

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE PATH TO POLICY CHANGE:

Practical Steps and Lessons from Health Funders

As part of its continuing mission to serve trustees and staff of health foundations and corporate giving programs, on November 3, 2005, Grantmakers In Health (GIH) convened nearly 80 grantmakers and a diverse group of individuals with expertise in different types of public policy work to discuss the challenges and opportunities for health funders interested in fostering systemic change. This report offers lessons learned about how to approach public policy work generally as well as those related to advocacy, communications, community organizing, data development and analysis, and evaluation.

Being a Public Policy Funder

Public policy work is both legal and a legitimate activity for health foundations. Public policy activities are a means to secure broader change than can be achieved through direct service alone. Foundations are uniquely positioned to do this work; they can work to capitalize upon windows of opportunity and to create the conditions which allow those windows to open. They also have a role to play in empowering others in the nonprofit sector to become players in the policy process. Although there are legal boundaries, particularly for private foundations, the law provides more leeway than most funders realize.

Develop a public policy strategy that fits your organization. Each grantmaking organization should develop a public policy strategy that fits its mission, history, tax status, resources, and the circumstances of the communities it serves. It should consider the foundation's internal capacity for doing public policy work. Finally, an organization's public policy work should be based on a clearly articulated theory of change.

Make sure you have realistic expectations. Policy work requires tolerance for conflict, prolonged engagement, uncertain outcomes, and possible failures. Grantmakers need to scale their expectations to the size of their investments. They should also be prepared to play in an environment that they cannot control.

Be strategic in developing relationships with policy-makers. Foundations can be valuable sources of information and intelligence on critical health issues. Funders should have a strategy for developing these relationships, identifying decisionmakers who are champions and opponents of their priority issues, as well as those who can be moved through education or other means.

Get your board on board. Board education about the value of public policy activities requires patience and persistence. It is useful to recruit board members based on knowledge of or interest in policy. It is important for the board to discuss how visible the foundation should be.

Advocacy Infrastructure and Coalition Building

Effective health advocacy requires an infrastructure. Three critical elements of an effective advocacy infrastructure are strong leaders, paid staff, and sufficient and flexible financial support.

Direct service providers have the potential to be powerful voices for change. Building advocacy capacity in direct service organizations and professional trade associations has value. At the very minimum, it builds the number and diversity of individuals and organizations calling upon policymakers to make important changes in health policy. These organizations need a better understanding of how to advocate more effectively, particularly by building on their organizational strengths and working in coalitions with other organizations.

Building effective coalitions is hard but necessary work. Foundations can play an important role in promoting collaboration among advocacy organizations focused on different constituencies. Diversity in advocacy coalitions is especially critical at a time of shrinking budgets.

It's not always easy to negotiate the boundaries between funder and advocate. Strategies that work include being a good listener, being respectful in relationships, providing feedback, and being frank about the inherent imbalance in power associated with being grantmaker and grantee.

Communications

Communications is much more than getting the word out. Strategic communications involves identifying the audiences that might be interested in the foundation's work, developing messages that resonate with these specific audiences, and carrying the message to the audience. Funders can play a role in all these tasks but should carefully consider when messages need to be tailored and when the foundation should be the messenger.

Communications efforts should match a foundation's resources. Communications work on public policy issues can cost a lot and demands a long-term commitment. Effective techniques for smaller funders include making leadership grants and mining grant reports to inform policymakers.

Design a communications strategy that reflects the foundation's style. Health foundations differ in their desire to be in the limelight. Some want to fly below the radar and believe they can be more effective that way. Any foundation engaged in public policy work should have clearly articulated policies about who speaks for the foundation and provide training for board and staff about how to respond to inquiries from the media.

Community Organizing

Supporting community organizing can be uncomfortable for funders new to the work. Despite shared interests in developing a more just health care system, foundation staff and community organizers come from different cultures. Still, there is no question that health funders can support community organizing efforts and still be accountable to achieving their philanthropic missions.

The most important thing funders can do for community organizers is give them a chance to succeed.

Community organizing groups are typically small and undercapitalized. They need resources to build their membership, expand their reach, and connect to other organizations with similar interests. Leadership development is another critical need.

Health foundations can link grassroots organizers to policy advocacy networks and activities. These relationships are necessary to getting more progressive policies moved through state legislatures and other decision-making bodies, but creating and sustaining them is a delicate business.

Data Development and Analysis

Foundations can use data to make significant health issues come alive for policymakers. Health funders are making investments in developing credible and reliable data, and making such data accessible. Data sources include information from community needs assessment activities, surveys on health care use, and public opinion polling.

Foundations can build the capacity of others to use data in the policy process. Health funders are helping advocates and community-based organizations to develop skills in data collection and analysis as well as how to use the results to advance policy and program goals.

Know your audience. Foundations have the opportunity to become a resource that policymakers will consult when they need credible, relevant, timely information in a form that they value. The data need to be ready for use on the policymaking timetable.

Evaluation

Focus on how your grantmaking is contributing to the change process. Foundations need to change the question about the work they fund from “did policy change?” to “how did our grantees’ work improve the policy environment for this issue?”

Think in terms of both short-term and long-term goals. Advocates and funders alike recognize the value of activities that can be counted. But such process and progress measures should be coupled with outcome measures so both funder and grantee know first, what was done, and second, what change occurred.

Evaluation should be a tool for learning and improvement, not just a report to be written after all the work is done. Funders and grantees should articulate at the outset of a project how and why certain activities will lead to specified outcomes, and then jointly define a set of measurable benchmarks that will be used to measure progress. Feedback should be given that can be used for midcourse corrections. The final step is to share lessons learned at the conclusion of the project.