

Grantmaking for Community Impact Project in New Mexico

By Lisa Ranghelli

Esther Garcia, from the village of Questa and a member of the New Mexico Acequia Association, organized her community when the aging Cabresta Dam was on the brink of failure. After three years of advocacy, she and other community leaders secured \$6 million to rehabilitate the dam, ensuring that Questa would not succumb to flood waters.

This was just one of several powerful stories of community impact shared at a December forum co-hosted by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) and the New Mexico Association of Grantmakers (NMAG). More than 75 foundation and nonprofit leaders gathered in December in Santa Fe to hear the findings from NCRP's new report, *Strengthening Democracy, Increasing Opportunities: Impacts of Advocacy, Organizing, and Civic Engagement in New Mexico*, which offers compelling evidence for funders wondering how to get the biggest bang for their buck.

The current economic crisis probably is prompting many foundation leaders to reexamine their funding strategy and grants portfolio. They may be asking themselves: How can we maximize our impact during this time of great need? This timely presentation offered some answers for both local and national funders who give grants in New Mexico.

Earlier this year, NCRP launched the Grantmaking for Community Impact Project (GCIP) to increase philanthropic resources for advocacy, community organizing and civic engagement that address the long-term needs of underserved communities. *Strengthening Democracy, Increasing Opportunities* is the first of several reports that will document the impact of these strategies around the country.



New Mexico faces many challenges, including high rates of child poverty and domestic violence, and low median incomes and high school graduation rates. The state has limited philanthropic resources to tackle these problems, and three of every four philanthropic dollars granted in the state come from outside New Mexico.¹ This is all the more reason for foundations and donors to ensure that their scarce resources are being invested wisely to address critical issues.

This point was made by several of the speakers at the report release event. Lieutenant Governor Diane Denish, on

the heels of becoming governor-designate of New Mexico,² gave welcoming remarks and noted that, "New Mexico benefits from the mission of NCRP," which seeks to ensure that philanthropic resources support nonprofit effectiveness and benefit those with the least wealth and power in society. Denish emphasized the importance of collaboration between philanthropy, the public sector and nonprofits, and announced her plan to create an Office of Philanthropic Partnerships. Denish highlighted examples of advocacy that has helped improve conditions in the state.

Dolores Roybal, president of the Con Alma Health

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Foundation, then spoke about the critical role the nonprofit sector plays both nationally and in New Mexico, which has fewer than two million residents but is home to more than 6,000 organizations, many of which engage in advocacy.

Indeed, as funders learned at the forum, the impacts and return on investment for support of advocacy and

organizing have been striking. NCRP researchers documented the work of 14 community organizations in New Mexico over a five-year period, from 2003 to 2007, and found that *for every dollar invested in these groups for their advocacy and organizing efforts, the return on investment was \$157 in measurable impacts*. Overall, NCRP quantified at least \$2.6 billion in community benefits. The benefits not only were tangible, but felt broadly. Many of the monetary gains, such as increased Medicaid funding, higher minimum wage levels, new Individual Development Accounts (IDAs) and expanded tax credits, had economic ripple effects that benefited the whole state. Other impacts were quantified less easily but just as impactful, including many environmental justice victories and civil and human rights gains.

Some of the advocacy and organizing benefits highlighted in the report include:

- > An \$800 million increase in state and federal Medicaid spending over five years, providing health care for 25,000 children and adults.
- > More than \$500 million in wages for at least 230,000 workers benefiting from state and local minimum wage increases.
- > \$131 million in savings on points and fees for 43,000 borrowers who were protected by the state's strong

anti-predatory lending law.

- > Acceptable levels of uranium in groundwater reduced from 5,000 to 30 milligrams per liter. Groundwater is the source of drinking water for 9 in 10 New Mexicans.
- > Improved health care access for native Americans and access to social services for people with limited English.
- > \$144 million school bonds for Albuquerque schools, attended by 90,000 students, and \$84.5 million in increased salaries for 18,400 teachers across New Mexico.

Audience members heard powerful stories of impact, which the groups often achieved in collaboration with each other, allied nonprofits and public officials. Equally important were the civic engagement findings. Most of the featured organizations have engaged affected constituencies actively in identifying problems, choosing solutions and working to get the solutions implemented.

