

## Reflections on Building the Advocacy Capacity of Nonprofit Organizations

STEVE COEN

*President and CEO, Kansas Health Foundation*

More than a decade ago, Kansas Action for Children (KAC), a private nonprofit organization dedicated to shaping policy that puts children first, received its first grant from the Kansas Health Foundation to build its advocacy capacity. Prior to that initial investment, KAC was struggling financially and had only a few staff members, after more than 20 years in operation. Consequently, the organization's ability to influence policy for children and families was limited.

After a series of multiyear, targeted investments on the part of the Kansas Health Foundation to build the organization's advocacy capacity, KAC is thriving and contributes to achieving policy gains for children and families year after year. Now as we look back and reflect with local philanthropic partners on KAC's growth, we recognize that there were several lessons learned along the way that may inform similar investments. While this is one organization's story, the outcome suggests it may be a story that has the potential to inform the field.

### LESSONS LEARNED

- **Build organizational capacity first.** Advocacy capacity is most effectively built on a strong organizational foundation. Consider investing in building the capacity of the organization before focusing on advocacy. An organization that does not have a strong staff and board of directors, processes for managing its human and financial resources, and the ability to generate revenue will be constantly distracted from building its advocacy capacity by the demands of day-to-day operations.
- **Capacity building is a long-term commitment.** Multiyear grants in philanthropy today are increasingly rare. Yet building the capacity of organizations to effectively advocate for policy change requires a long-term commitment. Grantmakers should think about capacity building as a series of multiyear investments.

SHANNON COTSORADIS

*President and CEO, Kansas Action for Children*

- **Create the conditions for sustained leadership.** Building capacity is an investment in the current leadership of an organization. Not only does the organization need to have the right leader to effectively build its capacity, but it also needs to retain that leader throughout the capacity building effort. Grantmakers should pay careful attention to whether the organization has the resources to adequately compensate executives and consider including resources to provide ongoing leadership development. Creating the conditions for sustained leadership also means ensuring that the organization has a succession plan that it regularly reviews.
- **Identify the core competencies for the organization to advocate effectively.** The mission of the organization will influence the core competencies for an organization to advocate effectively. The core competencies required for an organization whose primary mission is advocacy may be dif-

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ferent than those required for an organization whose primary mission is direct service. A dialogue about what it will take for the organization to effectively engage in advocacy or take its advocacy to the next level should include the identification of the core competencies the capacity building will seek to develop.

- **Build core competencies one at a time.** While the organization is building its advocacy capacity, it will drain the overall capacity of the organization. In other words, it takes capacity to build capacity. Approaching capacity building as a long-term commitment provides grantmakers and grantees with the opportunity to build one or two new competencies at a time and figure out what it will take to sustain the newly built capacity. Not only does this approach increase the likelihood that the grantee will

institutionalize changes, but it also reduces the likelihood that the capacity building effort will burn out the organization's leadership.

- ***Incorporate advocacy evaluation when the organization is developmentally ready.*** The organization will require a long-term horizon to demonstrate results from its newly built advocacy capacity, which will likely frustrate both the grantmaker and the grantee. Realistic expectations, including the recognition that progress is incremental and does not always equate to policy gains, are critical. When the organization has successfully institutionalized the necessary core competencies or appears to be on the cusp of effective advocacy, it is time to think about building the capacity to evaluate the work. Unfortunately, demonstrating progress as a result of advocacy is messy, and most organizations will require technical assistance to identify and implement processes and tools that help organizations progress toward their long-term advocacy goals. Pushing the organization to evaluate its advocacy before this point is unlikely to help the organization learn and may deplete capacity that is still fragile.
- ***Provide core support.*** Grantmakers that successfully build the advocacy capacity of an organization should consider supporting that capacity with core support. Without the flexibility of core support, an organization is unlikely to be able to maximize the potential of its newly built capacity for policy change. Success in the policy environment requires that grantees have the flexibility to respond to emerging opportunities and changes in the political landscape. Without adequate core support, grantees are likely to focus on the implementation of programmatic grants that do not yield the results that pushed the grantmaker to invest in building the organization's advocacy capacity.
- ***Be prepared to sustain it.*** The organization will require long-term support. An organization whose primary mission is advocacy has to consider its sources of revenue carefully. Relying on state, federal, or corporate financial resources may compromise the organization's ability to serve as an independent voice for its constituency. The capacity building endeavor will be best served by supporting the organization in diversifying its funding base through collaboration with other grantmakers, carefully considering the right size of the investment, and staying the course. While the Kansas Health Foundation played a key role in building and sustaining KAC's advocacy capacity, core operating support from several Kansas grantmakers is an essential element of the organization's success story.

## ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR GRANTMAKERS

In addition to a strategic, long-term approach to building advocacy capacity, it is important to consider how advocacy grantmaking is positioned within philanthropy. Because there are important differences between advocacy grants and programmatic grants, there appears to be a tendency to create organizational silos to address this. Based on our experience, an alternative approach that acknowledges those differences has

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the potential to yield greater results. Positioning advocacy grantmaking as part of philanthropy's overall work and strategy is critical to success. In fact, building the capacity of key advocacy organizations has the potential to decrease demands for programmatic resources.

Another important consideration for grantmakers is creating a shared vision with the grantee regarding the desired outcome. It is important to clearly articulate that the desired outcome is increased advocacy capacity, not creating and sustaining new programs. It is also important to delineate what increased advocacy capacity looks like in terms of progress and/or accountability. While progress will be incremental, success depends on a shared commitment to be accountable for results. This is particularly important with organizations that are very early in the life cycle of their advocacy capacity building work and may need to spend time with their boards and/or other key stakeholders preparing them for the implications of the organization's new focus.

Lastly, it is important for grantmakers to consider the other ways in which they can support the grantee. Our most recent experience suggests that philanthropic organizations can play a critical role in advocacy if they are willing to closely collaborate with one another and use their own networks and relationships as leverage. Grantmakers can also support grantees by inviting an open and honest dialogue from the beginning. As organizations make a commitment to build their advocacy capacity, it is important to set the stage for honest communication around progress and setbacks. The stakes will feel high to the grantee, and making it clear that you are partners in this endeavor and willing to learn together is an important part of achieving results.

**VIEWS FROM THE FIELD** is offered by GIH as a forum for health grantmakers to share insights and experiences. If you are interested in participating, please contact Osula Rushing at 202.452.8331 or [orushing@gih.org](mailto:orushing@gih.org).