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Community Foundations as Partners in the Public Policy Process: What it Takes

By Deborah A. Ellwood

In the city of Dubuque, Iowa, youth aging out of foster care have been put at the top of the list for subsidized housing.

Students in Massachusetts will have the opportunity to participate in a high-quality community college system that meets their needs and is better aligned with the needs of the modern economy and the available jobs.

Families in Louisiana, Mississippi and Arkansas are receiving parent support services that have been proven to reduce child abuse.

Parents in the Fresno Unified School District are learning the importance of attendance to school success, and school administrators are developing innovative ways to help families overcome the barriers that lead to excessive absences.

The City of San Jose passed an ordinance that may serve as the "gold standard" for payday loan regulation by California municipalities that are concerned with protecting the most vulnerable of residents living in very-low income neighborhoods where these businesses are concentrated. In Montana, the interest people can be charged by pay day lenders has been capped.

High school students in Pittsburgh, Syracuse, Buffalo, Kalamazoo, New Haven and a number of other communities have access to financial support for college.

All of these policy changes – affecting the lives of millions – were won with the support and/or leadership of community foundations. Whether



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it is the creation of a strategic plan at a school district that leads to better teacher training, the implementation of a regional business development program or the marshaling of federal funding for specific programs that bolster vulnerable families, community foundations across the country have been at the table as key partners and welcome allies. As Thomas Glynn, former chief operating officer at Partners Health-Care remarked, "In a town loaded with health care experts, the Boston Foundation has succeeded in changing the conversation about health care, making prevention, wellness and obesity central to our community dialogue."

AN IMPORTANT PART OF A COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP STRATEGY

The community foundations doing policy work are different sizes, have different asset mixes and use varying business models, but they are all engaged with the public sector because they recog-

nize that the challenges their communities face are too large to be solved alone. They believe that pursuing a public policy agenda is an important part of an overall community leadership strategy because it can lead to bigger advances than grantmaking alone.

UNIQUE ATTRIBUTES AND A RANGE OF TACTICS POSITION COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS WELL

Community foundations have unique attributes that make them particularly helpful to the policy process, including political independence, flexible resources, permanence, local relationships as well as a public charity tax status that allows them lobbying flexibility and helps ensure local accountability. National funders have found that community foundations can be important partners on local policy issues. “The Annie E. Casey Foundation is working closely with community foundations across the country on the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading,” said Ralph Smith, senior vice president. “We have found them to be perfectly positioned to help shepherd needed changes to education policy and practice.”

Because of their unique position, community foundations are able to employ a number of tactics at different points in the policy process – support for research that documents needs and possible solutions, stakeholder engagement, direct communication with policymakers, public information campaigns, opinion pieces in local media outlets, lobbying and long-term community conversations that support broad resident participation in community problem-solving. Each of these demands varying levels of staff and grantmaking resources.

INTERNAL PRACTICES SUPPORT SUCCESS

While the public policy strategies employed by community foundations can take many forms, there are some under-

lying internal practices that help ensure that community foundations are effective in working with the public sector.

A board of directors that is committed to public policy as a strategy

Community foundations that are engaged in public policy work usually have boards that are committed to it as a core strategy. According to Tom Wilcox, President of the Baltimore Community Foundation, his board understands the importance of this approach. “When thinking through how we could make the biggest difference in building a better Baltimore,” he says, “our board recognized that we couldn’t do it without doing more policy work. Now our all of our strategies include a policy component, with the board, including people with views all along the political spectrum, fully committed.”

Boards most aligned around policy work are very comfortable working with the public sector and have a nuanced understanding of the risks and benefits of trying to influence public policy at varying levels of government. They are willing to allocate significant resources for this work, particularly for the CEO’s time. In addition, they allow the CEO and staff the leeway they need to make quick decisions within a particular policy strategy. They also recognize the need to be publicly tied to policy work when necessary and understand when it is more appropriate to play a quieter role.

