



the Sillerman Center

FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF PHILANTHROPY

DYNAMIC FAMILIES: How Small Family Foundations Decide to Make Big Changes Through Public Policy

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The interplay of public perception, public will and political, legislative, judicial, or regulatory action is the realm of public policy. Just as a citizen can organize votes or create a coalition, or media coverage can shift the way policy is made, foundations of any size can be instrumental in influencing policy. By leveraging their wealth and (often) personal connections to those in power, foundations can influence public opinion, change service practice, gain media attention for an issue, or sponsor research that helps to shape how elected officials approach new laws or regulations.

As numerous articles and reviews of philanthropic activity have noted, foundations have always played these roles in the United States. They have at times been lauded for it, at times been criticized and circumscribed by law. But, over time, they have become essential players in the nonprofit advocacy arena and in academic and political circles, providing both the spark and the grease to innovate in areas where government process is less nimble.

While large, national foundations garner the lion's share of media attention, the foundation world is, in fact, populated mostly by small foundations, directed by families. Operating with relatively small endowments, the vast majority work on a small scale at a local level. Those who have looked at the sector, however, see untapped potential in small family foundations' vast resources and unique local knowledge and presence, and suggest that if more small family foundations engage in policy grantmaking, it might do much for the public good. This project explored that potential.

Our investigation revealed common patterns among small family foundations that have thrived in the world of policy philanthropy. The patterns relate to the foundations' structure, age, and staffing, all of which affect what kinds of giving make sense for each foundation. And while we found no magic formula that attracts small family foundations to policy, this research establishes some developmental steps that form the basis of successful policy philanthropy. They are:

1. A founder's mission/vision established the policy sphere as a vital interest; and/or
2. A generational shift brings in new board members with agendas that include "up-stream" issue work; i.e. going after the causes of societal problems and changing policy to affect thousands, rather than just a few; and/or
3. The foundation "professionalizes" its practice, often hiring an outside advisor or adding professional staff, bringing non-family members onto a board or serendipitously having a family member who has a different operational vision, and initiating strategic planning that brings policy investing into the agenda.

Those interviewed for the project emphasized the importance to successful policy grantmaking of professionalizing the foundation's approach.

The key conceptual shift for most foundations is moving from a tradition of providing local charity to thinking strategically about preventing the problems that communities face. "Looking upstream" at the causes of and possible solutions to problems leads to a different kind of giving, often involving strategies for changing policies and leveraging assets (e.g. through collaboration) for greater impact.

Also important to many family foundations that embrace policy work is understanding that strategic investing for policy change need not crowd out other giving. Most small foundations interviewed for this project, even those with robust policy investments, still made substantial grants for direct service or institutional development. Although the ratio of policy to program grants may vary, those in the field said, policy grantmaking remains a question of "both/and" for family foundations, not a question of having to choose a new and exclusive path.

Introduction

Which of the following is true of small family foundations?

They ...

- a. are destined to be involved with policy
- b. have no appetite for policy work
- c. can have significant influence on policy change
- d. are only taking baby steps toward policy grantmaking
- e. have a moral obligation to be engaged in policy
- f. are too small to be effective in large scale policy change
- g. find small size, flexibility, and local influence useful in policy change
- h. some of the above
- i. all of the above

answer: (i) ALL OF THE ABOVE

PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT

Although the philanthropic sector has focused considerable attention on how or why foundations can influence public policy, few have specifically considered the role of small family foundations. The need for such a focus is highlighted by the strength of the small family foundation sector: they make up more than half of philanthropy's registered, independent foundations,¹ although fully 85% of family foundations, including more than 90% of those with assets under \$2.5 million, have no paid staff.

