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responsive philanthropy

# State of Philanthropy 2004



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**STATE OF PHILANTHROPY 2004**

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# Table of Contents

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## PREFACE

Reinforce or Rearrange — the Goals of Philanthropy III Julianne Malveaux

INTRODUCTION VI Jeff Krehely, Naomi Tacuyan and Cynthia Conner

CONTRIBUTORS X

## POPULATIONS OF PHILANTHROPY

1. Philanthropy's Record on Diversity and Inlusiveness: An Inconvenient Truth 3 Handy L. Lindsey Jr.
2. Myth Versus Reality: State of the LGBT Community and Philanthropy's Response 10 Nancy Cunningham
3. State of the Latino Community: The Role of the Latino Nonprofit and Philanthropy 15 Lorraine Cortes-Vazquez and Erik Paulino
4. Opening Doors: How Women's Funds Have Transformed Money and Willpower into Community Capital 21 Christine Grumm and Emily Katz Kishawi
5. Foundations for a Framework: A New Generation of Grantmakers Seeks Big Picture and Deep Impact 28 Rusty M. Stahl
6. Philanthropy's Role in National Service and Civic Engagement 35 Dorothy Stoneman
7. State of Rural Philanthropy: 'Homegrown,' Innovative and on the Move 39 Alan McGregor and David Schenck
8. Current Trends in Environmental Funding 43 Jim Abernathy
9. A World of Missed Opportunity in Environmental Philanthropy: We're Globalizing All of the Economy Except Philanthropy 48 Chet Tchozewski

## POLITICS OF PHILANTHROPY

10. Hearings and Roundtables:  
NCRP Brings Philanthropic Accountability  
Standards to Capitol Hill 57 Rick Cohen
11. Can There Be a New Politics of Philanthropy? 64 William Schambra
12. How Political Wars Are Won: What Mainstream  
and Progressive Foundations Can Learn from the Right 70 Jeff Krehely and Meaghan House
13. Funders' Support Grows as the Impact of  
Community Organizing Grows 74 Lee Winkelman

## ARCHITECTURE OF PHILANTHROPY

14. Philanthropy in Practice: Great Expectations  
Versus Getting the Job Done 83 Mike Bailin
15. The New Health Philanthropy: A Force for Social  
Justice in Health System Change? 88 Kate Villers
16. Workplace Giving and the Public Trust 95 Matt Howe
17. The Culture of Small: Rethinking  
Small-Foundation Philanthropy 99 Kymberly Mulhern and Kathleen Odne
18. Community-Based Public Foundations:  
A Challenge to Mainstream Philanthropy 103 Rick Cohen and Meaghan House
19. Alternatives to Perpetuity: Foundations That  
Decide to Spend Down 106 Jeff Krehely, with Heidi K. Rettig
20. Corporate Philanthropy: Giving to Get? 117 Jeff Krehely and Meaghan House
21. Risk Minus Cash Equals Crisis: The Flap about  
General Operating Support 121 Clara Miller
22. Globalization and Grantmakers: The Case for a  
Social Change Approach 126 Carolyn Deere and Mark Randazzo

## 13. Funders' Support Grows as the Impact of Community Organizing Grows

Lee Winkelman

Community organizing, once seen by many funders as dated and unproductive, is gaining favor in the philanthropic world. While funding for organizing is still a relatively small percentage of overall foundation funding, there has been a real increase in foundation funding for community organizing over the last five years, fueled by an increase in funding from mainstream foundations. Support for organizing is growing because organizers have become more sophisticated in the strategies they are pursuing. More and more funders see that organizing, in conjunction with other strategies they fund, produces positive results.