Boards that are very committed to working with the public sector also look for CEOs who are experienced with government and even hire people directly from senior elected or appointed positions. The Seattle Foundation hired the former mayor, the Minneapolis Foundation brought on the former county administrator and the San Francisco Foundation hired the former director of public health for the city and county. Boards from foundations as di-

verse as The Nebraska Foundation, the Hartford Foundation for Public Giving, The Pittsburgh Foundation the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo and the Denver Foundation all brought in CEOs who have worked directly in government at various levels. Meanwhile, the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, The Boston Foundation and the California Community Foundation hired people with visible track records in the policy sphere who have aggressively carried that forward into their work with the community foundation. The Chicago Community Trust’s board shared their CEO with the public sector from November 2010 to May 2011 when he served as the interim superintendent of the Chicago Public Schools until a new superintendent was named.

For those boards that are not comfortable working with the public sector, CEOs can work with them to create a better appreciation and understanding of the role of public policy in building healthy, productive communities. Often, when boards examine the range of strategies to maximize community impact, the issue of the foundation’s role in policy emerges. If they choose to engage the organization more deeply in the public sector, they can then adopt the appropriate policies and practices.

Staff have expertise influencing policy

Those community foundations that are most aggressively pursuing a policy agenda often have a CEO with significant experience shaping public policy and those CEOs often hire staff with expertise in law, communications, or community organizing.

If the CEO does not have a policy background or the foundation is just entering the policy realm, the CEO might bring on another senior manager with relevant skills. At the Arkansas Community Foundation, for example, Heather Larkin, president & CEO, hired a vice president of community

investment with a background in law, who was a former staff assistant for the United States Senate Committee on Small Business, when the board determined that it wanted the organization to do more work with the public sector. “Hiring someone with experience in government and policy expertise has been invaluable in helping ARCF and our partners advance significant, long-term improvements in our communities,” said Larkin. “We are more sophisticated and our impact is much greater.”

In either case, it’s important that there are staff that understand how the policy process works, have a mechanism to intelligently analyze issues, are able to communicate clearly to the right audiences and have the sophistication and sensitivity to work with a range of community members to shape policies that affect the community.

Board and staff have relationships with a range of policymakers and community members

Whether it’s a board member who has close relationships with legislative leaders, a CEO who knows the deputy mayor, a communications officer who worked in state government or a senior program officer who worked in the external affairs office at a local hospital, relationships with the public sector matter. These relationships help open doors for a community foundation, assist staff in accessing information quickly and provide insights that are critical to all aspects of policy strategy.

Community foundations also need relationships with a number of partners – content experts, the media, other funders and not-for-profit leaders in order to advance a policy agenda. In addition, a growing number of community foundations are emphasizing the importance of building trusting relationships and creating safe spaces for

community members who are most affected by government policies to come together to address their concerns. They argue that it’s not enough to get “input” on issues; people need to be able to identify their needs and work together to craft solutions. In the end, this will lead to more effective and sustainable public policies and practices.

The community foundation has the infrastructure to legally and effectively engage in policy

Because work with the public sector carries a significant amount of risk, community foundations are wise to

have some basic internal policies and procedures in place around policy, advocacy and lobbying. Most importantly, they need to know and abide by basic IRS rules about lobbying as well as the state lobbying laws. A number of useful resources are available for community foundations engaging in this work, including *Foundations for Civic Impact: Advocacy and Civic Engagement Toolkit for Community Foundations* by the Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest, Council on Foundations, CFLeads and Rockefeller Brothers Fund. In addition, the Council on Foundations’ Center for Community Foundation Excellence offers a course, *Public Policy for Community Foundations*. The curriculum for this course was prepared by CFLeads.

In addition, there need to be well-understood processes by which policy issues are chosen and acted upon. It is helpful to articulate when a board should get involved, which will vary depending on the organization’s current level of policy involvement and experience. In addition to adopting internal policies, committing grantmaking and general operating resources for an extended period of time is important because few policy victories are won quickly.

While the practices articulated here are important to any work with the public sector, it takes time to get a community foundation to a point where it is comfortable taking on a policy agenda at the local, state or federal level. No community foundation has undertaken these approaches overnight. They usually pursue a deliberate process that takes them in that direction. Once they do, though, they can be important partners in bringing about the public policies and practices that are critical to healthy, thriving communities. ■

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