

Greensboro Gathering Highlights Impressive Advocacy Impacts and Return on Investment for Grantmakers

By Lisa Rangelhelli and Julia Craig

On 11 May 2009, in Greensboro, N.C., NCRP released the second in its series of reports for the Grantmaking for Community Impact Project (GCIP): *Strengthening Democracy, Increasing Opportunities: Impacts of Advocacy, Organizing and Civic Engagement in North Carolina*. The culmination of six months of research and outreach in the state, the report documents the impacts of the policy engagement work of 13 community organizations in North Carolina. The North Carolina Center for Nonprofits and the North Carolina Network of Grantmakers cohosted the event with NCRP. Ninety nonprofit and foundation leaders attended from across the state, including as far west as Cherokee, east to Greenville and south to Charlotte.

Former foundation leader W. Hodding Carter III gave inspiring welcoming remarks, noting that there is little foundation support today for “activities that disturb the even tenor of our times.” Carter called on foundations to think boldly and broadly in their work and to seize the opportunity of the current political and economic climate to advance the causes they care about.

NCRP executive director Aaron Dorfman and senior research associate Lisa Rangelhelli presented the findings of the report, which was coauthored by Rangelhelli and research assistant Julia Craig.

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presentation, Rangelhelli highlighted four themes from the findings: tangible benefits, broad impact, democratic participation and collaboration. Tangible benefits included such gains as increased wages, unemployment benefits, school bond funds, and medical services for the uninsured. There also were benefits that were difficult to quantify but just as impactful, such as the work of farmworker advocacy groups.

The Farmworker Action Network (FAN) includes three groups featured in the report: Student Action with Farmworkers (SAF), NC Justice Center, and Toxic Free NC. FAN has worked to empower and improve working and living conditions of farmworkers like Elizabeth Arias, who witnessed her 22-year-old cousin die in the fields after

the workers were exposed to freshly sprayed pesticides. Elizabeth told SAF, “It is important to be conscious and to value the arduous work of farmworkers, because they are risking their lives.” FAN’s work has helped ensure that fewer farm laborers meet the same fate as Elizabeth’s cousin, thanks to tighter pesticide regulations and new standards for migrant housing that require sanitary mattresses and access to an emergency telephone.

In addition to research on the impacts of advocacy and organizing, NCRP also explores the central role that funders play in helping organizations achieve their goals. In North Carolina, collaboration with funders was a key element of success. Institutional grantmakers provided 86 percent of the groups’ advocacy, organizing and civic engagement dollars, over half of which was given as unrestricted general operating support.

The Funders’ Collaborative for Strong Hispanic Communities, formed in conjunction with Hispanics in Philanthropy (HIP), created a pool of \$2 million from 24 grantmakers and has supported 22 small and medium-sized nonprofits since 2005. The collaborative has built the capacity of Latino organizations in North Carolina at a critical time, allowing them to respond to a challenging policy environment and on-the-ground needs in the state. According to Ada Volkmer at the Coalition of Latino-American Organizations, “I don’t think that Latino centers in western North Carolina would be where they are today without HIP.”

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A mother and daughter are among the 4,500 people standing up for immigrant rights at the We Are One America march in Asheville NC on May 1, 2006.

The event itself is intended to not only present the research results on policy impacts, but also to engage funders and community leaders in dialogue about how advocacy and organizing can help them achieve their long-term objectives. In fact, at the Greensboro event, Karen McNeil-Miller, president of the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust, suggested that a planned “funders only” conversation be opened to nonprofit representatives as well. With enthusiastic support from attendees and NCRP, the change was made. As one nonprofit leader noted in the evaluation of the event, “I thought it was great that a representative from Kate B. Reynolds Foundation suggested that funders not be separated. I think it made for a much richer conversation and sent a strong message that those power dynamics need to be deconstructed.”

Indeed, the highlights of the gathering were the two breakout sessions at which participants were able to engage each other and share ideas. In “A Dialogue with Funders,” grantmakers shared suc-

cessful strategies for increasing their support for this work, including foundation leadership in the community, donor and trustee education, constituency representation at the trustee level, and rethinking how to partner with nonprofit grantees. In “Making the Case for Support of Advocacy and Community Organizing,” nonprofit panelists discussed developing shared power to advance the causes and values nonprofits and foundations both care about.

NCRP has received overwhelmingly positive reactions to both the report and the event. One funder wrote that, coming away from the session, the strongest message was the variety of ways that foundations can support advocacy and organizing and the importance of trustee and leadership education about these strategies. Most nonprofit leaders who responded to a survey after the event indicated that they felt better prepared to explain the benefits and impact of their advocacy, organizing and civic engagement work to a funder.

While the report and release event are key features of the Grantmaking for Community Impact Project, the outreach that precedes the event and follow-up afterward both are critical to the project’s success. At each research site, NCRP’s field team conducts extensive outreach with funders in the state for months leading up to the report release. This provides NCRP staff with an opportunity to understand each funder’s mission better and to discuss how supporting policy engagement may enhance each institution’s goals. NCRP also establishes a host committee that helps identify potential community groups for inclusion in the research, provides feedback on the preliminary findings, and helps shape the event. In North Carolina, the host committee included both funders and nonprofit leaders.

