

Rebuilding the middle: How United Ways and foundations can get in the fight to bring communities together

By Pete Manzo

In Salt Lake City, Utah, state legislators passed a bill that provides millions of dollars to fund preschool and childcare for at-risk children.¹

In Georgia, voters passed a state ballot initiative to commit funds to fight human trafficking, following a study that identified Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson airport, the nation's busiest, as a major transit node for trafficking.²

In Los Angeles, California, voters approved a City of Los Angeles ballot initiative in November 2016 and a Los Angeles County initiative in March 2017 that together will provide up to \$5 billion for housing and supportive services to homeless families and individuals, thus implementing a "housing first" policy.³

What do these successful efforts have in common? They all involved broad coalitions of community groups, policy advocates, foundations and, perhaps surprisingly, business leaders. United Way also played a central role in assembling and leading each of these efforts, which happened despite our intensely partisan national political climate.

WORKING AT THE INTERSECTIONS

In the aftermath of the November election, philanthropic and nonprofit leaders have been struggling to find their footing. Alarm at the sharp rise in hateful speech during the election has been only somewhat eclipsed by alarm at a barrage of policy changes since January 20 (made primarily by fiat), which challenge the fundamental values of inclu-

sion and opportunity that most philanthropies and nonprofits hold dear.

Henry Adams observed that "Politics, as a practice, whatever its professions, has always been the systematic organization of hatreds."⁴ With such rancor in our public discourse for the past year, it is tempting to take Adams' hyperbole literally, but we should resist.

Part of the problem is the zero-sum dynamics of our two-party system, exacerbated by partisan gerrymandering and cultural "sorting," which make it easy to forget that far more unites all Americans⁵ than divides them.

One thing all Americans agree on is that families across the country are going through trying times. The stock market is hitting historic highs, and economists say we may be close to "full employment," but working families aren't feeling it. Our middle class is shrinking; wages haven't kept pace with productivity. A solid majority of Americans fear the American Dream is slipping out of their grasp. People may disagree about what to do, but there's broad consensus that something is deeply wrong with our social and economic engines.

America has gutted its economic middle – every year more and more families struggle to meet basic needs – and that zero-sum political conflict has ripped out the middle of our civic life, certainly at the national level.⁶

Where can philanthropy begin to get a handle on rebuilding the middle of civic life in communities?

Dr. Robert Ross, president and CEO of The California Endowment, provided



Children were among last year's participants of United Way of Greater Los Angeles' HomeWalk, an annual march to raise funds and awareness to end homelessness. Photo courtesy of United Way of Greater L.A.

a vivid illustration when speaking a few years ago to United Way board members and senior staff gathered for an annual Capitol Day event in Sacramento, California.⁷ He asked the board members to “Stand up if you have business leaders on your boards. Now keep standing if you also have labor leaders on your boards. And if you have liberals and conservatives, Republicans and Democrats on your boards.” And, with the room filled with board members still standing, he asked, “Now, when your boards meet about your mission, is there blood on the floor?”

This illustrates how the examples from Salt Lake, Georgia and Los Angeles could take root. In each case, the focus was on mission, on achieving a concrete result to improve lives. Those issues attracted support from leaders that many would assume would not agree – liberals and conservatives; business titans and soft-hearted nonprofit leaders; grassroots community organizers and “grasstops” elite foundation and civic leaders.

If we watch cable TV news, it may seem hopeless to expect that philanthropic movements can bring liberal and conservative, rich and poor, people of color and whites to solve real problems and, in so doing, also rebuild the middle ground and bring our communities together. But doing so not only is possible, it is the most important role philanthropy can play in these times.

ADVOCACY THE UNITED WAY

United Way fights for the health, education and financial stability of every person, in every community. We believe everyone deserves the opportunity to lead a good life, and we know we cannot social-service our way to a thriving society.

To achieve the greatest impact possible, we need to catalyze social and cultural change that will be more supportive of human development and self-sufficiency for the people we serve. Catalyzing such change is the highest level of strategic impact the United Way or any philanthropy could hope to achieve,

as observed by Michael Porter and Mark Kramer in their canonic article “Philanthropy’s New Agenda: Creating Value.”⁸

“Give. Advocate. Volunteer” is our call to action, and advocacy increasingly is a central strategy for achieving community impact. Not all “game-changing” initiatives involve policy changes, but in many fields such as health, human services, education and social justice, policy changes comprise a commanding share of potential high-impact strategic goals.

United Ways are independent public charities that share the same mission, brand, goal areas and approach. This shared mission and brand enable United Ways to work together across geographic boundaries – county, region, state and national – while also being responsive to the characteristics and needs of their local communities. As public charities, United Ways are also able to engage more deeply in advocacy than private foundations, such as by supporting or opposing legislation and ballot initiatives

The central task for United Ways and other funders seeking such large-scale change is first to engage with community members to learn their aspirations and work with them to build community. That is both the path and the work itself, in many ways.

United Way’s approach to advocacy is to work through the relationships that individual United Ways – and especially their board members, donors and volunteers – can bring to an issue. We strongly believe the most effective advocates are those volunteers and donors, rather than United Way staff leaders.

