

# Advocating for Advocacy

By Rick Cohen

What do progressive funders think can be done to promote local or regional (as opposed to national) nonprofit public policy advocacy for social change? NCRP asked that question to 30 foundation senior program officers and executives from around the nation in an e-mail survey conducted in the spring of 2003.

The questions came from the top priority issues identified by local and regional nonprofit public policy advocates in metropolitan Washington, D.C. This summary focuses on two key issues—getting more money for advocacy and building the capacities of nonprofit advocates.

Money: First on their minds was how to maintain advocacy grantmaking in a philanthropic environment of widespread grantmaking cutbacks. As one D.C.-area funder noted, “[My] sense is that the smaller family foundations tend to not feel comfortable funding advocacy, community foundations ... tend to be careful to not offend donors [and] ... corporate foundations are wary for their own reasons.”

However, as another respondent put it, the cutbacks have begun to “kick-start connections in people’s minds ... a real sudden understanding in times of crisis that helping the babies one at a time is not adequate.” While those funders committed to social justice advocacy appear ready to hang in, most “have not seen a rush by new funders to support advocacy; those who funded it before will continue and they understand how important it is, [but those] who have not are not going to do so.”

What do funders recommend as strategies to generate more funding for social justice advocates in the face of lower foundation grantmaking budgets?

- Convening forums on critical public policy issues in the foundations’ geographic areas (particularly on racial/economic justice issues and on post-9/11 civil liberties questions) to induce funders concerned with these issues to link their concerns with advocacy grantmaking.

- Participating in collaborative funding efforts on critically important public policy issues (for example, multiracial immigrant/refugee justice work)—sharing the risk and reward of funding nonprofit advocacy.
- Convening peer networks among foundation staff to bring attention to issues and organize within foundations from the staff level for more resources directed toward advocacy.
- Aggressively targeting small foundations, new foundations and individual donors to build interest and involvement in advocacy—speaking to their interests and connecting their interests with the need for advocacy—before as new funders they get “tracked” into more mainstream grantmaking avenues.
- Re-emphasizing core operating support grantmaking for nonprofit public policy advocates as the most important kind of grantmaking for social change.
- Engaging in countercyclical grantmaking—increasing grant levels despite depressed endowments due to the increasing need for advocacy in troubled times and troubled economies.
- Making funding available in “political time”—making emergency grants and cash-flow loans or recoverable grants to advocacy groups that address their needs for money when it is timely and important.
- Granting money (by private foundations) to public foundations (community foundations, women’s funds, social justice funds such as Tides and Changemakers, issue-specific public foundations such as the Ms. Foundation, etc.) that are closer to grassroots constituencies and therefore able to strategically deploy advocacy grants.

In the words of one Chicago-area funder, “For me, the long-term solution lies in constant education and dialogue between and among funders

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and with organizing and public policy organizations. For those of us supporting community organizing and advocacy as a key grantmaking strategy, we must make the case that such a strategy offers a unique opportunity to address the root causes of economic and social inequality, whether in housing, education, health care, the environment, etc. ... But this must be recognized as an organizing project that requires a long-term strategy to reach as many funders as possible with a coherent message, compelling stories, best practices, etc.—all of which can influence and affect the grantmaking priorities of funders.”

Capacity: For some funders, part of the challenge is one of “messaging,” connecting with funders and connecting with the public to build supportive constituencies. How can funders bolster the communications effectiveness of nonprofit public policy advocacy organizations?

Funders were split on whether communications and messaging constitute critical capacity issues warranting funders’ attention or are simply the latest capacity-building fad, but some clearly put communications at the core of advocacy effectiveness: “We need to redefine communications from being an add-on to being an integral part of programming ... [and we] must get away from the notion that dollars invested in communications are dollars that cannot be invested in programs.” While several suggested that foundations pay to link local and regional advocates to high-powered media relations firms, others cautioned against the “self-serving charlatans” that flood the market with overpriced and underskilled communications technical assistance (TA) providers.