### DEFINITION OF COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

Community organizing has been defined a number of ways, and there are a wide variety of organizing models and practices. For our purposes, we can use the definition proposed by Neighborhood Funders Group: Community organizing is a "process by which people—most often low- and moderate-income people previously absent from decision-making tables—are brought together in organizations to jointly act in the interest of their 'communities' and the common good."<sup>1</sup> There are four essential characteristics of community organizing that distinguish it from other approaches to solving social problems. First, organizing is a collective, not an individual, approach. People come together jointly to resolve their collective problems. Second, unlike most insider advocacy approaches, the people who are affected by the problems are themselves proposing solutions and acting to make change. Third, unlike social service programs that provide immediate help to those who need it—a bowl of soup to the hungry, a cot in a shelter to the homeless—community organizing aims to resolve the conditions that cause social problems. Organizing aims to change policies of governments or

other large institutions, reallocate resources, or otherwise change the underlying conditions that result in social problems. Lastly, organizing's effectiveness stems from a base of a large number of people who come together in an organization. This approach uses the power of organized people to bring about change.

### FUNDING LEVELS FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZING

During the 1990s, most of the growth in funding for community organizing came from 248 alternative funding institutions<sup>2</sup>—religious funders, funds that raise money in the workplace as an alternative to the United Way, progressive community foundations like those affiliated with the Funding Exchange, and identity-based funds such as Black United Funds, women's funds, and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender funds. While some of these funds have endowments, they raise most of the money they give away each year in annual campaigns. According to Robert Bothwell, these alternative funds gave out \$106 million in 1998 and an estimated \$190 million in 2000—"40 percent of what *all* private and community foundations, including both mainline liberal foundations and progressive foundations, gave for social action." Of course, not all of this funding is for community organizing, but Bothwell concludes that these funds "by and large fund social change," which he defines, using a definition from the National Network of Grantmakers, as "reaching those who are in greatest need of help by giving them the power and opportunity to solve their own problems"—not too far from the definition of community organizing that I am using in this chapter. While there is no comprehensive information available on how much money alternative funds have given out since 2000, conversations with staff members from many of these funds suggest that funding levels have declined in the wake of the

Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the stock market crash in 2001 and the recession.

Countering the decline in grantmaking from alternative funds, mainstream foundations appear to have substantially increased their funding for community organizing over the last five years. Program officers at the Ford Foundation, Rockefeller Foundation, Carnegie Corporation of New York and Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, for example, all report increased support for community organizing at their foundations during this period. The Ford Foundation is illustrative of trends at large mainstream foundations. In 2000, Ford began a three-year, \$4.5 million interprogram effort to fund organizing in Chicago, Los Angeles and the South. The Fund for Community Organizing involved funds and staff from every Ford program area, and it was so successful that it was extended for another two years and \$2.1 million. Though relatively small, the Fund for Community Organizing has had a big effect on Ford's grantmaking. Out of this initiative, the Community Organizing Working Group was formed, which currently consists of 15 Ford program officers from different programs who meet regularly to share information and compare strategies about their separate funding of organizing. Ford invests substantially more funds in community organizing through each of its program areas than it does through the fund. Urvashi Vaid, deputy director of Ford's Governance and Civil Society Unit, says her portfolio alone has made grants of more than \$15 million to organizing groups since 1998, plus an additional \$11 million to collaborative projects run by grassroots organizing and public policy groups, and unspecified additional indirect support for organizing through evaluation or training, for example. It is clear that Ford spends tens of millions of dollars per year funding community organizing, although Vaid is unable to provide a more specific estimate.

There have been other significant increases in funding for organizing over the last five years, in addition to the increased support from large, established national foundations. The Marguerite Casey Foundation is a new foundation that is investing its sizable portfolio solely in community organizing work. Last year, in its first year of grantmaking, Marguerite Casey gave out \$20 million. This year, it will give out \$28 million. Some state and local foundations have also increased funding for organizing, including the California Wellness Foundation, Boston Foundation and Meyer Foundation in Washington, D.C.

Added up, these individual cases suggest there has been a slow but significant increase in funding for com-

munity organizing over the last five years. Grantmaking that addresses poverty and other social issues is still a minority of philanthropic funding, and funding for organizing remains a minority of that minority. But increased funding of community organizing is a significant trend that has made a difference in the lives of hundreds of thousands—perhaps millions—of low-income people.

