

Neighborhood Funders Group

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# **ISSUE BRIEF**

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A Seat at the Table:  
Keeping the "Public"  
in Public Policy

By Ami Nagle



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## **Mission**

Neighborhood Funders Group is a membership association of grantmaking institutions. Our mission is to strengthen the capacity of organized philanthropy to understand and support community-based efforts to organize and improve the economic and social fabric of low-income urban neighborhoods and rural communities. We provide information, learning opportunities, and other professional development activities to our national membership, and encourage the support of policies and practices that advance economic and social justice.

## **Issue Briefs**

Periodic NFG Issue Briefs will examine emerging issues and strategies of concern to funders working to expand support of efforts to strengthen rural and urban communities. We appreciate the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation's support for this publication.

Ami Nagle of Tucson, Arizona researches and writes about health, education, and human service policy issues. Editorial assistance provided by Sharon McGowan.

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# Using Public Policy to Create Change

**I**n the early 1980s the City of Santa Monica, California began to build its tourism industry. Situated on the Pacific shore, city officials knew that with a few financial incentives and investments in infrastructure they could encourage hotels and entertainment establishments to open, create jobs, and boost the economy.

To some degree, they were right.

By the late 1990s, major hotel chains had opened, thousands of hotel rooms were regularly filled, and small shops and restaurants were serving the growing number of visitors to the city.

However, while corporate profits were increasing there were few improvements in the lives of thousands of hotel and restaurant workers in the tourism zone.

When the only hotel with union representation came under attack from an anti-workplace-organizing campaign, workers and neighborhood activists knew that their efforts to push for better wages one business at a time were bound to fail.

“We could have fought hotel by hotel, employer by employer, but we knew that trying to raise the wages of those in the service sector by coming at it from a public policy perspective was our best chance at securing the real changes we were interested in,” recalls Madeline Janis-Aparicio, Executive Director of

Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE). Little did they know that the public policy change they sought – a living wage ordinance – would meet heavy resistance and act as a real turning point for the community.

In 1999, a newly elected Santa Monica City Council gave LAANE and members of the SMART Coalition – a group of labor unions, neighborhood representatives, and religious organizations – their best opportunity to promote the living wage. LAANE and coalition members

have prohibited City Council members from ever taking up a living wage ordinance again. Proponents of Measure KK spent \$1.5 million – 5 times more than what was spent by opponents of Measure KK – to ensure that this measure passed.

LAANE and the SMART Coalition knew that their success hinged on the defeat of Measure KK. The organizations developed public education materials to help community members and the media better understand the measure and its impact.

On Election Day 2000, the people of Santa Monica spoke. Measure KK was defeated by almost 80% of the vote.

In May 2001, the Santa Monica City Council passed a living wage ordinance setting wages at \$10.50 per hour with benefits of \$2.50 per hour for businesses in the city’s tourism and down-

town zone that earn more than \$5 million a year. This change alone directly affects more than 2,000 workers and potentially raises the wages of other workers in hotels and restaurants affected by the ordinance. Moreover, the measure provides worker rights, employer-hardship exemptions, and a strong enforcement mechanism.

Janis-Aparicio credits a combination of strong grassroots organizing and public policy analysis to securing this important change. “We knew that just organizing alone was not going to make some international corporation pay double the wage they had been paying, provide

**What is Public Policy?**  
**Public policy includes the laws, regulations and guidelines that guide the administration of public agencies and govern the relationship between individuals and organizations.**  
**- Guidelines for Informing Public Policy**  
**W.K. Kellogg Foundation**

had spent the previous year researching living wage efforts in other parts of the country, pulling together their findings, and building the case for setting a living wage level in Santa Monica’s tourism zone. So persuasive was the evidence that the Santa Monica City Council began serious debate on the issue.

But a major change like a living wage would not be won that easily. During this same period, a handful of hotels launched a ballot initiative, called Measure KK, that was touted as a living wage bill, but would have only raised wages for about 60 workers across the city. In addition, if passed, it would

benefits, and allow workers to have a voice on the job,” she explains. “We knew that these corporations were responsive to local governments and zoning requirements. By using the tool of public policy, we were able to help

secure a change for workers across the city.”

