

Watchdog resigns

Rick Cohen leaving National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy

By [Todd Cohen](#)
Editor and Publisher
Philanthropy Journal
September 21, 2006

Rick Cohen has resigned as executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy after heading the philanthropy-watchdog group for more than seven years.

The organization, based in Washington, D.C., has named Mary Lassen, former president and CEO of The Women's Union in Boston, as interim executive director while it conducts a national search for a new executive director.

Cohen, who will remain with the National Committee as a consultant, says he plans to continue his research and writing and will expand his focus from foundations to include nonprofits in general and civic issues overall.

Under Cohen, the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy strengthened its finances and served as a leading monitor and critic of organized philanthropy and the nonprofit sector.

"Rick has had an enormous impact on the field of philanthropy, especially in terms of public accountability of foundations, as well as nonprofits," says Pablo Eisenberg, a founder and member of the board of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy and a senior fellow at the Georgetown Public Policy Institute.

Ruth McCambridge, editor in chief of The Nonprofit Quarterly in Boston, says Cohen combines "bravery based on a high moral code, and extraordinary research skills," and has been "impressively productive in terms of challenging the status quo in philanthropy."

While Cohen can be highly critical of philanthropic and nonprofit organizations, McCambridge says, he also has "an unusual bridging capacity" and is "extremely open to having discussions with people who have opinions very different from his."

Bill Schambra, director of the Bradley Center for Philanthropy and Civic Renewal at the conservative Hudson Institute in Washington, D.C., says Cohen transformed NCRP from a "shrill partisan instrument of the left to a genuinely respected, objective watchdog group."

Cohen "wasn't afraid to bring the same scrutiny they used to bring just to conservative organizations to a huge mainstream foundation, to left-wing foundations," Schambra says.

"He was a vigorous voice for the public interest in bringing critical attention to organizations that all too often get away scot-free," Schambra says. "This was a really fearless voice for the public against the self-dealing and the special-interest lobby, no matter where he found it."

With an annual budget of roughly \$1 million, the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy has eliminated a deficit it had when he joined the organization and now has a reserve, Cohen says.

It also has roughly doubled its staff to 11 positions.

"Despite the fact that there are a number of foundations that have not and will not ever give to NCRP" because of the tough positions it takes, Eisenberg says, "there are a number of donors that feel that is an important mission for NCRP to play. There continues to be a stream of support."

The organization publishes four major reports a year and a quarterly magazine, writes op-ed columns for newspapers and the nonprofit trade press, and appears on TV and radio news programs.

And Cohen says he spends an hour or two a day providing background on philanthropic and nonprofit issues for news reporters.

Eisenberg says Cohen "established NCRP as an absolutely essential source for any reporters or broadcasters who wanted to deal with philanthropy."

NCRP recently published its third annual State of Philanthropy report, and this fall will publish studies on the impact of alternative workplace fund drives, the impact of bank mergers on bank philanthropy, and the operating-support challenges facing nonprofits.

NCRP has been active in recent debates in Congress on the regulation of nonprofits, and irked many nonprofit and foundation leaders by calling for tougher regulation and greater accountability on the part of foundations and nonprofits.

Cohen has called for foundations to pay out more of their assets in grants, for example, and has proposed tougher rules on foundation administrative costs and self-dealing, on disclosure and payouts of donor-advised funds and supporting organizations, and on disclosure and control of foundations run by politicians.

And he has documented the relative impact of conservative and liberal foundations, concluding that while liberal foundations spend more, conservative foundations are more effective at shaping public policy because, unlike liberal foundations, they tend to make unrestricted grants that support operations, giving conservative policy groups greater flexibility.

Eisenberg says NCRP "is the only serious watchdog with teeth that exists" in the nonprofit sector.

The organization's tough scrutiny of organized philanthropy has created fundraising challenges that Cohen has met, Eisenberg says.

Cohen "was good at raising money from the hands that NCRP has bitten," Eisenberg says. "There are very few voices from the nonprofit sector that are critical of philanthropy because most nonprofit leaders are scared to death in potentially alienating foundations and stimulating retribution among these foundations."

McCambridge agrees.

"NCRP should not be standing alone as the institutional watchdog on philanthropy, but to a major extent it does," she says. "If you are a nonprofit and you set yourself up as a watchdog on philanthropy, you'd better be pretty darned good at what you do. Because you can get punished."

Schambra says tough watchdogs are rare because they generally are dependent on foundation funding they hesitate to put at risk.

"If you have multiple funders in this field, and you're always second-guessing yourself about who's going to be offended by what you say," he says, "it's extremely difficult to tell the truth."

McCambridge says the challenge for NCRP will be "to look carefully at its role and how it's going to maintain the position that it has at this point, which is a unique position in terms of generating discussion about the future for philanthropy, and the future of regulating the sector."

And she says Cohen, a member of the editorial advisory committee of The Nonprofit Quarterly, has "gone out of his way to ensure that we survived and thrived in our early years, and he informs most of the analytical work that we do" and has been "absolutely pivotal for us being able to make sense of the issues."

Cohen says the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy and the nonprofit sector face common challenges.

"Can we be candid and really deal with the problems?" he says. "The sector is dealing with the daily accumulation of petty scandals that chip away the public trust in the nonprofit sector." The nonprofit sector "is in danger of losing as much credibility as the public sector has by the accumulation of these scandals and the tendency not to take them on and deal with the core issues," Cohen says.

"So unless NCRP and other organizations can say, 'Enough is enough,' and root out the bad guys and toughen the public standards for regulation and oversight, and the sector's standards for self-regulation," he says, "we're going to see this continue and persist, with the result of increasingly lower levels of public trust in what philanthropy can do."

© 2006 *Philanthropy Journal*