes nonprofit advocacy.
- 7. Core operating support is needed:** The lack of general operating support bedevils nonprofit advocacy in the Washington metropolitan region. More than half of survey respondents’ total revenues were for operating support. However, since many groups reported raising general support money from members’ dues, special events and other sources, it is likely that a sizable portion of local foundation grantmak-

ing went for project-specific purposes rather than for flexible core operating funds. According to the metropolitan Washington advocacy groups—echoing respondents in NCRP’s California and New York studies—funding for core operating support is the key to building effective and sustainable nonprofit public policy advocates.

**8. Advocacy projects are favored over systemic reforms:**

Advocates complained that funders wanted them to focus on “advocacy projects” that lend themselves to “concrete case studies,” as opposed to broader system-reform efforts. Funders are reportedly even less amenable to constituency building and grassroots organizing. Advocacy projects may produce easily quantifiable outcomes, but they frequently fall short of needed long-term systemic change.

**9. Capacity-building mismatches abound:**

The “vanilla” organizational-development capacity-building or management-support technical assistance that foundations provide rarely fits the needs of public policy advocates. Groups expressed concern that OD experts rely on a service-delivery model of nonprofits, with relatively little understanding of the skills and resources needed for effective public policy advocacy: constituency development, political mobilization and so forth. There is an especially great demand for technical assistance focusing on communications, media relations and message development.

**10. New measures of success are needed:**

Funders have to be open to measures of success that go beyond head counts of meeting attendees or service recipients. Funders’ expectations that short-term grants will

enable advocates to “solve” major public policy problems quickly and neatly are unrealistic and self-defeating. Survey respondents suggested measuring the public resources leveraged by public policy advocacy, the creation or strengthening of nonprofit coalitions, increases in political mobilization and involvement by nonprofit constituents, and the increasing strength, capacity and staying power of the advocacy organizations themselves.

Washington area foundations clearly need leadership to promote the legitimacy and importance of local nonprofit advocacy among their grantmaking peers. A dozen or so funders are the bedrock supporters of advocacy in the metropolitan area, meaning that more than 1,000 foundations in the area provide little or no support for public policy advocacy.

Leadership means organizing to promote increased grantmaking for lobbying and public policy advocacy. It means convening the advocates themselves for mutual support and strategic thinking that cuts across narrow issue interests. It means creating incentives for authentic collaboration instead of compelling groups to emphasize their differences to attract foundation grants. It means being willing to support nonprofit advocacy on difficult and contentious public policy challenges, not just on widely supported children-and-families issues.

There is simply too little foundation money going to support social change advocacy in our nation’s capital—and much of what there is could be deployed more strategically. The message for philanthropy from metropolitan Washington nonprofit advocacy organizations is clarion clear: It is time for foundations to aggressively and publicly promote—and fund—nonprofit advocacy. ○

*Rick Cohen is executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP).*

***There is simply too little foundation money going to support social change advocacy in our nation’s capital—and much of what there is could be deployed more strategically.***