Since the event in May, NCRP has been working with our nonprofit and foundation partners in North Carolina to

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increase foundation grant support for policy engagement. NCRP field director Melissa Johnson has been leading follow-up efforts with funders. “I’ve been really impressed with the continuing level of interest from foundation leaders in the state,” observed Johnson. “For example, the Community Foundation of Western North Carolina is using the report in its ongoing dialogue with trustees and nonprofits to determine how it can best support advocacy in the region.”

Johnson also noted that Bob Wagner, vice president for programs at the community foundation, along with Karen McNeil Miller and Betty Craven, president of the Warner Foundation, will be participating in a panel discussion about the project at the Southeastern Council of Foundations annual meeting in November. The North Carolina Center for Nonprofits also will have a session at its fall conference.

Community organizations featured in the report also are using it to educate funders about the value of advocacy and organizing. Craig White of the Center for Participatory Change has been using the report in conjunction with NCRP’s *Criteria for Philanthropy at Its Best* in conversations with board members, donors and funders. “The 25 percent figure (continued on page 14)

This year, the Accounting Aid Society was recognized as *Crain's Detroit Business* 2008 Best-Managed Nonprofit because of its collaboration with 100 other community organizations to increase its ability to provide free tax preparation to low-income people and teach them financial literacy.

According to Kathleen Katke Aro, president of the Accounting Aid Society, "Through our collaborative efforts with 100 community partners and 800 individuals, we helped return \$14.8 million in tax refunds and credits to struggling families this year."

We also can look at the newly-formed ONEplace @ kpl, a management support center for nonprofit organizations in Kalamazoo County. ONE, which stands for Opportunities for Nonprofit Excellence, brings together nonprofit leaders and peer groups to learn from one another.

"Area foundation and nonprofit leaders recognized the importance and need for a capacity building organization to support area nonprofits," says Bobbe A. Luce, director of ONEplace @ kpl. "It is our goal to be the one place people can turn to for nonprofit information, resources, trainings and referrals. We opened in March 2009 and the activity level has been almost overwhelming. People are so grateful for this resource."

The Irving S. Gilmore Foundation and Kalamazoo Community Foundation took the lead in conceiving and funding a "one-stop" support center and approached the Kalamazoo Public Library to join them by housing and operating it. The Greater Kalamazoo United Way added a start-up grant, and the Timothy and Bernadette Marquez Foundation is supporting materials development.

The troubling economy also is a reminder for nonprofits to ensure that their fund development efforts are aligned with the rest of the organiza-

tions. Two years ago, Lighthouse of Oakland County noticed that the sponsors of its large events were not the same people who regularly volunteered their time, money or goods. Fundraising was focused on large corporate sponsors while the operations of the organization (including behind-the-scenes office work) relied heavily on volunteers.

"We made a strategic decision to track everyone who gave time, money or goods to the organization as a supporter," says John Ziraldo, president and CEO of Lighthouse of Oakland County. "We saw the need to cultivate relationships with those in the community that are dedicated to the work of the organization."

Although Lighthouse has seen a decrease in corporation sponsorships due to the economy, it has seen an increase in individual giving. This year, it replaced its black-tie gala with a series of house parties that are accessible to anyone in the community. The people who truly are committed to the work of Lighthouse are able to attend the event and develop a deeper commitment to serve.

During this time of economic hardship, grantmakers and grantseekers have two courses they can chart. They either can sit back and blame the economy for hurting their organization—the survival storm approach—or they can steer into the gale, by assessing their course, evaluating how programs or grants align with the mission, and looking for ways to work with other grantmakers and grantseekers to achieve their missions.

Michigan and our nation will weather this recession. The real question is what will the landscape look like when the clouds clear, and who will be left to enjoy the sun breaking over the horizon? ■

Kyle Caldwell is the president and CEO of Michigan Nonprofit Association

(continued from page 11) NCRP recommends [for foundations to grant to advocacy and organizing] really resonates with our folks," White observed. And Chris Estes of the North Carolina Housing Coalition has found the report to be a great tool to explain to funders the tangible value of investing in long-term, structural solutions to problems like the current foreclosure crisis. NCRP and the N.C. Center for Nonprofits also sent copies of the report to every state legislator. Policy makers can play an important role in protecting the legal basis for nonprofit advocacy and can urge foundations to support nonprofit policy engagement, as well.

North Carolina was second in the GCIP series; the first was New Mexico, and NCRP currently is producing a report in Minnesota, where we have partnered with the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits and the Minnesota Council on Foundations. The report, to be authored by Gita Gulati-Partee, is due out September 30. As GCIP builds the body of evidence documenting the impact of advocacy and organizing in states around the country, NCRP will continue to help nonprofits confidently discuss the value of their work with funders, and engage, educate and challenge grantmakers to increase their support for these efforts. ■

Lisa Ranghelli, senior research associate, and Julia Craig, research assistant, are coauthors of Strengthening Democracy, Increasing Opportunities: Impacts of Advocacy, Organizing and Civic Engagement in North Carolina. This report is available for free download at www.ncrp.org.