

Bolder Together: Collaboration to Strengthen Civic Engagement Capacity in California

Submitted By Mary Manuel, McKay Foundation

How can foundations help build movements and opportunities for social change – and win?

This is the question at the heart of a funder collaborative launched in California in early 2010. The California Civic Participation Funders was born out of a series of conversations among a group of us who invest in various social justice issue areas. We realized that we shared a common sense of frustration about the lack of sustainable policy wins among the social movements that we supported.

To achieve real and lasting progress on issues from immigration reform to economic justice, we understood that civic engagement could not come and go with each election cycle. We wanted to support nonprofits around the state as they worked to build and strengthen the capacity of people and communities to get involved in local statewide issues – and to stay involved over the long haul in working for social change.

In our early meetings, we focused on identifying the critical capacities that nonprofits need (either on their own or as part of broader networks) to achieve their goals. We developed a framework modeled after State Voices¹ that included several of these cross-cutting capacities, such as community organizing, strategic communications, voter mobilization, leadership development, policy development and research and fundraising. This list of capacities then helped us identify our priorities for funding.

We also began to settle on a shared goal: to strengthen local organizations and networks in targeted regions of the

state so they can mobilize and engage underrepresented voters more effectively.

The four regions we targeted were San Diego, Orange, San Bernardino and Riverside Counties. These areas of the state were selected based largely on demographic and political trends. As they are among the fastest growing counties in the country, we believed that investing in local infrastructure now would prepare underrepresented communities (who by now make up a majority of the counties' population) to have a voice in local and statewide decision-making to both protect and advance their own interests. For example, Riverside County grew by 42 percent in the last decade. Two-thirds of that growth was due to a surge in the Latino population; the number of Asian Americans doubled over the same period. However, the county's political and local leadership remains overwhelmingly conservative and white despite these

dramatic increases in the local population of people of color.

Upon reviewing these numbers, we decided that the changing demographics of the four counties made them promising laboratories to explore how best to promote higher levels of civic engagement among the populations that are the focus of the collaborative's work. As funders interested in social justice, members of the group saw a clear connection between higher engagement among these populations and sustainable progress on priority issues from education to civil rights. Among the reasons: many of the newer immigrant populations that comprise the target population for this work tend to be more open to government efforts to reduce discrimination and advance equality, and to boost investments in education, health and social services for people in need.

One of things we wanted to accomplish with the California Civic Participation Funders was to take a fresh look at how to build and sustain a successful funder collaborative. We have some key elements to our approach that we believe makes this effort distinct from other funder collaboratives:

- **We are an intentionally diverse group.** The 10 participants range from large foundations to smaller family foundations and private donors. We bring a variety of perspectives and interests to the work of increasing civic participation. For some of us, the spark is an interest in advancing immigrant rights and integration; for others, it is promoting racial justice or getting a broader

CALIFORNIA CIVIC PARTICIPATION FUNDERS

- California Endowment
- Color of Democracy Fund
- Evelyn and Walter Hass Jr. Fund
- James Irvine Foundation
- McKay Foundation
- Mitchell Kapor Foundation
- PowerPAC Foundation
- Rosenberg Foundation
- Tides
- Women's Foundation of California

cross-section of the public involved in health care advocacy. By focusing on a common denominator that strengthens all of our work, we are able to step out of our issue silos to invest in a core strategy that will contribute to the success of the movements we support.

- **We are committed to community engagement.** We began our work in the four counties with an effort to convene community leaders, learn about the unique conditions in each county, and explore local priorities and perspectives. For example, in San Diego, we convened 20 local leaders from the labor and faith communities, representatives of local foundations, political leaders and community organizing groups. Over the course of seven months, these local leaders codeveloped the plan of action to increase civic participation in San Diego County. From this was born Engage San Diego, a county-wide table whose mission is to increase civic participation in underrepresented communities to ensure that the electorate and civic leadership of the region matches the area's diversity. Engage is also the first regional partner of the national State Voices network of similar tables in states around the country.
- **Participants retain a high level of autonomy.** Rather than pooling our funds and adopting the necessary policies and procedures for making joint grant decisions, we settled on an approach whereby each of our organizations still makes its own grant decisions, but does so in a way that is highly coordinated. We all have an understanding of the broader goals and objectives, and of how our investments fit into a bigger puzzle. In other words, once everyone agrees on what the finished puzzle should look like, each member then contributes its respec-



Photo courtesy of Evelyn & Walter Haas, Jr. Fund.

tive pieces to complete it. This approach has helped us avoid some of the common complaints in collaboratives with pooled funds: getting bogged down in cumbersome and protracted joint decision-making processes; tensions over which organizations or communities should receive support; and concern over whether there is an adequate, mission-related return on investment.