#### WHY FUND ORGANIZING?

Program officers cite two reasons for funding organizing: because it is good in and of itself and because it works.

It is good in and of itself because, as Sue Chinn, director of the Discount Foundation, points out, "A large part of the problem in this country is that people have disengaged from the political process in the broadest sense, not just elections." Vaid echoes this view: "An active citizenry, engaged in the full range of decision-making about the use of public resources, is the basic building block of democracy." Vaid also points out that grassroots community organizations, along with religious congregations and labor unions, are among the only "avenues of political and policy influences open to ordinary people (particularly those at social and economic disadvantage)." Many funders support organizing because it encourages civic participation and strengthens the democratic process.

Other funders cite more instrumental reasons for funding organizing. Geri Mannion, chair of the Strengthening U.S. Democracy Program at the Carnegie Corporation of New York, says, "We don't fund organizing for moral reasons—that is, charity. We fund organizing because it is effective." Darren Walker and Katherine McFate report that the Rockefeller Foundation's support for organizing evolved out of its support for research and policy development at the national level. McFate, Rockefeller Foundation's deputy director of Working Communities, explains that devolution—the transferring of funding and control of social programs from the federal government to the states—has meant that "to have an impact on education, welfare and income support policy, jobs and economic development, you have to fund at the state and local level." She also notes that "welfare reform was a wake-up call for many national funders." During the welfare reform process, many national think tanks and policy groups put out detailed analyses of the weaknesses of leading welfare proposals and suggested thoughtful and potentially effective alternatives, but to little effect. "There was incredible information within the Beltway

(Washington, D.C.), but they could not motivate and mobilize constituency support in the rest of the country," says McFate. She explained that Rockefeller now supports a "three-pronged approach: knowledge building and research, to look at the evidence; inside advocacy," to propose alternative policies; and "mobilizing and building coalitions. You need inside advocacy, but you also need organizations that mobilize constituency groups that will hold public officials accountable to pass good policies and then enforce them when they are passed." Rockefeller, like the other mainstream foundations interviewed, supports organizing as a complement to the other strategies they support.

Some foundations are reluctant to support organizing because it is too confrontational. They think of organizing as an old-fashioned '60s thing, concerned only with tearing down the system. But organizing in the first decade of the 21st century has evolved in a number of directions. While challenging policies and allocations of resources often does lead to conflict with some of those who benefit from the status quo, today's organizers are more likely to seek common ground with a large variety of allies than they are to attack those who hold opposing views. They are more likely to propose sophisticated, proactive alternatives than to say simply, "Not in my backyard." As Carnegie's Mannion notes, "A lot of organizers have come of age in the last few years. They are much more sophisticated now; they are players. Politicians take them seriously. There are real opportunities to fund organizing that is having a real impact."

#### OPPORTUNITIES AND SUCCESSES

While some funders support community organizing as a field, most organizing funders support this strategy to resolve an issue that is of particular interest to the foundation. There are a number of opportunities to have a significant impact on key social problems through funding of cutting-edge community organizing. Following are just a few of those opportunities.

##### **Affordable housing and community development.**

Many foundations that fund housing production and community development are finding that building buildings is not enough. These foundations are supporting community organizing around housing issues as a complement to their other community development funding. Darren Walker, director of Working Communities for the Rockefeller Foundation, cites Housing First!, a New York City coalition of 260 groups that include banks, community-based organizations, nonprofit housing developers, private for-profit housing

developers, higher education institutions, and religious congregations and organizations. The Housing First! coalition used its technical expertise to issue a sophisticated plan calling for the city to spend \$10 billion over 10 years to produce and preserve 185,000 units of affordable housing. And the coalition has the ability to mobilize enough public support to influence public policy. Largely as a result of the efforts of Housing First!, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg has made a major commitment to affordable housing, pledging \$3 billion for 65,000 affordable housing units over the next five years. While the mayor's plan is not as ambitious as the Housing First! proposal, it is a 25 percent increase over housing funding during the previous five years—a remarkable accomplishment in the current budget climate. Nonprofit housing developers alone, without this broad-based organizing effort, would never have achieved this increase in housing funding.