The Sillerman Center for the Advancement of Philanthropy wanted to shine a light on the roles of small family foundations and, with this and other reports, strengthen the understanding of the potential impact of this little studied, but substantial, swath of the philanthropic sector. This report focuses specifically

on small family foundations involved with policy (e.g., policies concerning health, education, justice, children, families, and communities).²

The project set out to explore several questions:

1. How robust is small family foundation involvement in policy grantmaking?
2. What led these foundations to policy grantmaking and why do they feel it is worthwhile?
3. What challenges of policy grantmaking may be particular to small family foundations?
4. How have small family foundations measured success in their policy grantmaking?
5. What informs the practice or is likely to improve the efficacy of small foundations in policy philanthropy?

¹ Foundation Center: Key Facts on Family Foundations, 2008. Data from 2006-2007.

² Although the Sillerman Center recognizes that philanthropic institutions span the political and ideological spectrum, this review did not weight or balance its list of foundations interviewed for a particular ideological perspective.

The resulting report is intended to provide a broad audience - spanning those in philanthropy, advocacy, policy, and academia - with ideas and insights for better ways to work with small family foundations. The recommendations at the end, however, focus on small family foundations themselves and other philanthropic sectors, especially those with an interest in the expansion and success of small family foundation involvement in policy: philanthropic peer organizations, philanthropic support and research organizations, larger national foundations, and community foundations.

METHODOLOGY

The research for this report followed a systematic methodology of literature review and focused interviews.

Focused interviews began with key informants in the field, each of whom is a professional in the field of philanthropy or policy and advocacy, to test ideas and questions and to ask for names of foundations doing interesting policy work and at varying levels of investment in policy work. From those conversations, we developed a target list of small family foundations and common questions that would guide the conversations with them.

Interviews with foundations generally included a staff interview and a board member interview. When possible, the board interview was with a family member. Each interview lasted from one to two hours. The author of this report conducted the interviews by phone after sending the interviewees the questions in writing (see Appendix).

An extensive (but not exhaustive) literature review drew heavily on the background materials for the dissertations of Jason Franklin at NYU and the 21st Century School Fund, and Amy Carlin at Brandeis's Heller School, and was supplemented

by Internet searches, publications from philanthropy, guides for the field, and conference reports.

Through GuideStar, the financial filings of a substantial number of the selected foundations were reviewed for information on board sizes and compensation, changes in grantmaking, and other background information helpful to understanding the selected foundations and interviewees for this report.

The spotlight profiles that appear in this report use quotations exclusively from the phone interviews.³ Analysis of the field comes from the interviews as well as from the wide-ranging contributions of the substantial literature on philanthropy and policy.

DEFINITIONS

For the purposes of this project, a **small family foundation** is a foundation that distributes funds of one family donor/founder, has (in most cases) four or fewer professional staff, and continues to be directed partially, if not exclusively, by donor family board members.

We define **policy philanthropy** as foundation activity in one or more of the following areas:

- a. Conducting legislative or regulatory advocacy (foundation staff speaks directly with lawmakers about current issues).
- b. Funding organizations that do policy work (think tanks, research institutions, policy/advocacy nonprofit organizations).
- c. Financing or conducting public education, such as media campaigns, voter education, documentary films.
- d. Funding coalition building at the grassroots level, e.g., through community organizing.
- e. Using other philanthropic leverage

(individual family members might use personal influence (e.g., by meeting with a politician they've personally supported or securing a meeting for others) or convening power, or might create or join affinity groups of funders, etc.).

ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT

The report begins with a brief review of the literature concerning foundations and policy, considering historical trends in philanthropic involvement in policy and highlighting recent interest in engagement between foundations and the policy sphere.

Next, we consider why small family foundations may be particularly well suited to policy philanthropy, citing both literature and key informant interviews. The report

posits three crucial antecedents for small family foundation "readiness" for policy engagement.

To illuminate how "readiness" for policy philanthropy looks and feels, the report then presents eight "Spotlight" profiles of small family foundations, each illustrating one of the three ways in which small family foundations become successfully engaged in policy grantmaking. Two charts look more closely at how spotlighted foundations handle evaluating policy work, and offer advice for other family foundations concerning success in policy investing.

