

# Advancing Advocacy by Philanthropies

08.20.19 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



Recently, the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP), noticed a shift in the focus of many foundations away from a historical reluctance “to embrace advocacy.” Governments have become less willing or able to tackle societal problems because of gridlock and dysfunction, coupled with a policy of budget cuts, so “funders are increasingly turning to policy advocacy as a lever for change.”

CEP’s mission is to develop “data and insight” to help foundations better address and solve these “pressing social needs.” It turned to Arabella Advisors, a Certified B Corporation that provides “strategic guidance for effective philanthropy,” to document and analyze this apparent trend of supporting advocacy and, sometimes, “experimenting with institutional and staffing structures, or seeking to use their convening power and influence in addition to grants, to advance policy change.”

Arabella Advisors was tasked with the interview of a “diverse group of 11 philanthropies to learn how they are approaching advocacy.” CEP now reports these discussions yielded “four common threads” that are “promising funder practices for advancing technology.”

- “Philanthropists are increasingly willing to spend on lobbying and elections and are creating institutional structures that allow them to do so.”

For many good reasons of law and policy, philanthropists have shied away from dipping into advocacy and have, instead, “deployed their capital through private foundations.” But their 501(c)(3) grantees face lobbying limits, “armies of lobbyists” and big political war chests; it’s like “bringing a white paper to a knife fight.” And recent events and experiences have shown that to make headway in public policy, the “capacity to petition elected officials to support specific legislation and to hold them accountable for their actions at the voting booth” is necessary.

Many philanthropists, including the newer ones like Laura and John Arnold or Priscilla Chan and Mark Zuckerberg have turned to different legal vehicles – LLCs – as the “primary home for their philanthropy.” In connection with their advocacy goals, they are also more likely to partner with 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) “fiscal sponsorship intermediaries capable of deploying capital for lobbying and political activity in ways that private foundations cannot.

- **Foundations are creating advocacy teams with specialized experience to support their program officers and grantees – and that sometimes play a lead role in driving advocacy campaigns.**

The switch to an aggressive advocacy posture means a need for specialists in advocacy who bring a new set of skills to “complement the expertise of issue-focused program teams and help program teams develop and execute smart advocacy strategies.” A good example is the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative: it created an internal advocacy team (a “horizontal”) that works with three “issue-oriented verticals.” This innovative approach helps to refine the target issues, identify suitable grantees or policymakers for collaboration, and analyze the needed capacities to “achieve policy change.”

Others have created teams to lead advocacy efforts independent of their established program teams. An example is The Rockefeller Foundation which recently led a campaign to “promote strong U.S. foreign assistance.” This project has its own goals, financial support, and separate grantee-collaborators.

- **Foundations are investing significant resources into convening and network building to encourage strategic alignment among their advocacy grantees.**

Since combining forces can only benefit the policy-change goals in the long run, funders are stepping into the role of “encouraging collaboration among advocacy organizations that otherwise compete for resources and have incentives to work independently.” There are better results when the focus is on building relationships and networks instead of forcing efforts through the “mandate” of grant-making.

Examples of funders using this approach are initiatives by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and by the Ford Foundation that facilitate “convenings” so organizations can “share best practice and advance field-level change.” And several major foundation are giving support to the Farm to Fork Initiative, which, itself, brings together advocacy groups that “promote federal good food policies.”

- **Funders are investing in long-term field building through multiyear grants, general operating support, and new capacity-building programs for their advocacy grantees.**

Philanthropists recognize that policy-change success may depend on their making “long-term investments to build capacity and nurture strategic flexibility in their advocacy grantees.” For instance, the Ford Foundation is one of the leading foundations announcing its commitment away from the traditional focused grants to providing general operating support, over a number of years, to its grantees to help them on their way to financial sustainability.

Many funders also train grantees on critical skills and knowledge including, for example, how to comply with lobbying rules and how to develop and carry out communications efforts.

***Conclusion***

CEP points out that “not all these practices are new” but there is important “experimentation among advocacy funders as they become more creative about their approaches to advancing policy change.” This “innovation” is critical in using advocacy to make societal change.