

# Responsive Philanthropy

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*In Los Angeles and across the state, families, nonprofits and movement leaders intersect to demand new policies for immigrants living in California. Photo by Theo Rigby.*



## Lessons for Philanthropy from the Success of California's Immigrant Rights Movement

By Cathy Cha

President Obama's executive action on immigration will allow millions of immigrants across the country to come out of the shadows. But political gridlock still rules the day in Washington, prompting states to step in and try to fill the void. While some states have adopted anti-immigrant measures, California has bucked the national trend. Backed by

strong foundation support, the state's immigrant rights movement has advanced common-sense policies that help level the playing field for immigrants.

As Reshma Shamasunder, executive director of the California Immigrant Policy Center, said, "The immigrant rights movement in California has found its footing and has achieved a number of very important policy wins, and a lot of that is because of the way philanthropy has supported us to come together and work on a shared agenda."

### AN EARLY MISSTEP

More than a decade ago, when the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund began

collaborating on this issue alongside other foundations, we looked at our home state of California and saw a diverse movement of large, urban immigrant organizations, small and very rural ones, and many in between. Coordination across the movement was difficult because of the sheer size of the state; groups in one region often had little idea what their counterparts in other regions were doing.

We researched what was happening in other parts of the country and suggested creating a statewide immigrant coalition to unify the movement, based on the models offered by Illinois and Massachusetts. *(continued on page 13)*



challenging grantmakers  
to strengthen communities

# Lessons from California's Immigrant Rights Movement

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It didn't take long to realize that this was not going to fly. California is too large and diverse to be coordinated by one entity. Not to mention, a foundation promoting this solution led to criticism that philanthropy was deciding what should be a community agenda.

So, in 2009, we regrouped and tried a different approach. Rather than attempting to reorganize the movement from the top down, we stepped back and supported groups from around the state to come together to identify shared policy priorities. "Meeting advocates from around the state was a great opportunity for us as a movement to really dig in and explore what was of common interest to the diverse communities we represent," said Andrea Guerrero, executive director of Alliance San Diego, which convenes the San Diego Immigrant Rights Consortium.

## A COMMON AGENDA

Coming out of these conversations, the first priority that advocates identified was strengthening the ability of the movement to communicate about the contributions of immigrants to our communities and our economy. Advocates around the state were struggling to get their voices heard in a media environment where anti-immigrant messages ruled the day. So we supported the movement to develop its own messaging toolkit and train community members as spokespeople.

As it turned out, focusing on communications was a safe first step that enabled groups to work together on a common goal. In the process, they were able to build trust and lay the groundwork for eventual policy wins.

Advocates also called for enforcement reform as another priority. They could see how unjust deportation policies were striking fear into immigrant communities. Groups across the state initially worked together to limit the ability of police to use DUI checkpoints

as a means to identify undocumented immigrants and impound their cars. It wasn't a headline-grabbing policy change, but it was a crucial building block toward achieving more ambitious goals because of broad-based interest in the issue.

Before long, California adopted a new law, the TRUST Act, which limits the ability of state and local law enforcement to detain immigrants when they pose no threat. As part of the campaign for the TRUST Act, regional coalitions led public education and advocacy campaigns in their local areas, "grasstops" policy groups worked together in Sacramento, and a coordinated statewide communications effort supported the campaign. Today, California's TRUST Act is hailed as a model for reforming immigration law enforcement across the country.

## BUILDING MOMENTUM FOR MORE WINS

A few years ago, we couldn't have imagined that the Haas, Jr. Fund would be working on an issue like immigration law enforcement. But in a state where more than one-fourth of the population are immigrants, we decided not to hang our support for the movement on one policy campaign. We wanted to help build a movement for the long run. Instead of being prescriptive about policy goals, we wanted to position immigrant communities to have a strong voice on the many policy issues that impact them now and in the future. Plus, enforcement reforms in California have resulted in real gains for immigrant communities, and this grassroots-generated work has galvanized the immigrant movement to come together in new ways to work for change.