The report concludes with recommendations for how the field of philanthropy can better support small family foundations to engage successfully in policy philanthropy.

Why Policy Philanthropy?

“If advocacy can save one percent of the state budget on housing, medical care, public education, that means millions of dollars toward those services. Support for advocacy can have great benefits while the same amount spent on direct services could not sustain programs over time.”

Emmett Carson,
as quoted in *Investing in Change*, from the Alliance for Justice.

American foundations have existed as legal entities since the 1800s. The power and wealth concentrated in the hands of the first philanthropic families gave them special access to much of the power elite. As historian James Allen Smith neatly summarizes, foundations, “have worked to shape policies by using the influence of their boards, by molding elite public opinion, by pursuing campaigns of public information and education, by creating demonstration projects, by using their financial resources strategically to leverage public funds, and by pursuing direct legislative lobbying, judicial strategies, and executive branch persuasion. They have worked at every level of government.”⁴

The policy arena comprises all of the areas Smith described. In engaging with policy, foundations and others interact both with the marketplace of ideas (public opinion and knowledge) and with governmental decisionmakers. These and other points of intersection with policy, any of which present a potential opportunity for foundation involvement and influence, are shown in the following policy framework, building upon one developed by James Ferris and Michael Mintrom:⁵

1. Inputs: Public and expert opinion, research, fact-finding, issue definition.
2. Actors: Grassroots (subjects of policy), voters, officials in the three branches of government: executive, legislative, and judicial.

3. Stages: Agenda setting, policy/regulatory formulation, policy adoption, implementation, and evaluation.
4. Levels: International, federal, state, and local.
5. Venues (or points of influence): Legislation (laws), administrative rules and regulations, agency procedures/guidelines, court cases, elections.

Bound significantly for the first time by the Tax Reform Act of 1969, foundations have altered their involvement in policymaking – i.e., they no longer engage directly in lobbying – but they continue to utilize their wealth to obtain access to policymakers and elite intellectual circles where policy gets debated and public opinion formed. While one could debate the fairness of this privileged access, it is not the focus of this report. Moreover, many in philanthropic circles believe that foundations have not just a legal imperative to invest in the public good by contributing to social justice and amelioration of inequities, but a moral imperative as well.⁶

Despite access, history, and means, however, policy philanthropy remains a leap for most small family foundations. Many in the field attribute reluctance to invest in policy or advocacy to skittishness over the legal implications of the tax laws.⁷ But for small family foundations, the considerations are more complicated and are often related more to the nature of working within a family structure than to

legal considerations.⁸

Because of their flexibility, compared with more closely scrutinized and ponderous government processes, private philanthropic dollars are perceived as important catalysts for progress on policy. Foundations are seen as being able to take the initiative more than government because they are only accountable to themselves, rather than to an electorate; they can be parsimonious in their areas of focus; and a foundation’s risk in investing its dollars is considerably different than the political risk attached to spending taxpayer funds.⁹

The recent rise of some new philanthropists (dot-commers and other financial winners from the boom of the 1990s) has ushered in a new era of attention to investing in social change. The self-described “next generation” of philanthropists has started to look at philanthropy as another form of investment, rather than charity, coining terms such as “social entrepreneurship” and “venture philanthropy” to convey a more engaged role in guiding the use of philanthropic dollars.¹⁰

The public’s knowledge of this form of philanthropy is understandably formed by the high profiles of larger foundations which both invest in and garner national attention for their work on issues such as health care (e.g., Robert Wood Johnson and Henry Kaiser), the environment (Doris Duke, Ford, Joyce, MacArthur, and Gates), international development (Open Society, Ford, MacArthur, and Gates), and education (Annie E. Casey, Carnegie, Ford,

Kellogg, Rockefeller, and Gates). But these foundations also put considerable time into communications, sometimes as public relations for the foundation and sometimes as part of an issue advocacy strategy.¹¹

In contrast, it is difficult to summarize the contributions of or reliably map out small family foundation involvement in policy. Well over half the independent foundations in the U.S. are family foundations, most of them relatively small. Upwards of 35,000 family funds controlled more than \$300 billion in assets and gave \$19 billion in gifts in 2007.¹² Yet these funds operate in relative obscurity – many by choice. And, as noted earlier, many operate with few or no staff. One funder we spoke with said her foundation did not want to develop a website because it invited unsolicited requests, and they didn’t want to deal with the extra work.

