

Making Progress Toward Increasing Funding for Advocacy, Community Organizing and Civic Engagement

By Melissa Johnson

Well under way, the Grantmaking for Community Impact Project (GCIP) is making progress toward increasing funder understanding and demonstrating the impacts of nonprofit advocacy, organizing and civic engagement. When NCRP launched this project in 2008, our intention was to increase funding toward these strategies, often the most direct way to address issues affecting marginalized communities and lead to systemic change.

In addition to producing a research report, we talk simultaneously to foundation staff, donors and trustees to assess where they fall on the continuum of funding these policy engagement efforts. Many funders in our first three sites – New Mexico, North Carolina and Minnesota – are well on their way to supporting nonprofits to build their capacity

to engage in advocacy and organizing while others are just beginning to invest in these strategies. Our work in the first three sites and early follow-up shows great promise that our approach, which combines outreach strategy, publication of findings and education, may prove to be effective at increasing philanthropic support for advocacy, organizing and civic engagement.

Thus far, our field outreach has included conversations with more than 100 foundations. At the same time, we have sought to educate ourselves on the social, economic and political climates of each of the states. Our process is simple: analyze the philanthropic landscape; research key issues and basic demographic and socioeconomic disparities that exist; and talk with as many funders as possible about their funding strategies.

In addition to this core strategy, our partnerships with the regional grantmaking associations and statewide centers of nonprofits give us deeper insight into how change has been made successfully in the nonprofit sector. We soon are able to identify a clear picture of which funders already support advocacy, organizing and civic engagement, and could serve as leaders for their peers. We then are able to devise a list of foundations whose missions could be achievable by investing in these strategies.

During the early outreach process, foundations have shared their hesitation in supporting policy engagement efforts, including concerns on how to identify and measure advocacy and organizing work, how to find nonprofits that engage in the work, and understanding what it takes for a nonprofit to be successful at these strategies. Additionally, funders continue to struggle with what they legally are permitted to fund. Thus, for each site, after the research reports are released, the real test begins – we aim to provide support for those foundations that are most ready to use the research reports as tools to adapt investing strategies and increase support for policy engagement over time.

We have begun to identify how progress is being made toward increasing funding for this work.

DIALOGUE

One of the major elements of our outreach in each research site is a deliberate effort to bring foundations and nonprofits engaged in policy engagement



PHOTO COURTESY OF CENTRO CAMPESINO

Students lobby for the DREAM ACT during the 2008 Student Day at the Capitol. They are members of the Centro Campesino's Youth Organizing Committee from Waseca, Owatonna and Northfield.

into dialogue with each other. To facilitate this, we create host committees comprising representatives from local foundations and nonprofits for our release event, to put together programs that encourage conversations about the findings of the research reports and stimulate constructive dialogue between foundations and nonprofits. Although none of the three events have been exactly the same, each involved discussions of the capacity needed and impact of the policy engagement efforts, as well as the funding necessary to enable nonprofits to achieve the greatest benefits for their communities.

In New Mexico, Lieutenant Governor Diane Denish set the stage for this honest conversation with attendees in the December 2008 release of the report. In North Carolina, nonprofits and foundations came together for nearly a full day of dialogue, holding two breakout sessions after hearing the findings of the report. One was focused on how foundations provide more support and another was focused on how nonprofits can hone their skills to be effective at documenting and communicating their impact. Both sessions included foundations and nonprofits engaging in open dialogue. The most recent event in

The most common roadblock encountered by foundation leaders that prevents them from supporting direct policy engagement efforts of nonprofits is a widely held misperception that advocacy is the same as lobbying ...

Minnesota featured a multimedia presentation by representatives from each participating nonprofit group to highlight their accomplishments, and served as a great complement to the research report.

EDUCATION ABOUT ADVOCACY, COMMUNITY ORGANIZING, AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Many foundation staff with whom we engaged in dialogue over the Grantmaking for Community Impact Project during the past year learned more about the continuum of support

they can provide to nonprofits involved in advocacy and organizing. Since most of these foundations have supported the research, education, leadership development or capacity building efforts of nonprofits that engage in policy engagement, NCRP sought to identify deeper ways these grantmakers can fund the strategies directly.

The most common roadblock encountered by foundation leaders that prevents them from supporting direct policy engagement efforts of nonprofits is a widely held misperception that advocacy is the same as lobbying – a myth that many trustees and donors believe.

Several foundation executives found the research reports a helpful tool to educate their grantmaking committees and boards of trustees. At the Community Foundation of Western North Carolina, nonprofits also were invited to talk about their advocacy and organizing efforts.

