

# In today's complex and uncertain times, philanthropy associations and networks are more vital than ever

By David Biemesderfer

I recently attended a conference hosted by The Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP), where the session discussions and hallway conversations all made it clear that many foundation leaders right now are concerned with how they can have a stronger voice and greater impact in today's complex, changing and uncertain times. It is also clear to me that philanthropy cannot respond to this concern without the leadership of philanthropy associations and networks – philanthropy's infrastructure.

A major contributing factor to the widespread feeling of uncertainty today is the recent election results and the deep divides they revealed in our country, which seem to have only solidified since the election. A Gallup Poll taken a few weeks after November 8 showed that 77 percent of Americans – a new high – believed the nation was divided on the most important values.<sup>1</sup> A Monmouth University Poll taken four months later found nearly identical results.<sup>2</sup> These numbers span political parties and ideological beliefs.

Amid the divisiveness and uncertainty, how can (and should) philanthropy respond? Results of a recent CEP survey, which CEP shared at its conference, offer insights into how foundations are beginning to answer that question. When foundation leaders were asked how they are changing their practice in the current environment, nearly half said they plan to place more emphasis on collaborating with other funders; this was the top response, followed closely by engaging



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in more advocacy and public policy at both the state and local levels.<sup>3</sup> Philanthropy associations and networks play a vital leadership role in these areas.

## PSO LEADERSHIP TO INCREASE COLLABORATION

The Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers represents a growing network of 56 regional and national philanthropy-serving organizations (PSOs). These include regional philanthropy associations, national philanthropy affinity groups and other types of national associations and networks. What they all have in common is that they are indisputable leadership organizations for advancing, informing and supporting philanthropy, with a focus on a region, an issue, a type of philanthropic practice or a type of funder.

As foundations look to collaborate more with other funders, regional and national PSOs are the best places to find others who most likely share their

interests and goals. Funders who care about Indiana will find like-minded funders through the Indiana Philanthropy Alliance, and grantmakers who care about ending homelessness will find their peers through Funders Together to End Homelessness.

PSOs provide safe spaces where the trust level is high; such spaces are needed now more than ever to enable foundations to engage in open and honest conversations about their challenges and fears and explore new paths as they move forward.

## PSO LEADERSHIP ON POLICY & ADVOCACY

As foundations look to expand their policy and advocacy work, regional PSOs in particular are the best places to turn for help. Nearly all of the Forum's 35 regional PSO members engage in policy and advocacy at the state or local level, and they have been growing their leadership in this area in recent years, thanks in part to the Forum's capacity-building initiative called Policy-Works for Philanthropy.

As one example of this growth, the percentage of regional PSOs dedicating some staff time to policy work has doubled in the first six years of the initiative, from around 40 percent to more than 80 percent. Clearly regional PSOs are providing an invaluable resource for foundations.

Regional PSOs can provide foundations with education, encouragement and guidance on how to get more engaged in policy and advocacy and

## New/Renewed Members & Supporters

Arcus Foundation  
Asian Pacific Community in Action  
The California Wellness Foundation  
California Association of Nonprofits  
Caring Across Generations  
The Center for Effective Philanthropy  
Center for Medicare Advocacy  
Center for Popular Democracy  
Citi Foundation  
Creative Action  
Deaconess Foundation  
Dyson Foundation  
East Bay Community Foundation  
Educational Foundation of America  
Faith in Public Life  
Georgia Justice Project  
Greater New Orleans Foundation  
Heinz Endowments  
Justice in Aging  
The Kresge Foundation  
Lloyd A. Fry Foundation  
MapLight  
Meyer Foundation  
National Coalition to Abolish the Death Penalty  
Nellie Mae Foundation  
New Visions Foundation  
Northwest Area Foundation  
Perrin Family Foundation  
Public Welfare Foundation  
Retirement Research Foundation  
Voqal  
W.K. Kellogg Foundation  
Weissberg Foundation  
Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation

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develop a stronger voice, while learning from experts and sharing with colleagues within a critical state and local context. Regional PSOs can also help amplify philanthropy's voice on policy and community issues and provide a stronger collective voice for the field.

For example, last month, the Forum's regional PSO members brought delegations from 28 states to Washington, D.C., for Foundations on the Hill (FOTH), which the Forum presented in partnership with the Council on Foundation and the Alliance for Charitable Reform. More than 300 philanthropy leaders met with their representatives and senators, talking about how to strengthen philanthropy but also discussing policy concerns in such areas as veterans' affairs, housing, homelessness, health care, immigration and criminal justice reform. It was one of the largest gatherings in FOTH's 14-year history and the largest in the past nine years and was made possible thanks to the leadership of regional PSOs. FOTH is part of a yearlong effort to help philanthropy engage with federal lawmakers to advance good policy that improves people's lives.