The focus of this investigation, however, is to look at why small foundations – especially given the limited nature of their typical grants – might be particularly well suited to policy investing.

First and foremost, foundations want to leverage their investments to have the maximum impact. So the notion that investing in large scale societal change affecting thousands of people with the same dollars that otherwise would serve at most hundreds of individuals should appeal to small family foundations, as many of those interviewed for this project noted. “It’s a way to have a really big impact with very modest money,” said one grantmaker. A recent study concurs, finding that private and community foundation investment in “public affairs”

⁸ Goldberg and Pittelman, *op cit*.

⁹ Thomas Oliver and Jason Gerson, “The Role of Foundations in Shaping Health Policy: Lessons from Efforts to Expand and Preserve Health Insurance Coverage.” In *Foundations and Public Policy*, James Ferris, Ed. Foundation Center, USC 2009.

¹⁰ Goldberg and Pittelman’s *Creating Change through Family Philanthropy: The Next Generation (op cit.)* exhorts a younger generation of philanthropists to engage with policy philanthropy.

¹¹ Paul VanDeCarr and Anne Mackinnon, *Communicating for Impact: Strategies for Grantmakers*. GrantCraft & The Ford Foundation. NYC 2009.

¹² The Foundation Center, *Aggregate Financial Data for Family Foundations, 2007*. FC Stats: The Foundation Center’s Statistical Information Service (foundationcenter.org/findfunders/statistics/)

⁴ James Allen Smith, “Foundations and Public Policymaking: a Historical Perspective.” Research Paper – 11, May 2002. The Center on Philanthropy and Public Policy, University of Southern California, Los Angeles, CA.

⁵ James M. Ferris and Michael Mintrom, “Foundations and Public Policymaking: A Conceptual Framework.” In *Foundations and Public Policy*, James Ferris, Ed. Foundation Center, USC 2009.

⁶ James Allen Smith, *ibid*. See also Alison Goldberg, Karen Pittelman & Resource Generation, *Creating Change through Family Philanthropy*, Soft Skull Press, 2006; and National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, *Criteria for Philanthropy at Its Best*, Washington DC, 2009.

⁷ Alliance for Justice, *Investing in Change: A Funder’s Guide to Supporting Advocacy*. Washington DC, 2004.

had the most substantial return on every dollar invested, far outstripping the return on program investments in education, health or human services – all of which received a greater share of foundation grants.¹³

Further, certain attributes position small family foundations well for exerting local influence. Many small family foundations are already deeply engaged in their communities and are known quantities, and can capitalize on these connections. They also have a lower profile than larger foundations, along with the flexibility of smaller boards and local knowledge of key constituencies and nonprofits.

If small foundations can be effective in policy, and policy investment brings substantial returns, what makes a small family foundation likely to engage in this sort of work and likely to succeed? The reasons for most foundations' (small or large) reluctance to engage in policy work is well documented: there is the perennial nervousness over the legal restrictions on lobbying; policy work is not only harder to grasp than direct service but also takes much longer to bear fruit; and many small foundations may not wish to engage in policy battles. Services are simply easier for foundations.

Policy work also requires an unusual degree of philosophical consensus among board members, and that may be difficult to achieve. In addition, boards accustomed to asking for specific results within short grant cycles (typically one to three years) may be reluctant to invest in policy's more amorphous road to systemic change that may not yield measurable results for ten years or more. As one executive director put it, describing her board's rejection of

policy grantmaking, "policy issues are too far removed from the 'do it' work they are used to."