The fight for a living wage in Santa Monica is not over yet. In September 2001, opponents to the living wage

ordinance circulated a petition and collected enough signatures to take this decision out of the hands of the Santa Monica City Council and have it be decided by voters in an election this November.

## Community Organizations, Funders, and Public Policy

**C**ommunity groups such as LAANE as well as social service providers are using public policy tools because of the potential impact on broader numbers of people and longer-term effects.

But this is not universally the case. Many of these organizations are chronically under-funded, often stretched to the limit by addressing local issues or operating programs. They often do not have the capacity to go it alone or

become more heavily involved in coalitions working on public policy issues.

Some funders of these organizations also have been reluctant to support work in the public policy arena. Historically, funders supporting neighborhood and community development and organizing have focused primarily on service provision and grassroots leadership development. This commitment to neighborhoods and vulnerable populations hasn't always been placed within the larger context of the public policies that affect these places and people. In addition, funders may believe that public policy

work moves too far afield from their grant making strategies. Many erroneously think they cannot fund “advocacy” because of IRS rules and regulations.

Unfortunately, when neighborhood organizations and their funders shy away from public policy efforts, they leave the decisions that affect communities to those who, at best, may not truly understand the issues faced by community members or the set of solutions that would help the community most or, at worst, may have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo.

## Why Public Policy Matters

**N**eighborhoods across the country face a variety of problems – lack of affordable housing, transportation problems, environmental hazards, lack of basic health and welfare services, inadequate schools, and few opportunities for gainful employment.

In trying to address these challenges, neighborhood and community-based organizations have brought to bear hundreds of millions of dollars of public

and private funds and helped improve the lives of millions of people.

“Some of the problems our communities and families face stem from larger issues. The changes we need to affect these problems are more systemic. Programs might help in the short term, but if you are going to affect systems you need to address policies,” notes Sara Gould, Executive Director of the Ms. Foundation for Women, a national public charity dedicated to improving the lives of women and girls.

Work in the public policy arena is important because it:

- **Supports the democratic process.** In a representative democracy, we elect leaders to make laws that govern our communities, businesses, governments, economies, and social policies. The system is best able to address the concerns of its members if there is sufficient public input into understanding the dimensions of the problem as well as possible solutions.

“Working on public policy issues is about democracy,” says Gayle Williams, Executive Director of the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, a regional foundation concentrating on assisting people in Southern states. “Democracy works when all kinds of people participate. We are all affected by public policies. We have a right and a responsibility to be active in these discussions.”

- **Affects the communities where people live and work.** If residents can’t access affordable housing, it may be due to local, state or national policies governing public and private housing and community development programs. Because of this, public funding and program decisions often have a much larger impact on communities and problems than private dollars. For example, about \$570 billion was spent on K-12 and higher education in the United States in 1997; about 81% (or \$462 billion) came from public sources. In that same year, charitable foundations provided these educational institutions with about \$21.5 billion.

“In working to support efforts that address public policy, we get a bigger bang for our buck,” says Michele Prichard of the Liberty Hill Foundation, a public foundation working to improve conditions in Los Angeles County. “We can put our resources towards ameliorating problems for a few people or fixing them for a greater number of people.”

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2. **Affects the communities where people live and work,**
3. **Underscores the growing link between federal, state, and local policy arenas.**

- **Underscores the growing link between federal, state, and local policy arenas.** For example, with the devolution of welfare, health care and other programs supporting low-income and other vulnerable populations, decisions made at the national level have a direct impact on what states and localities can and cannot do to support low-income and working-poor families. Congress mandated a 60-month lifetime limit on cash assistance through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, but gave each state the flexibility to set shorter time limits. Seventeen states set a lower level than the national ceiling. This dramatically affects the most vulnerable of community members, requiring that they try to find work with little or no skills and work experience, or forces them to leave welfare and live with little means to support their families.

“There are important links between federal, state and local policy arenas,” says Benita Melton, Program Officer

at the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, a national foundation working to reduce poverty. “The impact goes both ways: federal and state policies impact local community resources and programs; and, policy and program innovations at the local and state level can impact national policy.”

While public policy may be important to the well-being of communities and families, there are real barriers to getting involved in public policy discussions. Public policy decisions are too often made by a small group of people behind closed doors, with little or no input from the public or those directly affected by policy. The growing interrelationships between the local, state and federal policymaking arenas is a challenge for grassroots organizations that have traditionally focused on national or local policies but may not have the expertise to engage state policymakers. Enabling low-income or vulnerable populations to participate in discussions at all levels of government helps ensure that more viewpoints are heard and considered.

