

CHALLENGING GRANTMAKERS TO STRENGTHEN COMMUNITIES



Strengthening Democracy, Increasing Opportunities

IMPACTS OF ADVOCACY, ORGANIZING, AND
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE NORTHWEST REGION

by Gita Gulati-Partee
and Lisa Ranghelli

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Gita Gulati-Partee builds organizational and leadership capacity for breakthrough social change through the national consulting practice OpenSource Leadership Strategies, Inc. With expertise in asset-based methods of inquiry and engagement, organization and network development, adaptive leadership and change, organizational and movement strategy, and systems change advocacy, Gita has served as senior consultant to the Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest and as core faculty of the Wildacres Leadership Initiative, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Academy for Leadership and Action, and Duke University's Institute in Nonprofit Leadership. Previously, she served as public policy director with the N.C. Center for Nonprofits and as a program officer with The Cleveland Foundation. Gita earned an MBA as well as a certificate in public policy from the Weatherhead School of Management at Case Western Reserve University. She received her undergraduate degree from Duke University. Gita has published books and articles on advocacy, philanthropy, nonprofit management, education, and racial equity.

Lisa Ranghelli is the director of NCRP's Grantmaking for Community Impact Project. She developed a methodology for measuring the impacts of advocacy, organizing and civic engagement and has authored or coauthored five reports in the related *Strengthening Democracy, Increasing Opportunities* series. Prior to joining NCRP in 2008, Lisa spent 20 years promoting advocacy and civic engagement, both in the nonprofit and public sectors. Most recently, she was a consultant to foundations and social justice organizations, conducting research, evaluation and program development. Previously, Lisa was deputy director of public policy at the Center for Community Change, where she helped grassroots organizations mobilize successfully in response to federal and state policy issues. Lisa holds a master of regional planning degree from Cornell University.

Executive Summary

The social concerns that funders address with their grantmaking – education, human needs or environment, for example – exist in a larger context shaped by many forces, including public policy, economics and community culture. Many funders believe that to be successful in their chosen areas of interest they must address the larger systems that shape these realities. Why and how do foundations and other institutional grantmakers invest in policy advocacy, community organizing and civic engagement by nonprofit organizations, and how does it make a difference in the daily lives of local residents if they do?

This report describes, measures and, where possible, monetizes the policy impacts that 20 community organizations in the Northwestern region of the United States achieved with foundation support during a five year period (2005–2009). NCRP found that Northwest nonprofits and funders seeking long-term change for local communities face many obstacles because of the complex local and state political environments, sheer size of the states, incredibly diverse populations and longstanding disparities. Despite these challenges, the sample organizations have developed innovative organizing and advocacy strategies and achieved impressive policy and civic engagement impacts with grantmaker support.

In fact, community groups in the Northwest have developed a complex, sophisticated movement building orientation that stands out in comparison with other states studied for this project. Often, their cross-cutting approach looked beyond their individual organizations, issues, constituencies and short-term campaigns in favor of longer-term and more holistic processes that built power, changed mindsets as well as policy, addressed root causes and built their organ-

izations strategically. Also unique to the region, and perhaps related to this, is the rich infrastructure of regional networks, capacity building providers, and funders with a strong social justice and movement orientation.

Using these resources and strategies, the groups had significant accomplishments:

- > Collectively, the groups helped garner more than \$5 billion for marginalized communities over five years. These dollars were in the form of wages, expanded services, state investments in housing and other programs, savings from costly and ill-conceived initiatives that were prevented, and other benefits.
- > The groups achieved substantial impacts that could not be monetized; yet, these benefited tens of thousands of underserved residents. Examples include protecting and advancing LGBTQ rights, promoting fair immigration policies and protecting communities and natural resources from environmental threats.
- > The 20 groups demonstrated a remarkable depth and breadth of civic engagement. Collectively, they trained more than 11,000 leaders, grew their memberships by 98,000 individuals and turned out 417,000 people at public actions. They also registered more than 71,900 voters, including many Native Americans, Latinos and people of color.

Foundations and other institutional grantmakers provided critical monetary, capacity building and convening support to these efforts. Funders contributed \$23.2 million, or 69 percent of all policy engagement funding over five years. Members of the organizations also contributed significantly to their own success: among 15 organizations, membership dues collected

over five years totaled almost \$4.9 million.