The civic engagement highlights include:

- > 300,000 community members were informed and educated.
- > 57,341 residents attended public actions.
- > 16,935 individuals joined organizations as members.
- > 8,295 constituents attended leadership training.
- > 1,903 volunteers registered and mobilized voters.
- > 707 members became core leaders of their organizations.

By engaging disenfranchised residents in the democratic process, the 14 organizations are strengthening the social fabric of their communities and building valuable skills that leaders take with them into other spheres of public life, causing a social "ripple effect."

A moving example of the power of democratic participation is the work of Somos Un Pueblo Unido's youth leaders, who organized to pass a state law that allows students to gain access to in-state tuition and scholarships for college, regardless of their immigration status. Many of these youths were brought to this country by their parents when they were infants or small children. Once in high school, they discovered barriers to higher education because they were undocumented. Through the democratic process, they helped change state law. This effort culminated in an Immigrant Student Lobby Day at the state

THE 14 ORGANIZATIONS FEATURED IN THE REPORT ARE:

Albuquerque Interfaith
 Community Action New Mexico
 Colonias Development Council
 Enlace Comunitario and El Centro de Igualdad y Derechos
 New Mexico Acequia Association
 New Mexico ACORN
 New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness
 New Mexico Environmental Law Center
 New Mexico Voices for Children
 Sacred Alliance for Grassroots Equality (SAGE) Council
 Santa Fe Living Wage Network
 Somos Un Pueblo Unido
 Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP)
 Tewa Women United

Capitol, attended by more than 200 immigrant youth.

General operating support, multiyear funding and capacity-building are critical types of foundation support for advocacy and organizing efforts because it usually takes a long time to achieve campaign goals, and policy environments always are shifting. “We found that foundation support is absolutely crucial for sustaining advocacy and organizing efforts,” said Aaron Dorfman, executive director of NCRP, during the event. “General operating support gives organizations the flexibility they need to respond to new policy opportunities.”

The highlight of the event was the small group discussions in which funders and nonprofit leaders shared their vision for a better New Mexico and ideas on how advocacy, organizing and civic engagement can help achieve such a vision. One local funder admitted that there were organizations profiled in the report he didn’t even know existed, demonstrating the value of highlighting the groups’ work and bringing funders and community leaders together to meet and learn from each other.

Reactions from community foundation leaders were encouraging. Randall Royster, president of the Albuquerque Community Foundation, gave a rousing call to action in which he shared his own story of how his foundation recently decided to embrace advocacy through its support for a campaign to end hunger in New Mexico.

Others expressed interest in having presentations in support of nonprofit advocacy made to their boards of directors. Given that out-of-state funding is significant in New Mexico, one participant encouraged national and local funders to share best practices for partnering with one another to leverage outside resources for the benefit of local organizations and communities. A local funder urged adopting a “strengths-based” approach to address the state’s many challenges. She noted that the nonprofit sector in New Mexico is resilient; it has accomplished much with limited resources (as the report demonstrates)

and can continue to have impact even through the current economic crisis by continuing to engage in advocacy, organizing and civic engagement.

The story of the Santa Fe Living Wage Network provides an example of a successful advocacy effort despite limited resources—but with a whole lot of people power. Between 2003 and 2007, the Santa Fe Living Wage Network mobilized low-wage workers, businesses, allied nonprofits and city council members to set a new minimum wage, which is now more than \$10 per hour in Santa Fe, the country’s highest rate. Some low-wage workers from the area shared with the *New York Times Magazine* (January 15, 2006) what they were planning to do with their extra earnings.

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— Aaron Dorfman, NCRP

They mentioned things that most people take for granted, like being able to take a vacation, spend more time with their kids, go to the doctor or get a prescription filled.

The added wages enabled people to live their lives with greater dignity—an excellent example and reminder of who, and what, we’re fighting for. ■

Much of the success of our first GCIP project is due to the invaluable support from NMAG president Terry Odendahl and assistant director Susan Cantor.

*Lisa Ranghelli is senior research associate at NCRP and author of *Strengthening Democracy, Increasing Opportunities: Impacts of Advocacy, Organizing and Civic Engagement in New Mexico*.*

NOTES

1. Susan Cantor and Teresa Odendahl, *Philanthropy in New Mexico*, 2008, New Mexico Association of Grantmakers.
2. President-Elect Obama had just announced his plan to appoint New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson as Secretary of Commerce.