EXPANDING KNOWLEDGE AND SCOPE OF NONPROFIT PARTNERS

In all three states, there is great diversity among the nonprofits that utilize advocacy, organizing and civic engagement as strategies to achieve their missions. The organizations featured in the

NEW AND RENEWING NCRP MEMBERS

(August 19 to October 26, 2009)

Capek & Associates
 Center for Civic Policy
 Center for Community Change
 Center for Health, Environment, and Justice
 Center for Participatory Change
 Center for Public & Nonprofit Leadership, Georgetown University
 Communities Helping All Neighbors Gain Empowerment (CHANGE)

Community Action New Mexico
 Cuidiu Consulting
 Dalia Association
 Dresher Foundation
 Edward W. Hazen Foundation
 HandsOn Northwest North Carolina
 Integrative Health Technologies
 John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
 Little Tokyo Service Center
 Media Sutra
 National Gay and Lesbian Task Force
 NC Justice Center
 New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness

New World Foundation
 North Star Fund
 PICO National Network
 Project Vote
 Rockefeller Foundation
 Rockwood Leadership Program
 Southern Coalition for Social Justice
 Southern Partners Fund
 Surdna Foundation
 Unitarian Universalist Veatch Program at Shelter Rock
 Warner Foundation
 Washington Interfaith Network (WIN)
 Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation
 Woods Fund of Chicago

reports include both grassroots community-based organizations and statewide advocacy groups. At least one funder has stated that it did not know that some of the nonprofits in the reports even existed. Our reports served as a tool to expand funders' knowledge of the scope and variety of nonprofits in their own states, thus broadening the potential grantee pools of the foundations. Funders also have demonstrated new appreciation for the length of time it takes to achieve real policy change and the importance of nonprofits working in coalition with one another.

ASSESSING AND ADAPTING GRANTMAKING STRATEGY

In New Mexico, Albuquerque Community Foundation president Randall Royster provided an inspiring call to action for funders in the state. He pledged that the community foundation would consider funding advocacy work for the first time in its 28-year history. The community foundation is part of the New Mexico Collaboration to End Hunger, a collaborative that combines services and advocacy funding to achieve real change.

In North Carolina, the Kate B. Reynolds Charitable Trust recently announced a new initiative that seeks to fund health advocacy organizations in the state for the first time. There also are some foundations that considered removing the "no funding for lobbying" clause from their guidelines, thus opening the door for new proposals and dialogue with nonprofit partners.

Our strategic outreach to funders and the documentation of the impact and community-wide benefits of policy engagement efforts through our research reports were catalysts to these foundations to venture along new paths. We hope to continue to provide support and assess their progress over time. We also hope that other grantmakers will be inspired.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NEW MEXICO ACEQUIA ASSOCIATION



"We are happy that we accomplished something that would not only make ourselves proud but our ancestors proud," said Juanita Garcia of New Mexico Acequia Association's Sembrando Semillas Project. Youth learn through a community-based experiential learning process that cultivates a love of the land called "querencia."

COLLABORATION AND PEER LEARNING

As a result of funder outreach and the research reports, some grantmakers have expanded their peer learning networks. In North Carolina, one statewide funder shared that after reading the report, it reconsidered a previous decision and agreed to continue a statewide partnership that supports services for the Hispanic communities in the state. The report not only served as an education tool for the advocacy work of the Hispanic community in the state but reaffirmed its importance.

In Minnesota, prior to NCRP's outreach, funders had been coming together in a Community Organizing Working Group to share and learn about each other's investments over time. The working group, which was an important resource for NCRP during our work in the state, now has identified increasing funding for community organizing as a desired goal for the group.

As we move on to our next site – Los Angeles County – our team plans to do critical follow-up at the six-month and 12-month marks to identify further how many funders and in what ways they have concretely moved towards funding more advocacy, organizing and civic engagement. We invite not only funders in New Mexico, North Carolina and Minnesota, but other funders to use the report in the following ways:

- Distribute the NCRP reports to your staff and board as an educational tool.
- Assess your mission and determine if investing in advocacy, organizing and civic engagement will help you achieve it better.
- Identify the barriers that prevent you from funding this work.
- Reach out to funders highlighted in the reports to learn more about how they evolved to support advocacy, community organizing and civic engagement efforts.
- Talk to nonprofit partners about how, why and to what extent their work using these strategies makes a difference in their communities.
- Contact your regional grantmaking association to help identify peer funders in your own region that already support nonprofit advocacy and organizing.

Finally, as NCRP hopes to complete the series of seven reports in different regions in the U.S., we hope to share with both funders and nonprofits our findings, lessons learned, progress and achievements. We encourage funders that have an interest in beginning or deepening their support for advocacy, community organizing and civic engagement to contact us. ■

Melissa Johnson is the field director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy. She can be reached at mjohnson@ncrp.org.