NCRP totaled the monetary benefits of the impacts in Idaho, Montana, Oregon and Washington and calculated a return on investment (ROI). For every dollar invested in their advocacy, organizing and civic engagement (\$33.9 million total), the groups garnered \$150 in benefits for their communities.

The ROI is not intended to be a precise figure, which would be nearly impossible to estimate. It uses the best data available to show how financial support by grantmakers and other funding sources has contributed to the collective policy impacts of these groups. The use of an aggregate ROI helps focus the findings on contribution to success, rather than attribution to one group or one grant. It is one among many tools NCRP used to document impact, along with civic and voter engagement data, interim progress outcomes and qualitative information on how the groups achieved success. NCRP also interviewed groups in Alaska and Wyoming to complement learning from the other four states.

STATE HIGHLIGHTS

The full report shares detailed descriptions of the policy impacts of the organizations by issue area, and then summarizes them by state in the appendices. Below are a few highlights for each of the four states represented among the twenty-group sample.

Idaho advocacy and organizing groups focused on a range of issues, including children's health care access, minimum wage, discrimination against immigrants and people of color, harmful factory farms and promotion of clean energy. Key impacts include:

- > Negotiating unprecedented state rules to make spraying of toxic dairy animal waste on agricultural lands safer for humans and better for the environment.
- > Organizing residents to stop a proposed nuclear power plant in Elmore County.
- > Winning state legislative approval of minimum wage increase, ensuring farm workers continue to receive fair wages.

In **Montana**, interviewed organizations supported voting reforms, living wages, women's and children's health, culturally appropriate education, immigrant rights, environmental protection and clean energy. Examples of impact include:

- > Convincing the state to adopt water standards to protect rivers from pollution associated with coal bed methane development.
- > Expanding eligibility for Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) from 175 percent to 250 percent of the federal poverty level, thereby covering up to 30,000 more children.
- > Winning same-day voter registration and "no-fault" absentee ballots. Increased use of absentee ballots (to 29 percent in 2006 and 43 percent in 2008) has contributed to higher voter turnout rates in Montana in recent elections (to 64 percent in 2006 and 74 percent in 2008)

Oregon groups worked in a range of policy areas, such as early education and care; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBTQ) rights; worker issues; immigrant rights; racial justice; tax fairness; tenant rights; and criminal justice. Highlights from Oregon include:

- > Stopping a prison construction initiative that would have cost taxpayers \$1 billion in upfront construction costs and hundreds of millions in ongoing operational expenses annually.
- > Defeating two anti-immigrant ballot initiatives in Columbia County.
- > Winning and then defending statewide LGBTQ anti-discrimination policy and domestic partnership rights for same sex couples.
- > Securing more than \$74 million in increased funding to expand Oregon Head Start Pre-Kindergarten.

In **Washington**, organizations tackled issues including homelessness and housing, predatory lending, immigrant rights, health care access, urban Native American inclusion, and environmental health. Some of their impacts include:

- > Persuading the governor to launch the Washington New Americans Program to welcome immigrants and help them become citizens.
- > Securing \$300 million in state funding for affordable housing development and preservation, leveraging four times that amount in additional housing resources.
- > Winning creation of Health Insurance Partnership to provide health care subsidies for low income employees of small businesses.
- > Developing jobs for low-income residents to make

Spokane homes and businesses more energy efficient – generating needed income and cutting energy costs for residents.

SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES

To achieve these impacts, the organizations creatively engaged affected constituencies in their cities and states. This engagement was valuable in its own right, helping marginalized groups find a voice in the democratic process. It also marshaled the people power needed to make change happen. NCRP found that both the quantity and the quality of civic commitment were distinctive. The report profiles several grassroots community leaders who were able to tackle issues of direct and immediate concern through their involvement in community organizations – such as 10-year-old Marcelas Owens, a member of the Washington Community Action Network who gained national visibility when he attended President Obama’s signing of health care reform legislation in 2010.

The Northwest groups designed leadership development programs that were tailored to their constituencies, whether immigrants, Native Americans or youth. They integrated nonpartisan voter outreach and ballot initiative work with their year-round organizing and issues campaigns, so these strategies mutually reinforced each other. They reframed how issues were discussed in the media and in public debates. And many organizations did cross-cutting issue work, for example linking early childhood education to crime reduction, or housing code enforcement to health outcomes. They also built bridges across constituencies, not only because it made sense for their organizations’ missions, but also to support their allies and foster broader movements for change over the long term.

