

## WORKING TOWARD Policy Change

Public policy directly affects the design, delivery, and allocation of health care services and resources. In the health sector, public policy determines who is eligible for public insurance programs; how much funding is available for public health programs; which health care services are provided (such as immunizations, language services, or prenatal care); and other fundamental choices. Sound public policies depend on several factors including the availability of reliable information and objective analysis, the input of those directly affected by these policies, and informed decisionmakers.

Many health foundations are funding health policy activities. According to a 2004 study by the Foundation Center, total grant dollars targeting health policy activities more than tripled from 1995 to 2002, from just under \$100 million to nearly \$360 million. A number of factors have pushed foundations in this direction, including shrinking public budgets and resulting cuts to public programs, and the belief that investing in health policy can contribute to more sustainable public funding streams. Grantmakers with a longtime interest in improving health are also using policy activities to complement grants for direct services, realizing the potential for influencing systemic change and benefiting a greater number of people.

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR GRANTMAKERS

Philanthropic work in the public policy arena can promote positive health outcomes, maximize limited resources, and foster health system transformation. There are a number of ways health foundations can influence public policy. Analysis of policies and data, as well as bringing stakeholders together to discuss issues and proposed solutions, are all ways to engage in health policy activities. Supporting advocacy is another successful tool. Advocacy focuses on giving voice to diverse viewpoints when making decisions that shape the health care system. Strengthening and including the voices of vulnerable populations in the political process, and ultimately producing better informed policy decisions, are the goals of advocacy.

► **Funding and Disseminating Policy Analysis** – Foundations can be influential in determining what information is available to policymakers, opinion leaders, and the public on health issues. The Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts Foundation's *Roadmap to Coverage* initiative, for example, is designed to provide comprehensive, nonpartisan research to inform the debate about how to best provide health coverage for the state's uninsured residents. Research and policy

### THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Foundations have a great deal of leeway to engage in policy-related activities. Restrictions apply only to lobbying and attempts to influence specific legislation that has already been introduced in a legislative body or a specific legislative proposal that the organization either supports or opposes.

The law applies differently depending on the grantmaking organization's tax status. The rules governing lobbying apply primarily to private foundations. Public foundations (including most community foundations) and public charities are not subject to the same restrictions.

For additional information, see GIH's report, *Strategies for Shaping Public Policy: A Guide for Health Funders* (2000).

analysis is being conducted by the Urban Institute, a non-profit, nonpartisan policy research organization; and a series of reports have been issued. The first report, issued in 2004, analyzed the cost of medical care for the uninsured; it was released at a summit featuring a luncheon address by the president of the Massachusetts Senate. The report included data on what is currently spent on care for the uninsured, who pays for it, and what full coverage would add to medical spending. For the release of a report examining options for expanding coverage in 2005, the foundation convened Governor Mitt Romney of Massachusetts, Governor John Baldacci of Maine, and health care leaders from other states to review and discuss the choices and tradeoffs associated with different coverage expansion options. The final report, a practical roadmap for extending health coverage to most, if not all, residents of the state, was released in 2005.

Supporting organizations that serve as information resources to policymakers and others is another strategy grantmakers can use to raise awareness of key health care issues. The Healthcare Georgia Foundation, Inc., for example, has provided significant funding to the Women's Policy Education Fund in Atlanta to create a centralized source of Web-based and printed material tracking health policy in Georgia and encourage its use by consumer-focused organizations and other key stakeholders. The foundation has also provided funding to help establish the Institute for Health Policy at Morehouse School of Medicine's National Center

for Primary Care. The grant is funding research on primary care, prevention, and mental health services for minority and underserved communities in Georgia. The institute will focus state and federal policies that would encourage health professionals to practice primary care in underserved communities and promote long-term retention; ways that Georgia could develop a cohesive and comprehensive primary care safety net that assures access to high-quality care for all Georgians; and the impact of existing health laws, as well as policies and proposed legislation on clinical outcomes.

- **Arming Policymakers and Advocates with Data and Stories** – Some grantmakers fund efforts to provide specific information to help advocates and policymakers make better informed health policy decisions. Both data and personal stories can effectively convey the health issues faced by individuals and communities. For example, The California Endowment, The California Wellness Foundation, Kaiser Permanente, and The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation have funded the California Center for Public Health Advocacy to develop policy briefs that present data on the health status of individuals by state legislative district (rather than by city or county), along with detailed information and recommendations for addressing these issues through specific state and local policy reforms. The first series of briefs focused on childhood fitness, obesity, and diabetes, and were influential in the passage of a landmark bill that established nutrition standards for food and beverages sold in California elementary schools.

The Connecticut Health Foundation publishes policy briefs addressing health concerns for the state of Connecticut. The briefs provide an overview of a key issue, present data, and pose questions policymakers need to consider when addressing the issue. They are disseminated to state legislators, their staff, and the public. In 2005, the foundation funded a series of three policy briefs examining the new Medicare prescription drug benefit. The recommendations included in the brief on transitioning Medicare beneficiaries who receive drug coverage through Medicaid (known as dual eligibles) to the new Medicare drug benefit, were included in a bill introduced in the state legislature.

To compliment the Missouri Foundation for Health's grantmaking and to address health issues from a systemic perspective, the foundation established the Missouri Foundation for Health policy group in 2002. The policy group works to support the work of the foundation board, staff, community members, and the state legislators by providing timely research on health-related issues of significance to Missouri. As part of its agenda, the policy group publishes the *Show Me* series. These papers focus on external audiences both within the foundation's service area and beyond, addressing topics derived from the foundation's policy agenda. The foundation distributes the papers to a broad audience in Missouri and across the country.

- **Facilitating Public Dialogue** – Many funders are in the advantageous position of having the ear of diverse members of the community, such as business leaders, policymakers, and advocates. Convening these stakeholders provides an opportunity for them to discuss public policy issues and inform public debate. To reach its goal of improving the oral health of New Hampshire residents, the Endowment for Health has awarded grants for the development and dissemination of analyses on oral health in the state, as well as supported the creation and implementation of a statewide oral health agenda. To reach a consensus on the oral health needs of New Hampshire's residents and to assess the capacity of the state's oral health system, the foundation supported community-based stakeholder meetings throughout the state. For example, in 2004, the New Hampshire Minority Health Coalition received a grant to convene stakeholders to discuss the oral health needs of Latinos living in the Manchester area. Meeting participants came together to assess the area's need for improved oral health services, identify ways they can work together, discuss oral health improvement models for Latino communities, and develop a strategy to fund the implementation of a pilot oral health access project. The foundation has also strategically awarded smaller grants to help cover, for example, the costs of meeting speakers and travel expenses for individuals to attend the statewide Forum for Public Health Dentistry in 2005.

In 2003, the Maine Health Access Foundation, in partnership with The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Bingham Program, and a number of community partners, held a day-long conference, *Caring for Maine's Underserved: Community-Based Strategies in an Era of State Health Reform*, to discuss the role of uncompensated care programs in Maine and their future in the state's Dirigo Health program. The conference took an in-depth look at innovative community-based programs that care for Maine's uninsured and underserved, and allowed participants to talk about successes and failures, and to learn how to both support each other and promote better care for Maine's residents.

*This article is part of GIH's portfolio, From the Ground Up: Improving Community Health, Inspiring Community Action. Each article focuses on an approach grantmakers are using to improve health in communities. The entire portfolio is available at the GIH Web site, [www.gih.org](http://www.gih.org).*