As the movement found its collective voice and grew stronger, the wins kept coming. For example, as more Dreamers across the state came forward as undocumented and spoke up for fair treatment, the movement was primed to get behind the importance of access to education and opportunity for these young immigrants. This public education work laid the foundation for passage of the California Dream Act in 2011, which provides Dreamers attending state colleges and universities with access to financial aid and private scholarships. That was a huge win – and it sparked the national effort to provide Dreamers with work authorization and relief from deportation.

Thanks to the movement's advocacy, public opinion has moved sufficiently to embolden lawmakers to take action on other issues. California now has laws that allow undocumented immigrants to get driver's licenses, extend overtime pay to domestic workers, and allow qualified undocumented immigrants to become licensed lawyers.

All of these wins were made possible because of increased collaboration and alignment across the movement. At the

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grassroots level, we now have strong regional coalitions that are moving local policies on behalf of immigrant families. And at the state level, this network of regional coalitions is connected by a group of effective statewide policy organizations. We may not have one statewide organizing entity, but this configuration makes abundant sense in a state as big and diverse as California. And it's working.

"Over the last several years, we have been able to strengthen the movement from the ground up," said Angelica Salas, executive director of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles (CHIRLA). "The movement as a whole has become much more sophisticated in how we work at the regional level and in Sacramento to advance our goals."

### WEIGHING WHAT IT TAKES

The immigrant rights movement in California is stronger today in part because of coordinated support from statewide funders such as the Rosenberg Foundation, the California Endowment and the James Irvine Foundation. In working with our funder colleagues, we have learned important lessons from supporting this social justice movement and its successes. These include:

- **Build trust first.** California's many diverse movement organizations needed time to build relationships and trust before they could partner on policy campaigns. This early work required patience, but it ultimately produced better results, with stronger partnerships and more ambitious policy agendas.
- **Facilitate alignment of goals and strategies.** Foundations have supported processes for local groups across California to identify joint policy priorities and to plan and coordinate their work. For example, since 2011 we have supported annual meetings of the heads of eight statewide policy groups. An associ-



*Community partners across generations march for immigration reform in San Jose, California. Photo by Kathy Sloane.*

ate dean at Stanford Law School facilitated conversations where these leaders could negotiate policy goals and tactics and scope out areas of common interest.

- **Invest in campaigns that build unity.** We have found that the most effective approach to supporting California's immigrant rights movement is to look for issues that unite different parts of the movement and resonate with the grassroots. This has meant leaving some white space to work on unexpected issues. Over time, this flexibility has led to broader ownership and real wins.
- **Build grassroots power.** Building the grassroots power to push tough wins across the finish line has been key. Funders have invested significantly in civic engagement, particularly in hostile, anti-immigrant parts of the state with surging numbers of Latinos and Asians – places where the politics haven't caught up with the demographics. Policy efforts in California have been boosted by immigrant community members working side-by-side with lawyers, policy analysts and organizers on advocacy campaigns.

- **Support movement leadership.**

We've learned that leading a social movement requires different skills than heading up a nonprofit. In California today, movement leaders have witnessed the strength of their collective power and see the imperative of partnering across organizational lines and building alliances. To help nurture these skills, foundations are investing in leadership development for the movement through programs like the Fellowship for a New California, which brings immigrant rights leaders together in a year-long series of collaborative leadership trainings.

### A BRIGHTER PICTURE

Important challenges remain for the immigrant rights movement in California, including an urgent need to strengthen the capacity of immigrant-serving nonprofits to assist more than 1.5 million immigrants across the state who are eligible for deferred deportation through President Obama's recent executive action.

But at a time when action on comprehensive immigration reform is still stalled in D.C., it is reassuring to see how California is taking steps to maximize the contributions of immigrants to our communities and our economy. The California experience also provides a powerful rebuttal to the approach of states like Arizona that are creating a more hostile climate for immigrants.

"This is a really exciting moment to be an immigrant advocate in California," said Fernando Romero of the Justice for Immigrants Coalition in the Inland Empire. "We have already accomplished a lot together but we stand on the cusp of doing even greater things." ■

*Cathy Cha is program director of Immigrant Rights and Integration at the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund.*