This movement orientation went hand in hand with strong coalitions. These sophisticated coalitions built organic and trusting relationships, developed well articulated goals and strategies, fostered inclusive leadership, and identified clear roles for coalition members. Often these coalitions went beyond the “usual suspects” to engage labor unions, faith communities, and business leaders. Broad coalitions have hung together successfully because their strength is in their relationships and common values, which remained constant even as issue priorities changed. Even when coalition members disagreed on some issues, they had worked through a process to ensure that their unity was not weakened by it.



Photo courtesy of Statewide Poverty Action Network.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR GRANTMAKERS

Grantmakers were critical to the success of these organizations, helping them build their capacity over many years to get to the point where they could work on the often geographically dispersed local level, as well as statewide and even nationally. This report provides many examples of effective funder-nonprofit partnerships, such as:

- > The Campion and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundations joined forces to build the capacity of the Washington Low Income Housing Alliance and its allies to fight homelessness.
- > Social Justice Fund Northwest helped Montana Women Vote take its voter and civic engagement work to the next level, thereby amplifying its public voice.
- > McKenzie River Gathering and Northwest Health Foundation have made long-term investments in Oregon nonprofits, going beyond grants to helping with communications, convening, reaching out to other funders, and acting as true partners on the ground.
- > The Bullitt Foundation helped Snake River Alliance in Idaho expand its mission from nuclear energy watchdog to clean energy proponent as well.

The findings suggest that if more local and regional foundations added advocacy funding to their toolbox of strategies to achieve their missions, communities could accomplish even greater impact. The region continues to face many urgent issues in areas such as immigrant rights, education, health, housing, low-wage work, LGBTQ rights and environmental justice. There is much to be done.

NCRP encourages nonprofits and funders to use this report to educate others about the ways philanthropists can leverage their grant dollars to advance their goals more effectively and help the communities they care about. Many funders and nonprofits share the same principal goal of making a bigger impact for those most in need. NCRP provides some research-based answers on how to achieve that shared goal by developing long-term strategies to change systems.

For foundations to maximize their impact, NCRP recommends that funders:

1. Engage board members and/or donors in dialogue about how advocacy and organizing can help achieve long-term goals.

Sharing concrete examples from this report with trustees and major donors can help demystify advocacy and organizing, and encourage discussion of how these strategies fit among a variety of approaches needed to achieve change on the issues funders care about. Grantmakers can seek out and learn from the experiences of funder colleagues and community organizations in the region as they engage in these conversations.

2. Add advocacy, organizing and civic engagement strategies to the foundation's grantmaking portfolio, or increase the percentage of grant dollars devoted to these strategies.

Some funders already recognize the significant return offered by investing in policy advocacy and organizing, and devote a substantial percentage of their grant dollars to this work. If other funders initiate funding or increase the proportion of their grant dollars devoted to these strategies, they will augment the impact of their own investments in direct service projects, increase the capacity of underserved communities to engage in participatory democracy and contribute to solving large scale problems rather than addressing only symptoms.

3. Work together to foster philanthropic cooperation and shared learning.

Northwest funders will see better results if they communicate with each other and with national funders to leverage their resources effectively to address the pressing issues facing the region. In doing so, regional and national philanthropies can capitalize on the unique qualities of advocacy and civic engagement in the region, including cross-issue and cross-constituency, movement building orientation.

4. Invest in organizational capacity and a nonprofit advocacy infrastructure

This report features a cross-section of highly sophisticated advocacy and grassroots groups in the Northwest. None of the groups in the sample achieved their current size and scope overnight; it took time, experience and investments in organizational capacity. Foundations can invest in culturally appropriate capacity building and in a nonprofit advocacy infrastructure in each of the Northwest states and the region overall.

5. Provide general operating support and multiyear grants.

Nonprofits must simultaneously build capacity, train and develop new leaders, and work across multiple issue areas in order to engage in effective advocacy and organizing work. Uncertain policy environments require flexibility to respond to rapidly changing circumstances. Funding partners can be of greatest help by investing in a way that enables groups to achieve the highest possible impact.

6. Explore the value of grants for advocacy in rural states and states that may seem politically challenging.

States that some funders may deem resistant to policy change or too sparsely populated to invest in advocacy actually may hold tremendous potential to make change. Rural communities have many assets that benefit advocacy work, including easier access to policymakers and strong community relationships. These assets can help overcome perceived political barriers. Lack of investment in these states by grantmakers is a missed opportunity, especially when a grant dollar can go further in achieving an advocacy impact.