

Giving Voice to the Voiceless: The Case for Advocacy Funding

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Funding in the public policy arena has always been an integral part of achieving The California Wellness Foundation's mission "to improve the health of the people of California by making grants for health promotion, wellness education and disease prevention." It is also an important complement to our funding of the provision of direct preventive health services, which was mandated to be at least half of our annual grantmaking in the conversion order that established the foundation. Many long-term, sustainable solutions for the issues that health foundations are addressing, such as building healthy communities, bringing effective programs to scale, improving the delivery of service, and increasing access to health and social services, involve changing public policy. We strongly believe we have the potential to improve the health of far more Californians through grants for public policy work than we could ever hope to reach through funding direct services alone.

ADVOCACY IN ACTION

A good example of influencing policy is the effect of advocacy efforts of many grantees around last year's state budget debate. California was facing a \$24 billion deficit. Governor Gray Davis proposed budget cuts and changes in eligibility rules that would have resulted in more than 500,000 eligible recipients being denied care through Medi-Cal, California's state Medicaid program. Health advocacy organizations documented the impact of the proposed cuts; organized a broad-based coalition of service providers, consumer groups, and grassroots and faith-based organizations to educate policymakers and opinion leaders; held press conferences in communities across the state to highlight what would happen to local services; and brought 4,000 low-income people to Sacramento to tell their stories and put a human face on the numbers in the budget. They even succeeded in getting editorials written about complex application procedures being proposed that would increase barriers to enrollment. Their efforts paid off. The budget that was passed by the legislature and signed by the governor contained only a

fraction of the proposed cuts. These advocacy organizations were able to respond because they had support from us and other foundations.

GRANTMAKING ACTIVITIES

The three main areas of our public policy grantmaking are: public education campaigns, policy research and analysis, and advocacy. The public education campaign and the research/analysis elements of our strategy lay the groundwork and provide the tools for the advocacy component – the focus of this article.

Funding for advocacy at both the state and local levels can help ensure that policymakers are responsive to the health needs of underserved populations. One can't simply hope policymakers will do the right thing – public policy is complicated. Policymakers may not know there is a problem or what the solutions might be. Just as all other vested interests are making their case to policymakers and educating opinion leaders, so must those who represent the interests of the underserved. If their voice is missing, their needs are easily ignored. Grants to advocacy organizations provide resources to educate policymakers and the media; monitor the actions of administrative agencies; organize those who are affected and engage them in the policy process; and build coalitions needed to advance an issue.

Over the years, successes of organizations funded by The California Wellness Foundation have included: a statewide ban on the production and sale of "Saturday Night Special" handguns; significant reductions in the barriers to applying for and remaining on Healthy Families, California's version of the SCHIP program, and Medi-Cal; and increased funding for health care for the uninsured – all achievements that will benefit millions of Californians.

At the local level, grantees have successfully advocated for tobacco settlement dollars to be used to expand access to health care. Furthermore, many of the foundation's strategic funding initiatives had community action program compo-

nents – community collaboratives primarily made up of youth working to build healthier communities – that undertook advocacy efforts that resulted in a restriction on the number of liquor stores permitted in a community, the building of a pedestrian bridge over a major freeway so that children could get to school safely, and funding to address problem gambling.

We also encourage health service organizations that receive grants to engage in advocacy, as they have a unique perspective about what policies work and what needs to be improved. They can document the problems and make a case for improving the system. Policymakers often respect the input of service providers because their solutions are more likely to be grounded in reality. Since there is a lot of confusion about what level of advocacy is permissible for 501(c)(3) nonprofits among those organizations that are unaccustomed to it, we occasionally send grantees information about the regulations governing advocacy activities.

LESSONS LEARNED

The following are some of our lessons learned:

- **Core operating support provides important flexibility for advocacy grantees.** Given the inherently unpredictable nature of factors that influence the political process, it is important that advocacy organizations have the capacity to respond quickly to advance their policy agendas when windows of opportunity occur. Grants for core support enable organizations to take advantage of such opportunities. The secondary benefit of core support grants is that they can be used for all advocacy activities, including lobbying to the extent permitted by a nonprofit organization's 501(c)(3) status. This frees the grantee from the burden of segregating its expenses related to lobbying from its overall budget. To protect the grantor foundation, it is important to include the statement in the grant agreement letter that the funds are not earmarked for any attempt to influence legislation.
- **An important ingredient of a successful advocacy effort is engaging the grassroots.** In an era of term limits, policymakers may be less likely to have knowledge of the issues, so it is particularly important that policymakers hear from their constituents. Constituents put a face on the issues, and their solutions are seen as grounded in reality. Many state-focused policy groups, however, do not have a grassroots capacity and need to learn how to seek out and work with grassroots organizations. Grassroots organizations, in turn, rarely have the resources to get engaged in state policy issues. It is important to provide resources to both types of groups so that they can work effectively with each other.
- **Demystifying the policy process is key to engaging community members in advocacy.** For most people, the policymaking process is a mystery that can make participation intimidating. Many of The California Wellness Foundation's community action program grantees did not initially design projects that involved public policy, nor

were they even receptive to the idea. It was only when they saw the importance of policy to achieving their long-term goals that they became interested. Technical assistance providers were then able to help them develop effective approaches. Particularly important was training on using media to build public support for their efforts.

- **Engaging community members in advocacy has long-term benefits.** Changing public policy can be an empowering experience. Once community members have experienced a public policy success, they are more likely to stay engaged in efforts to improve their communities and hold policymakers accountable. Many of the youth involved in community action programs have learned the advocacy skills they need to make their communities better places in which to live.
- **Organizations with expertise working with youth are generally more effective in engaging youth in advocacy than are organizations whose primary expertise is policy.** When youth are trained in the “how-tos” of advocacy, they can be very effective. This is especially true when they are allowed to identify the issues of concern and are part of developing the proposed solutions. Youth do not want to be used as props. Organizations that are inexperienced working with youth often have difficulty giving up the control necessary to take full advantage of the resources youth bring, thus making it a frustrating experience for both parties.

One of the most important things to remember when funding advocacy is that policy changes do not happen overnight. It takes time – years – to change policy. It took six years for violence prevention advocates to achieve their goal of a state ban on the production of “Saturday Night Special” handguns. The work of advocacy organizations needs to be funded even when immediate success isn't likely. The policy climate can change rapidly – just look at how quickly states went from surpluses to deficits. Organizations need to be in place and have the capacity to take advantage of windows of opportunity. If the opportunities are not there, they need to keep the issues alive. Progress may be slow, but when change happens, millions of people benefit.

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