Philanthropic involvement in policy change also varies with generational and ideological shifts in government, within the different arms of the government (legislative, judicial, regulatory, local, etc.), and with the point of entry in the policy process (problem definition, policy formulation, program evaluation, etc.).¹⁴ Similarly, as individual fortunes have shifted, interest in government has changed, and the American democratic experiment has aged, so too have ideas about how those with extraordinary private resources can and should re-invest those resources in the society that gave rise to them.¹⁵

However, as we finish the first decade of the 21st century, the preponderance of literature suggests that while the slope of the curve is positive, the rate of growth of policy involvement remains slow. To some, especially those who see enormous untapped potential for social investing in the sea of foundations that operate without paid staff, increasing funders' interest in policy philanthropy has become a priority. This has resulted in a rash of reports and conferences designed to identify obstacles and spur a greater sense of urgency and efficacy in the field.

The effect seems to have been to ameliorate the sense that policy philanthropy is off limits, but it is harder to pinpoint what it takes to convey the potential for efficacy, especially among very small foundations. As Emmett Carson wrote, "While foundations have become increasingly aware that policy advocacy work is possible, many...foundations lack the necessary 'thirst' to expend any

appreciable energy or effort directed at becoming engaged in public policy advocacy."¹⁶

In the next section, we look at the opportunities and obstacles peculiar to small family foundations that affect

whether and how they approach policy work. We then consider what practices have brought these foundations the most success and satisfaction in engaging with policy.

TEN KEYS TO SUCCESS IN POLICY INVESTING

1. Network, network, network.
2. Hire professional help.
3. Find a niche issue.
4. Be an information gatherer & disseminator.
5. Join collaborative funds (or affinity groups).
6. Consider funding research.
7. Expand to policy, don't stop service funding.
8. Organize, educate, mobilize.
9. Offer to make connections happen.
10. Be patient.

(See pages 20-21)

¹³ Robert Shapiro and Aparna Mathur, "The Social and Economic Value of Private and Community Foundations." *The Philanthropic Collaborative*, Washington DC, 2008.

¹⁴ See Oliver and Gerston as well as Ferris in James Ferris, Ed. *Foundations and Public Policy*. *Op cit*.

¹⁵ James Allen Smith, "Private Foundations and Public Policymaking: A Historical Perspective." In *Foundations and Public Policy*, James Ferris, Ed. *Foundation Center, USC* 2009.

¹⁶ Emmett D. Carson, *Foreword to Investing in Change: A Funder's Guide to Supporting Advocacy*. *Alliance for Justice*, Washington, DC 2004.

The Special Case of Small Family Foundations and Policy

“There’s a bit of grandiosity in those of us at small foundations wanting to do policy change. We think we’re the elephant in the room, when in fact we’re a mouse. But you should never underestimate a mouse.”

Ellen Remmer, CEO of The Philanthropic Initiative

Because small family foundations with little or no staff make up more than 90% of registered independent U.S. foundations, it is important to remember, as Ellen Remmer of The Philanthropy Initiative (TPI) pointed out, that “there are always going to be lots of small family foundations that just don’t have the time or inclination for the strategic, systemic work, or who are simply oriented towards directly helping people or organizations. A smaller group is focused on issues and this is the group that may eventually get to working on policy, movements, and systems.”

Among that smaller group are the interviewees for this project. And we found considerable consensus on a number of themes about the distinct advantages and special challenges for small family foundations in embracing policy philanthropy.

Perhaps most important, our interviewees emphasized that the policy arena is the perfect match for smaller foundations because of the magnification of impact derived from public funding. Delivering a program to 60 or 160 children, they said, is great. But getting a state to change a law so that every needy child received that program is what real change is about.