Right now, regional and national PSOs are also fighting the threatened weakening or repeal of the Johnson Amendment, which prohibits 501(c)(3)

charitable organizations from endorsing, opposing or contributing to political candidates and engaging in partisan campaign activities. President Trump recently signed an executive order seeking to weaken this law. To date, half of the Forum's regional and national members have signed on to a letter to ensure the continued full enforcement of the Johnson Amendment, and more signatures are added every week. These members took the lead to educate their foundation members and constituents about the issue and offer guidance for those wanting to add their foundation's own voice to the effort.<sup>4</sup>

The Forum also harnesses the power of our network to work with our regional and national PSO members to ensure a fair and accurate census count in 2020. When census information is not accurate, it threatens to muffle the voices of undercounted groups and regions and undermine the basic political equality that is central to our democracy. We're working closely with many of our members to help them activate funder groups at the local level around the census and broader democracy issues.

### PSO LEADERSHIP TO IMPROVE PHILANTHROPIC PRACTICE

In today's complex, changing times, funders are more interested than ever

in obtaining knowledge about policy, advocacy and many other areas that can help make their philanthropy more impactful; regional and national PSOs play an important role here as well.

We talk a lot these days in our field about how philanthropy can have greater impact, but PSOs are walking the talk in their daily work.

A new, first-of-its-kind research study by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation revealed that foundations' most trusted source of information and knowledge about philanthropic practice is their peers, and they rely heavily on formal funder networks at the local, regional and national levels to connect with them. During interviews and on surveys, foundations cited the Forum's member regional associations as an important point of peer-to-peer connection and interaction. The report noted that "regional associations can offer a more tailored experience and often provide a space for individuals from smaller and regionally focused foundations to have the in-person interaction with peers that is so essential to the spread of new ideas and practices."<sup>5</sup>

The study also affirmed the central role that regional and national PSOs play in leading foundations to change their practice to be more effective with their philanthropy. Nearly three-quarters of survey respondents said they have adopted, or are considering adopting, an idea or best practice during the past two years. When this group was asked an open-ended question to identify the source of practice knowledge that contributed to that change, the top response was a funder network.<sup>6</sup>

PSOs are using their role as a trusted, highly valued source of information and knowledge to inform funders on the most critical issues facing our field and our country today. Right now, for example, many Forum members are helping their foundation members and constituents address how to engage in the hard work of advancing racial equi-

ty, diversity and inclusion in philanthropy. Last year, the Washington Regional Association of Grantmakers launched "Putting Racism on the Table," a learning and action series for philanthropy.<sup>7</sup> The Minnesota Council on Foundations has developed a new strategic framework focused on "advancing prosperity and equity."<sup>8</sup> ABFE offers leadership, training and coaching on racial equity in philanthropy. The list goes on.

Again, a funders' nearest regional association or favorite national affinity group can provide the type of safe, trusted environment that allow foundations to tackle today's complex, sensitive issues with their peers in ways that are more likely to lead to change than many of the alternatives. Today these types of spaces are more needed than ever.

If I sound like an unabashed cheerleader for philanthropy associations and networks, it's because I am, and not just because I lead a network of philanthropy associations and networks. Based on my 20+ years of working with and for

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these organizations, I feel it's impossible to see how philanthropy can confront today's challenges in a meaningful, sustainable and broad-based way without the leadership of philanthropy infrastructure organizations. They serve as the core of our democracy's civil infrastructure. Collectively through the new and expanded Forum network, they will continue to be a powerful foundation for change in our field and our country. ■

*David Biemesderfer is president and CEO of the Forum of Regional Associations of Grantmakers, a nationwide network of regional and national organizations that advance, inform and support philanthropy to advance the common good. The Forum is the largest network serving philanthropy in America.*

## Notes

1. Gallup Poll, "Record-High 77% of Americans Perceive Nation as Divided," November 21, 2016, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/197828/record-high-americans-perceive-nation-divided.aspx>.
2. Monmouth University Polling Institute, "America Remains Deeply Divided," March 22, 2017, [https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/reports/MonmouthPoll\\_US\\_032217/](https://www.monmouth.edu/polling-institute/reports/MonmouthPoll_US_032217/).
3. The Center for Effective Philanthropy, "Shifting Winds: Foundations Respond to a New Political Context," April 2017, <http://research.effectivephilanthropy.org/shifting-winds-foundations-respond-to-new-political-context>.
4. See Forum website: [www.givingforum.org/resources/policy-update-johnson-amendment](http://www.givingforum.org/resources/policy-update-johnson-amendment).
5. William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, "Peer to Peer: At the Heart of Influencing More Effective Philanthropy," February 2017, <http://www.hewlett.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Hewlett-Field-Scan-Report.pdf>.
6. Ibid.
7. See <http://www.puttingracismonthetable.org>.
8. See <https://www.mcf.org/strategic-framework>.