**Jobs and economic development.** Exciting organizing efforts are creating living-wage jobs and economic opportunity for low-income people in several different ways. In California, the Los Angeles Metropolitan Alliance, led by a community group called AGENDA, negotiated a groundbreaking benefits agreement with DreamWorks studio. In return for city subsidies for a sprawling new studio development, DreamWorks agreed to create a \$5 million program to provide entertainment industry jobs to members of poor communities and communities of color that have traditionally been underrepresented in the industry. Though the studio development project ultimately fell through, DreamWorks kept its commitment. Now 150 people from South Los Angeles have apprenticeships in the film industry. Building on this model, several community groups from across California have joined together in a long-term effort to change California law to require all large commercial developers to issue economic impact reports detailing how their projects would affect low- and moderate-income people. These reports, like the environmental impact reporting requirements already in place, would give developers incentive and community groups leverage to make sure that future developments benefit the entire community.

Two community groups in the San Antonio area took a different approach. Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) and Metro Alliance, both affiliated with the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), together created a successful job training program. Called Project Quest, the program has been successful at getting living-wage jobs for the unemployed and working poor because it brings together congregations, private

employers, the potential workers and the resources of the state government. The employers reserve a certain number of jobs for qualified trainees and make sure that the training gives workers the skills to be successful in the jobs. The potential workers ensure that the training times and locations are accessible, and that the training formats are appropriate. The state of Texas provides key funding for the training and supports trainees to allow them to finish the course, which takes up to two years. Project Quest trained 2,000 people in the first seven years of the program. Participants' average annual earnings upon entering Quest were \$3,467, while two years after graduating from the program, average annual earnings had risen to \$24,907. Alone, government, employers and the potential workers could not have created such a successful program. It was only because of a joint organizing effort by COPS, Metro Alliance and member congregations that the private employers and the state joined in supporting the project. Other organizing groups in the IAF network have spread the Project Quest model to at least five other cities.<sup>3</sup>

**Civic participation.** A number of foundations are supporting groups that are working to increase the voting rate of low-income constituencies and people of color, who are underrepresented in current voting patterns. Here are three examples of national voter mobilization efforts that give an idea of the scope of the efforts. ACORN, a national network of community organizations, and Project Vote are spending a projected \$22 million in 2004 to register 1.2 million new voters in 24 states and to turn out 1.1 million new and infrequent voters on election day in 15 states. The Center for Community Change (CCC) and a coalition of community groups are undertaking a \$2.2 million effort in 35 states to register 115,000 new voters and turn out 250,000 new and infrequent voters on election. USAction Education Fund is projected to register half a million new voters and turn out a million voters on election day in an \$11 million effort in 17 states. All three of these nonpartisan voter mobilization efforts accomplish two important goals. First, they bring large numbers of African-American, Latino and low-income voters into the political process for the first time. Second, they build the power to influence elected officials once the election is over to support policies that benefit the low-income and people of color constituencies that the community groups are mobilizing.

**Immigrant organizing.** Another dynamic funding area is the integration of immigrants into the larger society. Many foundations are funding groups that are organizing around the legal status of immigrants. Much of this

organizing work takes place at the state level—the most notably successful efforts in 2003 were in Georgia, Hawaii, Kansas, New Mexico and Louisiana—to pass laws allowing more immigrants to get driver's licenses.<sup>4</sup> But the most dynamic immigrant organizing over the last few years has involved the rights of immigrants as workers. A number of immigrant worker centers have formed in most parts of the country. These worker centers are run by the immigrants they serve. Along with the organizing work they do, the centers provide a mix of services, including legal assistance regarding residency status; instruction in English as a second language and computer skills; and education about workers rights. Organizing work has included efforts to win back wages and improve substandard working conditions; to pass city, state and federal laws to protect low-wage workers; and to win space for a hiring hall for day laborers who had been soliciting employment on the street.<sup>5</sup> Twenty-five of these local worker centers that focus on day laborers have banded together to form the National Day Labor Organizing Network, under whose banner they share successes and challenges and pursue national legislation to improve working conditions and protect the rights of day laborers.<sup>6</sup>