Funders were equally split on the need for more communications attention to the benchmarks and outcomes of funding nonprofit advocacy. In one foundation CEO’s terms, “Artificial concreteness is more destructive than no measures; hard measurements often preclude tackling the most difficult problems.” As another noted, “It is inherently difficult to measure [the] outcomes or impact of policy work because so much of it is educational and involve[s] the prevention of bad outcomes as opposed to the creation of good ones.” On the other side, funders in favor of more attention to performance benchmarking suggested that “groups need to get very serious about evaluation and outcomes and they need to start very early in identifying what the outcomes are

that they expect and how they are going to measure them.”

Whether in favor of greater or lesser attention to performance benchmarking, respondents focused on three suggestions for advocacy funders:

- Collecting in-depth information on the measures and indicators used by local advocacy organizations and by public policy advocacy efforts in other communities to determine which ones might be applicable and useful.
- Collecting information on how organizations articulate their “strategies for change”—how their advocacy work is meant to instrumentally make things different, with proximate accomplishments and outcomes being as important as desired multiyear systems impacts.
- Using this information to educate reluctant funders of advocacy—perhaps the trustees in addition to or even as opposed to foundation staff—about the impacts and outcomes of advocacy, particularly the leverage of resources and protection or expansion of rights for disadvantaged constituencies that public policy advocacy is meant to achieve.

Most TA for advocacy and social change doesn’t seem to fit the skill sets of most capacity-builders. As one West Coast funder put it, “The world of nonprofit consultants doesn’t match our grants, [so] we have had to develop our own technical assistance program [addressing] campaign-style [work], cultural competency,” etc.

Funding for capacity builders hardly matches the importance and utility of grant funding for

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core operating costs—simply providing groups with flexible grant support and letting them figure out what they need and how to obtain it. But the problem is, once a group knows it has needs, who does it turn to for the kinds of training and technical assistance that fit the distinctive concerns of nonprofits trying to promote social change through public policy advocacy?

Foundation respondents offered four categories of responses for the kinds of organizations funders can and do turn to for capacity-building resources for local and regional advocacy nonprofits:

- Bringing in top flight TA providers to ratchet up the organizational strengths and strategies of social change advocates, implying that anything less is simply shortchanging the organizations and shortchanging social change advocacy.
- Supporting efforts to reach out to subject-specific TA providers rather than the generic management capacity builders that dominate the TA field, focusing on providers that specialize in organizing and leadership development (such as the Midwest Academy and the Rockwood Leadership Program), social change advocacy-oriented fundraising (such as the training offered by the Grassroots Institute for Fundraising and Training) and using technology for social change (such as assistance from Technology Works for Good).
- Supporting technical assistance provision through networks such as the Center for

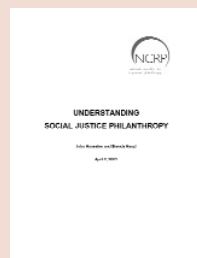
Community Change (on welfare reform and jobs strategies), the National Immigration Forum (on immigrant rights), the National Community Reinvestment Coalition (on banking and insurance issues) and the Environmental Support Center (on environmental advocacy and fundraising).

- Facilitating mechanisms for peer support technical assistance—helping local and regional advocates learn from each other through “ongoing peer-based learning.”

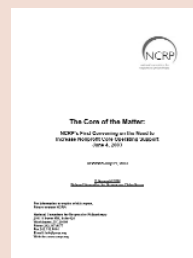
No one had a magic elixir to offer for galvanizing the resources of funders to support local and regional nonprofit public policy advocates. There may in fact be more money flowing to social change advocates than ever before, but it pales in contrast to the array of financial resources supporting the public policies of the status quo or a return to visions of even less compassionate past public agendas on taxation, civil rights and public services. But there is no substitute for the actions of social justice philanthropists actively engaging and organizing their peers to join the cause of inching foundation funding higher toward flexible grants for social change public policy advocacy nonprofits. ○

*Rick Cohen is executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP). More information on this topic can be found in NCRP's September 2003 report, Advocacy for Social Change in Metropolitan Washington.*

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