# What is Public Policy Work?



unders support and organizations implement a variety of activities to raise awareness of public policies and to inform public policy debates.

These activities include everything from sharing information with constituents to identifying and researching public policy problems and solutions to developing media campaigns and organizing coalitions.

Funders and organizations may work in all or just a few of these areas. In fact, it is not uncommon for neighborhood-based organizations to work with other organizations, perhaps those that have research, technical or legal expertise, to augment their efforts.

## *Understanding Processes and Issues*

At one time, policy and program research was left to “academics” or “specialists.” Today, local community groups are discovering the power of research, undertaking analyses of the issues faced by the local community, and using the analysis to inform public policy debates.

What has become clear is that information can be influential and organizations undertaking policy analysis have become important information producers and disseminators. As noted by Andrew Rich of Wake Forest University and R.

Kent Weaver of the Brookings Institution, “Information rivals money as a powerful currency in contemporary American politics and policy making.” These organizations fill an analytical void and shape policy debates through research, analysis and outreach to key players and the media.

For example, the Idaho Community Action Network and the Northwest Federation of Community Organizations used research to help inform the children’s health insurance debate in Idaho. Realizing that passage of a health insurance plan for uninsured children did not ensure that Idaho’s most vulnerable children would actually get health insurance, these organizations set out to document the barriers keeping low-income, working parents from enrolling their children in the state’s Medicaid program. In 1999, the organizations sent 27 “testers” to three regions to try to enroll in Medicaid.

As a result of these efforts, the organizations identified 17 substantial barriers to enrolling in the program, including an overly lengthy and complex enrollment form, no availability of translators for non-English speaking clients, intrusive questioning by case-workers, and enrollment offices that are closed during the times most convenient for working parents – lunchtimes, nights and weekends.

“Nobody was talking about this issue. The research informed the debate. But, it was also leverage for action. It gave us a foothold in the debate as well as a concrete set of solution strategies,” says Lee Ann Hall, Executive Director of Idaho Community Action Network (ICAN) and the Northwest Federation of Community Organizations (NFCO).

As a result of this research and the aggressive media and public education campaign that followed, ICAN and NFCO were asked to meet with state officials and negotiate changes in the state Medicaid enrollment process. These changes, along with aggressive outreach, led to a 194 percent increase in the number of children enrolled in the state’s children’s health insurance plan between January 1999 and November 2000.

But the import of these efforts reaches beyond Idaho.

“While the solutions that these research projects are pointing out are local, the fact that we are seeing them across the nation points to a set of needed national changes,” Hall says. “Our local efforts can be a catalyst for change at the national level, changes that would have a tremendous impact in communities across the nation.”

In fact, the National Campaign for Jobs and Income Support – a broad-based effort to bring together grassroots organizing efforts from across the country – is working with ICAN and other grassroots and community-based organizations to develop local research projects and raise or “lift” these issues onto the national stage.

**Information rivals money as a powerful currency in contemporary American politics and policy making.**

**- Andrew Rich and  
R. Kent Weaver**

## *Setting the Agenda*

Too often those affected by policies are the least likely to be involved in developing public policies. Getting involved in coalitions working to provide input into the development and adjustment of public policy proposals strengthens grassroots and neighborhood organizations.

“There is a seat at the table and then there is a seat at the table,” notes Erica Jackson, the community organizer at the Center for Children and Education in Georgia. The Center, a grassroots organizing and parent training organization founded in 1997, helps parents develop the skills necessary to become involved in school policies on behalf of their own children as well as children throughout the district and state.

In 2000, the State of Georgia developed a system of local school councils – consisting of two parents, two teachers, and two business community members – to help guide local schools. Decisions made by these local school councils could supersede decisions made by elected school boards.

It became clear to the Center that some local schools were not interested in developing the full potential of local school councils; indeed, some were developing rules to limit the councils’ input and power.

The Center is training parent representatives on the elements of a fair election, what to demand of shared decision making, and what kinds of rules and procedures need to be in place to ensure that real parent input is achieved.