**Youth organizing.** Youth organizing had attracted the support of many foundations concerned about youth development and leadership. Several of these funders participate in the Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing (FCYO), formed in 2000 to provide collaborative grants to youth organizing groups and to increase the awareness and understanding of youth organizing among funders. FCYO has distributed \$1.8 million to 42 youth organizing efforts across the country. FCYO Executive Director Vera Miao explains why more and more funders are supporting this strat-

**While challenging policies and allocations of resources often does lead to conflict with some of those who benefit from the status quo, today's organizers are more likely to seek common ground with a large variety of allies than they are to attack those who hold opposing views.**



egy: "Youth organizing has an immediate impact on the issues facing young people and their communities—public school reform, environmental justice and police brutality, among other issues—at the same time that it trains them to be leaders, now and in the future, in building a more just society." Californians for Justice (CFJ) is a good example of the dual purposes that youth organizing serves. While building the leadership skills of hundreds of young people in five cities around the state, CFJ is having an impact on public education in California. CFJ led a successful coalition effort to delay implementation of the California high school exit exam. CFJ is currently working to make the delay permanent, while advocating for broader measures to improve the quality of education provided by public schools.

**Influencing national policy.** More and more community organizing groups are exploring how to have an impact on national policy without sacrificing the local roots that are the source of their power to make change. One recent successful experiment was the National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support, organized by the Center for Community Change. This national coalition brought together local grassroots organizations, some independent and some part of larger networks, to generate pressure on district offices of federal legislators while advocating in Washington, D.C., for sophisticated policy alternatives. The biggest victories of the national campaign were expanding the Food Stamp Program and making the 2001 child tax credit partly refundable, resulting in an additional \$8 billion per year for low-income children. Other networks and coalitions are also exploring ways to have an impact on national policy. Most recently, the Pacific Institute of Community Organizations (PICO), a national network of 40 faith-based organizations in 13 states and 110 cities, held a national assembly in Washington, D.C., to kick off a three-year strategy to influence federal budget policy. PICO's new effort represents the first systematic nationwide attempt by one of the four major faith-based organizing networks to influence national policy.

## KEYS TO SUCCESSFUL FUNDING

There are several keys to success in funding community organizing:

**Provide long-term operating support.** Only strong organizations with well-trained leaders and deep roots in the community can have a significant impact on poverty, education, health care and other important social issues. But developing community roots, training

leaders and building strong organizations can take years, continuing beyond the end of particular issue campaigns. One-year project-specific grants can produce positive short-term results, but they also tend to divert organizations' efforts away from building the long-term leadership, organization and power that will allow them to have a more significant impact on even bigger issues. Whenever possible, invest in strong, creative organizations with multiyear grants for operating support. This grantmaking strategy can result in a much bigger impact down the line.

**Look for both depth and scale.** The ideal organizing group has both depth—strong community roots, sophisticated leaders and a deep, widely shared analysis of social problems—as well as scale, the ability to mobilize large numbers of people and to have an impact on big problems that go beyond the local level. It is often easier to evaluate scale than depth, but both are important. The best way to evaluate depth is to meet with leaders out of the group's membership as well as with staff, to see for yourself the leaders' level of understanding of the issues they are dealing with and the strategies necessary to resolve the issues. Look for a good balance of short-term outcomes while working to deepen leadership, organization and power to achieve bigger outcomes in the future.