We also feel that this collaborative structure allows us to take on a shared assumption of risk. By working collectively to identify and support the full range of investments needed to boost nonprofit capacity across the four counties – from training and technical assistance to leadership development, peer learning and base building – we are able to do work on a scale that would be impossible to accomplish on our own. The risks in this work look different in each county. For example, in San Diego, we knew that organizations already were in place that could be supported to engage in the work of boosting civic participation among underrepresented groups. The challenge was to bring people together around

shared strategies and goals, and to introduce innovations and new ways of working collaboratively to reach greater numbers of voters. We did not know when we started whether such a collaborative approach would take hold among the organizations and movements involved.

Perhaps the most important part of our collaborative is its emphasis on learning. We have created an intentional learning community in which, through joint site visits, periodic get-togethers and shared sponsorship of research, we work together to develop a more fine-tuned understanding of problems and possible solutions so we can work with nonprofits to achieve better results on the ground. In our quarterly meetings, we first spend time discussing updates on the work in each of the four counties. We are continuously assessing what we have learned and adjust our strategy based on the information we are receiving from the groups we are working with. We then devote the last hour to a presentation on a learning topic that affects the entire state. These topics have included upcoming ballot measures, redistricting, election reform and shifting demographic trends.

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Although they are bursting with the very black people ABFE's framework purports to help, many of our black organizations are hanging on by a shoestring, reeling from years of disinvestment by government and philanthropy, lack of the most current technology, and board and staff capacity that cannot meet the demands of the work or the competition from their mainstream counterparts. And, like those of us who are black in philanthropy, many of our nonprofit heads feel isolated without a peer support network and without a talent pipeline of strong successors.

Our ancestors worked hard after slavery ended to establish an infrastructure of black organizations. To be sure, times have changed, and we can theoretically go anywhere we want for help. But as part of ABFE's Responsive Philanthropy in Black Communities Framework, ABFE and all of us on the ground must lead the effort to lift up

and partner with our NAACPs, Urban Leagues, the various former settlement houses named after our black heroes and she-roses, as well as other black nonprofits that must play a critical role in rebuilding our community. We should not be afraid to hold a high bar for the quality of the work and demonstrated outcomes while at the same time offering a hand of support as they remain a critical part of the fabric of black communities.

And if there are some organizations that cannot or will not or should not survive, let's not kill them by death by a thousand cuts, but let us help them find a humane and respectful way to close. We must strengthen "our house" in the context of ABFE's Framework for Responsive Philanthropy. We must not apologize for working to lift up our own organizations, just as others of various backgrounds do not apologize for lifting up theirs. ■

Karen Kelly-Ariwoola is former vice president of community philanthropy at The Minneapolis Foundation. You can read the full text of her ABFE James A. Joseph Lecture at www.abfe.org/FCDOCS\21st_James_A_Joseph_Lecture.pdf.

Notes

1. *The Minneapolis Foundation, One Minneapolis Report, Fall 2011.*
2. *The report was Measuring Up 2000, published by the Minneapolis Foundation, Minneapolis Public Schools and the Minneapolis Chamber of Commerce.*
3. *Download the Blueprint for Action at: www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/www/groups/public/@health/documents/webcontent/convert_278139.pdf.*
4. *See <http://blog.mkf.org/2012/04/17/strengthening-our-house-capacity-building-seminar-april-24th/>.*

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Looking ahead, we are interested in applying what we are learning across the four counties and to further our understanding about innovative strategies to boost civic participation that might be working in one place and could potentially be applied in others.

The glue that holds our collaborative together is our relationship with one another. We do not have a formal management structure. It's loose enough so that each of us determines how to take part in the work in ways that makes sense for our organizations.

In addition, no one dominates the group. We have strived to keep in good communication so that everyone knows and understands what everyone else is doing and can tailor the work accordingly. One of our partners has taken on the de facto lead in organizing meetings, docu-

menting the group's collective investments and generally keeping things on track. Each member plays a leadership role in a different way. While sometimes challenging, the informality of this collaborative has allowed us to be much more flexible in what we do, while still being very diligent about communications, learning and overall strategy. We also genuinely enjoy the time we spend together and try to always allot time for a bit of fun.

We hope that by sharing our approach and what we have learned so far, we can support other funders interested in collaborative funding for social justice. We do not presume that we have come up with the model for others to emulate, but rather offer up our approach as food for thought as funders and nonprofit partners weigh how best to build or strengthen our movements, especially in a moment

of declining resources for this work.

We look forward to further identifying shared innovative approaches that will help all of us be more effective in this work. ■

Adapted from "Bolder Together," written by William H. Woodwell Jr., a report commissioned by the California Civic Participation Funders. You can read the full report at <http://www.haasjr.org/what-were-learning/resource/bolder-together>.

For more information about the collaborative, please contact Cathy Cha at cathy@haasjr.org.

Notes

1. *You can find more information about State Voices here: <http://www.statevoices.org/>.*