“In many ways this is an opportunity to ensure that parent input is part of local school policy decision making, but only if parents have the tools to make the

most of it, make sure the process is fair, and understand education policy,” Jackson says.

As these councils get underway, the Center also will be involved in helping parents better understand policy issues facing schools – from truancy and expulsion policies to determining curriculum that promotes reading – so that they can help set the agenda about what needs to be done to improve the education of children across the state.

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## *Monitoring Policy and Program Implementation*

Even when laws that benefit low-income and vulnerable communities are passed and programs established, it does not always mean that those resources and services reach the community. Monitoring the implementation of policy and programs at the ground level and identifying and raising awareness of needed changes can help to strengthen the position of local organizations while improving conditions for families and neighborhoods.

The Community Reinvestment Act (CRA) was passed by Congress in 1977 to encourage financial institutions to make credit available to businesses and individuals in low- and moderate-income neighborhoods. Housing and neighborhood revitalization groups across the country believed that CRA was an im-

portant opportunity to increase financial institutions’ investment in low-income communities. CRA may have created an opportunity, but few financial institutions were using it to make loans in vulnerable communities.

“It was a good policy, but it had no teeth,” says Pete Garcia, President and Chief Operating Officer of the Arizona-based Chicanos por la Causa and Chair of the Board of the National Community Reinvestment Coalition, a group of about

800 local and national housing and community development organizations working together to improve the Community Reinvestment Act.

After years of trying to encourage financial institutions to use the CRA and make loans in low-income communities, members of the National Community Reinvestment Coalition realized that the regulations needed to be changed to increase the incentives for participation. Rather than

adding financial incentives, the group recommended that information regarding financial institutions – in particular the scores that federal regulators give indicating a financial institution’s level of commitment to reinvesting in low-income communities – be made public.

Soon, financial institutions started calling local community organizations asking for help in establishing mortgage loans, small business loans, and community investments in low-income neighborhoods. Many community organizations worked with these financial institutions, building partnerships that generate financial capital – through loans and investments from financial institutions – and human capital – through financial literacy, and new homeowner and business classes provided by local community organizations.

But the work to improve CRA wasn't complete: cumbersome paperwork meant that banks spent more time filling out forms and less time making new financial investments; difficulty selling loans to other financial institutions meant that participating banks had many older loans on their books and were unable to make new loans in low-income neighborhoods.

"We had been trying to fix these problems on the local level. Our members knew that if we could fix these problems at the national level more loans would be made and more investments would be made in low-income communities across the nation," says Garcia.

And they did it. Members of the Coalition worked with a committee of bankers to get regulations changed and devised creative ways to enable large financial institutions, such as Fannie Mae, to purchase older, established loans, allowing banks to have the capacity to make new loans.

These changes and the relationships built with financial institutions have had a great impact on local communities. For example, through CRA and the partnerships created with local financial institutions, Chicanos por la Causa has been working with more than 75,000 people across Arizona. Three years ago, Wells Fargo bank made a \$1.2 million invest-

ment that has enabled Chicanos por la Causa to purchase and rehabilitate buildings and construct 500 new homes in the next five years.

### ***Developing and Communicating Messages***

In today's media-saturated society, it's critical for community-based organizations to be able to shape and disseminate messages about public policies.

Organizations engaged in communications take on a variety of tasks, including conducting polling that identifies key issues for the public, holding focus groups to refine messages, developing creative dissemination strategies that rely on "paid" as well as "earned" media coverage, and developing campaigns to increase public will to address the issues facing low-income and vulnerable populations.

When the Home Day Care Committee of the Direct Action for Rights and Equality (DARE) – a grassroots organizing effort based in Providence, Rhode Island – began to explore state-provided health benefits for home child care providers, they realized that framing the message was going to be critical.

"Policymakers, because of racism and sexism, did not view child care as 'work,' and especially not work that should be valued. We developed a series of key messages, based on research and decisions made by members, that made the issue resonate and made it hard to ignore," recalls Sara Mersha, Executive Director of DARE.

For example, the Committee talked about home-based child care providers who are serving low-income families receiving a state child care subsidy as "state workers." Framing the message in this way helped to ease comparisons between these workers and other state workers who do receive benefits.