**Coordinate with other funders.** Despite the increase in funding in certain areas (such as civic participation), there is still not enough money to support community organizing. Collaboration between funders can maximize the effectiveness of each grantmaking dollar by ensuring that grants work toward the same end. Funder collaboration can be informal, through affinity group discussions or other ad hoc conversations between funders. Or collaboration can be formal, through partnerships such as the Four Freedoms Fund, to support immigrant organizing; the Interfaith Funders, to support faith-based community organizing; and the Funders Collaborative for Youth Organizing. These formal collaborations often involve collective grantmaking.

**Support capacity building.** While multiyear operating support is the greatest need, organizing groups also need to build capacity in strategic planning, organizational development, media and public relations, research, evaluation, and use of computers and other technology. Community organizing groups often get overlooked in capacity-building initiatives. Funding the capacity building of organizing groups can be an important contribution for local funders or funders that are reluctant to support the organizing work directly.

**If you do not have extensive experience with community organizing, get help.** Organizing has unique time lines, benchmarks and measures of success. Luckily, several excellent resources exist to help funders in this area. A good place to start is the *Community Organizing Toolbox*, published by the Neighborhood Funders Group.<sup>7</sup> Local groups of funders that support community organizing have emerged in several cities, including Boston, New York and Chicago.<sup>8</sup> These funder groups meet to share information, discuss the opportunities and challenges of funding organizing, and occasionally undertake joint projects. Funder affinity groups and collaborations are a good way to find funders who organize around a particular issue of concern to your foundation. Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees, Grantmakers Income Security Taskforce, and Grantmakers for Education are among the many affinity groups that bring together funders—some that support organizing and some that don't—around common issues.<sup>8</sup> The Funders Collaborative for Youth Organizing is a resource on youth organizing. NFG's Working Group on Labor and Community is a good resource on low-wage worker organizing. Interfaith Funders can provide information and support about faith-based community organizing.

**Provide more funding to community organizing.**

Despite the increase in funding for community organizing, this strategy is still underfunded, both relative to other areas that foundations fund and absolutely in terms of the needs of organizing groups and populations. Most organizing groups are shoestring operations that achieve remarkable results with little funding. By increasing your foundation's support for community organizing groups, you can help them multiply their accomplishments exponentially.

**NOTES**

1. Parachini, Larry and Covington, Sally. *Community Organizing Toolbox*. Neighborhood Funders Group, Washington, D.C. 2001.
2. The term "alternative funding institutions" and the information on these funders in this paragraph are taken from "The Decline of Progressive Policy and the New Philanthropy," by Robert O. Bothwell, published online in 2003 at <http://comm-org.utoledo.edu/papers.htm>.
3. Information on Project Quest taken from Osterman, Paul. *Gathering Power*. Pp. 161-165. Beacon Press, Boston, Massachusetts, 2002. Also from Welfare Information Network's "Promising Practices"

Newsletter, November 2000, available at <http://www.financeprojectinfo.org/WIN/promising/projectquest.htm>.

4. For a brief summary of statewide immigrant work, see the Web site of the National Employment Law Project, [http://www.nelp.org/iwp/reform/state/low\\_pay\\_high\\_risk.cfm](http://www.nelp.org/iwp/reform/state/low_pay_high_risk.cfm).
5. A major study on the immigrant workers center movement across the country will soon be published by the Economic Policy Institute.
6. A summary of the Day Labor Fairness and Recovery Act is available at <http://www.nelp.org/nwp/initiatives/day/daylaborbill.cfm>.
7. The *Community Organizing Toolbox* was written by Larry Parachini and Sally Covington in 2001. Find information about how to obtain the report at [www.nfg.org](http://www.nfg.org).
8. These groups are all independent, but Neighborhood Funders Group tracks contact information for local groups of organizing funders.
9. The Council on Foundations Web site has a relatively comprehensive list of funder affinity groups at <http://www.cof.org/index.cfm?containerid=72>.