

Advocacy Work Deserves More Support from Foundations, Not Less

By Lisa Ranghelli, NCRP

Chronicle of Philanthropy

March 17, 2010

To the Editor:

In his recent opinion piece (" [Big Philanthropy Has Reasons to Fear Populist Fervor](#), " February 25), William Schambra made several broad generalizations about nonprofits that are at odds with my own understanding of the sector.

First, he asserted that nonprofits are increasingly turning to advocacy to grow government spending on programs, often at the instigation of foundations. Yet a sizable number of the country's foundations are notoriously averse to providing grants for policy-engagement activities such as advocacy and community organizing. Philanthropic spending on these efforts has been fairly constant in recent years.

Additionally, research on the impact of nearly 60 nonprofit advocacy groups from Los Angeles, Minnesota, New Mexico, and North Carolina shows that many of their accomplishments do not expand government and may save taxpayer resources. For example:

-

Living- and minimum-wage laws enacted in four states and sector-specific wage packages negotiated in L.A. County will add billions of dollars to the pockets of hundreds of thousands of workers over several years, likely reducing their dependence on government-funded social services.

-

An estimated \$2.2-billion in health-care costs will be saved over several years by replacing old diesel trucks and reducing dirty truck emissions by 80 percent at the Ports of L.A. and Long Beach, lessening related deaths and respiratory ailments.

-

An anti-predatory-lending law in New Mexico saved homebuyers at least \$131-million in points and fees that they would have paid to lenders. This law likely increased neighborhood stability, reduced foreclosures, and enhanced community property values.

-

In preventing the implementation of the REAL ID Act of 2005 in Minnesota and New Mexico, advocates saved their state, taxpayers, and drivers tens of millions of dollars.

Furthermore, in many cases, nonprofits don't necessarily advocate for bigger government but for better government that is more responsive and effective with the resources it already has. For example:

-

State environmental laws were changed in ways that protect drinking water and air, likely reducing public-health costs. These include a reduction in uranium levels allowed in New Mexico groundwater; a ban on hog-waste lagoons in North Carolina; and a rule in Southern California that will reduce toxic sulfur-oxide emissions by 75 percent.

-

Organizers won two major reforms to the Los Angeles Unified School District that involved no additional budget outlay: improved nutrition of cafeteria food at all schools in the district and a requirement to provide college preparatory classes at all high schools so more students will be eligible, prepared, and able to attend college.

-

Local and statewide laws in Minnesota reduced discrimination and hiring disincentives against people with criminal records seeking employment. Work-force development programs in L.A. were retooled to better serve ex-offenders. These reforms likely will increase incomes and reduce recidivism, thereby easing the financial burden on the state.

-

An anti-bullying law in North Carolina will protect children with disabilities and gay, lesbian, and transgender youths who often are persecuted in schools. This law was the first in the state to treat LGBT residents as a protected class.

[Read the full piece here](#) .