## **But What About the IRS?**

Some foundations have been reluctant to fund public policy or advocacy efforts because they believe that it is against the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) code. "Some foundations are hesitant to get into this arena because they think it is illegal or are concerned about how much they can do. They need to understand the law," notes Sara Gould, Executive Director of the Ms. Foundation for Women.

Indeed, according to the IRS it's perfectly legal for nonprofit organizations to organize, educate, communicate and lobby. The organizations you fund can't endorse specific candidates for office or engage in partisan politics. Foundations and public charities can give grants to nonprofit organizations that lobby, as long as certain conditions are met. First, grants of general operating support may not be earmarked for lobbying. Second, grants made to specific projects that have a lobbying component must be for an amount less than the budget for the lobbying activities.

It is important to note that the IRS specifically addresses lobbying activities. The IRS does not prohibit or even limit other policy-related activities such as analysis of social problems and public policies, and dissemination of policy education materials (as long as there is no reference to *specific legislation* and no position on legislation is taken).

*Source: Drawn from Grantmakers in Health. Strategies for Shaping Public Policy: A Guide for Health Funders. January 2000.*

In addition, DARE identified the best messengers for their effort – home child care providers themselves. DARE helped to train Committee members and home child care providers to speak in public, conduct media interviews, and present their arguments to policymakers, whether at a hearing, a negotiation session, or a direct action. The organization also developed fact sheets that Committee members used in their public education efforts.

While communications and message delivery efforts helped to position the issue, it still was an uphill battle. After five years of working to develop and raise awareness of the issues, conducting research, and organizing across the state, DARE secured statewide, comprehensive health insurance for home child care workers.

The hard work and accomplishments of this group have helped to launch a new home child care cooperative in Rhode Island.

### ***Reaching Out to and Mobilizing Constituents***

The public policy process can often be overwhelming. While community members experience and see problems, they may not know about the policies that affect their neighborhoods and families. Or, they may just not know how to get involved. A key role that organizations involved in public policy can play is to translate public policy information and help their constituents understand the information as well as the policy-making process.

Communities for a Better Environment (CBE), with offices in Oakland and

Huntington Park, California, has been working for years to translate complex, technical, and environmental-impact information for communities across California.

CBE builds the capacity of grassroots leaders to take on neighborhood environmental problems by using scientific research and analysis as well as various legal strategies.

In the wake of the Northridge earthquake in 1994, the residents of Huntington Park started to see a “mountain” of debris growing across the street. This emergency operation was open 24-hours a day, seven days a week, and the noise and dust had an immediate effect on the health and well-being of the neighborhood.

At first, neighbors approached the construction firm to ask them to cease or modify their operations. When the business refused, the neighbors realized they needed to get public policy officials involved and asked CBE for assistance. What CBE and community members discovered right away was that the company was not violating any existing codes or laws. This community did not need better enforcement of or alterations to existing laws; they needed new public policies governing these activities.

By analyzing the health impact of the facility and going door to door to organize in the neighborhood, CBE was able to create a movement called “La Montaña” – to change city policy regarding waste facilities.

In order to raise awareness of this issue and encourage policymakers to act, CBE needed research to document the health

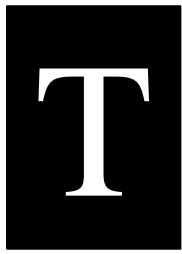
effects. Staff gathered research on health and environmental issues. A study for the City Council, developed by a professor at the University of California, Irvine, found that the dust from the facility was having a major impact on health, directly affecting 2,000 to 3,000 residents near the facility and indirectly affecting another 10,000 people in surrounding neighborhoods. Armed with this and other information, community leaders became conversant in environmental health and public policy and shared that knowledge with other community members. The more information community members got, the more they were spurred to act.

“This was empowering for community members. They became spokespersons. They were more knowledgeable about the health impact of breathing dust from this facility than the City Council members,” says Carlos Porras, Executive Director of CBE.

Educating the City Council to enact an ordinance took three years. But at the same time, community members raised awareness of these issues among state policymakers. Shortly after the City Council passed local ordinances, the state of California also instituted zoning policies that apply to neighborhoods across the state. These ordinances set in place a process by which businesses applying for these kinds of permits need to be reviewed by a state regulatory agency and pass health and safety measures.

“By using scientific information and public policy, community members changed their lives and the lives of people across the state,” notes Porras.