Our policy advocacy is most effective when we work together as a network to build a majority of support among policymakers. While most United Ways have strong relationships with stakeholders and public officials in their areas, and can easily gain audiences with public officials, that access is not the same as having *influence*. Ev-

ery United Way has access, but, at the state and national levels, we only can influence power over policy or cultural change when we work together.

Too often, United Ways and other funders are transactional – funding a certain set of activities on the programmatic side or funding a policy goal but then moving on to something else after the vote. However, it is even more important to “win the implementation,” to work even harder on how a policy change goes into effect, and effectively engaging people at the front end makes it much more likely that we will stick with it. The preschool initiative in Salt Lake City and the homeless housing initiative in Los Angeles resulted from years of painstaking work, and rather than being culminations, they instead opened doors to new, more intensive phases of driving change.

Some key aspects of United Ways’ advocacy work include:

- Connecting issues across education, health and income that are far too often addressed in isolation.
- Engaging and bringing business leaders to the table with nonprofits and public sector agencies.
- Being rigorously nonpartisan and working constructively with public officials from all parties (in many cases, public officials will meet with United Ways even when they refuse to meet with United Way coalition partners on an issue).
- Connecting multiple levels of policy activity – local, regional and state – so that messages, best practices, innovation and other activities can be mutually reinforcing and still be responsive to local/regional conditions and needs.
- Statewide and national presence tied to local roots, something many policy-first organizations based in capital cities or big metropolitan centers lack (critical committee chairs and other decision-makers can come (*continued on page 11*))

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Make long-term, flexible investments of capital, time and capacity.

As we have opened branches in small towns, we have strengthened our relationships with the local elected officials, business people and residents. We recognized that, though town leaders and residents had identified needs that could be addressed with public, private and philanthropic resources that are readily accessible in more affluent places, they often lacked the staff and expertise to secure the needed support.

In response, we developed the HOPE Small Town Partnership, an initiative supported by the USDA, Delta Regional Authority and private donors. Through this effort, we have assembled a team to help local leaders and residents develop comprehensive development strategies. Their priorities include affordable housing, healthy food options and community facilities such as health centers and schools – the elements that are required for people in any place to prosper.

National foundations that follow similar strategies will find success in the Deep South. We offer fertile ground for growing a more equitable economic system. Steadfast work by advocates has shown that people in places like the Mississippi Delta and the Alabama Black Belt can prosper when they are equipped with the right tools.

I urge funders to take heed of the recommendations put forth by NCRP and fuel the kind of change that has been a long time coming to this severely distressed, but incredibly promising region. ■

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from any community, large or small, so it helps to have local organizations almost everywhere).

- Working in diverse local communities – large and small, rural and urban – offers insight into emerging challenges and increases understanding of possible solutions.
- Working to win the implementation, since a sought-for policy change is not the end of the battle but really the beginning.

For these attributes to matter, though, a United Way or any other public charity must be willing to “get in the fight,” as Dr. Ross urged. United Way expects and strongly encourages all local United Ways to get involved in advocating for policy changes that can increase the odds of success for the people and communities we serve.

This first step in such a journey can be daunting. It requires CEOs and board members to discuss and agree upon policy goals and strategies, and acknowledge that some opponents will claim it is not their place, or that it is “political” for them to pursue advocacy goals. It invokes fears that controversy may damage relationships or turn away donors.

Our experience, though, is that when United Ways do put a stake in the ground and engage in policy advocacy, their relevance in their communities goes up, not down; they attract more new friends and donors than they may lose, and when they win a policy change, whether a ground ball single up the middle or a home run, it can be worth many multiples of the funding invested in charitable programs.

And in these times when governance seems so polarized nationally, engaging community leaders of all stripes to meet and engage on key policy change is vitally important for its own sake. ■

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Notes

1. Jeff Edmondson, Bill Crim and Allen Grossman, “Pay for Success is Working in Utah,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Oct 17, 2015, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/pay_for_success_is_working_in_utah.
2. Learn more at <https://www.unitedwayatlanta.org/2016/10/25/amendment2/>.
3. Learn more at http://www.unitedwayla.org/prop_hhh_a_victory_for_compassion_in_solving_homelessness.
4. *The Education of Henry Adams*, see <http://bit.ly/2qBc40m>.
5. Seth J. Hill and Chris Tausanovitch, “No, Americans have not become more ideologically polarized,” *Washington Post*, Oct 13, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/10/13/no-americans-have-not-become-more-ideologically-polarized/?utm_term=.2f858f2ef484.
6. “A Bold New Focus for United Way,” Brian Gallagher, at <https://www.unitedway.org/blog/a-bold-new-focus-for-united-way>.
7. “Reform in a Time of Regret,” remarks by Dr. Robert Ross, CEO of The California Endowment, at United Ways of California Capitol Day, prepared text reprinted here with permission: <https://www.unitedwaysca.org/opinion/322-ross-keynote-capitol-day-2012>.
8. The three other levels, in ascending order of impact, are: consistently choosing the best programs/grantees over time; attracting support to those effective efforts from other funders and charitable organizations; and improving the performance and capacity of effective programs/grantees. Michael E. Porter and Mark R. Kramer, “Philanthropy’s New Agenda: Creating Value,” *Harvard Business Review*, November-December 1999, <http://www.fsg.org/publications/philanthropy%E2%80%99s-new-agenda>).