# Suggestions for Funders



There are many ways to support public policy efforts. In addition to the core public policy activities described in this

Policy Brief – understanding processes and issues, setting the agenda, communications, and mobilization – foundations supporting public policy efforts should also consider supporting:

- **Skills building.** Neighborhood and community activists often have a good sense of the problems their communities face, but may not know exactly how to inform and affect public policy. Becoming involved in the public policy arena requires developing or honing a new set of skills and strategies, including: learning how existing or proposed policies affect communities and families; understanding the policy environment and the policy-making process; developing policy proposals; and building direct and “real” relationships with policy-makers. Activists also may need help in connecting the local community issues that seem most immediate to the more distant, seemingly abstract world

of state- and federal-level policy. They must also develop or sharpen the capacity to monitor implementation of the policy changes they win and counter efforts to repeal them.

- **Intermediaries, supporting institutions, and coalitions.** No group can change public policy alone. Funders can also support an organization’s interest in public policy by linking it to intermediaries that can help analyze issues or political processes, connect it

**Scaling Up**  
Public policy work offers a way to scale up and increase your philanthropic dollars.

- Michele Prichard  
Liberty Hill Foundation

with other efforts across the nation, and develop new skills in members. Coalitions at the local, state, and national levels can help neighborhood and community organizations understand the policy-making arena. By working in coalition with others interested in the same issues, these organizations can help to inform state-level

organizations and maximize efforts by pooling resources.

- **Networks.** Funders should also consider developing links between local, state, and national grantees that allow them to share lessons and strategies for success. Network members can: share information about the impact various policies are having in a range of states; educate each other about effective policies that reduce poverty and increase community assets; share effective policy advocacy strategies; learn new leadership and organizing skills; and discuss ways to ensure policies are implemented fairly.
- **General operating grants.** Changes in public policies can take years to accomplish. Organizations with flexible or general operating funding will be more able to adjust projects and strategies as the barriers to success shift. For years, conservative foundations have provided organizations with general operating grants. This flexibility has been found to help provide stability and enable the organization to quickly adapt to changes in the policy environment.

## Resources for Grantmakers

- **Guidelines for Informing Public Policy.** W.K. Kellogg Foundation ([www.wkkf.org](http://www.wkkf.org)).
- **Worry Free Lobbying for Nonprofits: How to Use the 501(h) Election to Maximize Effectiveness and Supporting Advocacy. It’s Easier Than You Think!** Resources for Grantmakers. The Alliance for Justice ([www.afj.org](http://www.afj.org)).
- **Nonprofit Quarterly,** Advocacy resources Web site ([www.nonprofitquarterly.org](http://www.nonprofitquarterly.org))
- **Independent Sector’s Charity Lobbying in the Public Interest** Web site ([www.independentsector.org/clpi/index/html](http://www.independentsector.org/clpi/index/html))
- **Now Hear This** (a “how to” on advocacy communications). Fenton Communications ([www.fenton.org](http://www.fenton.org)).





# Membership

Membership in NFG provides access to a network of creative grantmakers interested in sharing their experiences and perspectives. Members also receive discounted admission to NFG events; free copies of reports and case studies; a subscription to NFG's newsletter and other mailings; inclusion in the Member Directory; full voting rights; and special communications to assist grantmaking efforts.

Membership is institutional and dues are based on the size of the annual grants budget of the member's institution. For further information, call Spence Limbocker, Executive Director, at 202.833.4690, or complete and fax the information below to 202.833.4694.

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**Working Group on Labor and Community**

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“As a funder, working on public policy issues can feel as if it is a long way from impact. But if you want to address issues that are affecting a large number of people, working on public policy has a direct impact on people’s lives.”

-*Gayle Williams*, Executive Director  
Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation.

“Immediately after the state enacted the Children’s Health Insurance Program our phones started ringing off the hook with people calling to report that they were not able to enroll. We knew there was a problem, but, to make a change, we had to document how pervasive it was and the dimension of the problem. We needed the research to do this.”

-*Lee Ann Hall*, Executive Director  
Idaho Community Action Network

“Some of the problems our communities and families stem from larger issues. If you are going to affect systems, you need to address policies.”

-*Sara Gould*, Executive Director  
Ms. Foundation for Women.



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