WHY POLICY PHILANTHROPY IS A PARTICULARLY GOOD CHOICE FOR SMALL FAMILY FOUNDATIONS

Our key informants, and others in the field, suggested the following advantages for small family foundations in policy impact:

- **A lack of bureaucracy** tops the list of advantages in policy grantmaking for small family foundations. The flexibility of small size and relatively quick decision processes allows small family foundations to respond to opportunities and changes in the political landscape.
- Small family foundations can often use **personal connections** in the community to provide non-monetary help (e.g., making key meetings happen, or putting information in front of a decision-maker).
- Small foundations can concentrate on a **“niche” issue** and become the go-to organization for relatively small but still important changes in government policy.
- Small family foundations have a greater capacity to operate **out of the public eye** because of the smaller dollar amounts they give, allowing them to give credit to others – such as legislators or nonprofits – who need the recognition in order to grow their capacity to do the work.
- For grassroots efforts, small family foundations can help **identify local talent**, or as one interviewee put it, “be like an R&D partner to a larger effort.”
- **Smaller grants** are often all that local advocacy groups can absorb, and they are often difficult (time consuming or not worth the effort) to obtain from larger foundations.
- **Structural flexibility** allows small family foundations to make grants over longer periods of time than larger foundations, an especially important factor in policy initiatives that must tolerate long and ambiguous roads to eventual success.

WHY POLICY PRESENTS UNIQUE CHALLENGES FOR SMALL FAMILY FOUNDATIONS

Small family foundations also face special challenges concerning adopting a policy grantmaking agenda. In addition to the obstacles discussed earlier, our interviewees raised the following issues particular to small family foundations:

- **Reputation:** The fear of social and political backlash can be a big constraint, especially if the family maintains a high profile in the community. One staffer told us, “When you fund policy, you have to be willing to make enemies. That doesn’t happen with the local museum.”
- **Family dynamics:** One informant said that to agree on a program, “a big foundation just needs a lawyer, a family foundation needs a therapist.” Diversity of opinion (especially in second or

third generation family foundations) and sensitivity of political views can keep a foundation from policy work. They don’t want political disagreements to become family rifts, and “emotional baggage and dynamics are key, so getting policy right requires a lot more intentional conversation.” Another funder said succinctly: “some things are better left unsaid in families.”

- **History:** Long-standing commitments in a community may make it hard for foundations to shift their dollars. “I may think policy is great,” said one funder, “but what about the hospital, or the museum, or the after-school programs that we’ve been funding for generations? You can’t just stop doing that. There are big relationships at stake.”

SMALL FOUNDATIONS IN POLICY GRANTMAKING: A BRIEF LOOK AT TEN*

Family Foundation	Policy Focus	Brief Description and Locale
A.L. Mailman Family Foundation	Early Childhood	Based in White Plains, NY, the A.L. Mailman Family Foundation has a staff of two. National in focus, they fund early childhood curricula and services, along with advocacy and public education to promote systemic change that improves early childhood outcomes.
Campion Foundation	Protecting Wilderness, Ending Homelessness	Based in Seattle, WA, with a staff of four, the Campion Foundation funds advocacy and programs to protect wilderness in the West and Canada, and advocacy and nonprofit capacity building to end homelessness in Washington State.
Eckerd Family Foundation	Vulnerable Youth	Based in Tampa, FL, the Eckerd Family Foundation, with a staff of three, focuses on assisting youth whose capacity to progress successfully to adulthood is compromised by systemic failures. It funds both programs and advocacy for systemic change in foster care, juvenile justice, and education.
Eos Foundation	Hunger, Education, Economic Opportunity, Children	Based in and focusing on Massachusetts, the Eos Foundation has moved from a service focus to advocacy grantmaking for systems change “to give direct service organizations and programs the best chance of success.”
Hill-Snowdon Foundation	Self-determination and Social Justice for Low-income Families and Youth	Founded in New Jersey, but now based in Washington, DC with a staff of four, the Snowdon Foundation focuses on building the capacity for self-determination among disadvantaged youth and families, particularly youth of color and low-wage workers.
Needmor Fund	Social Justice, Participatory Democracy	Based in Toledo, OH with a staff of four, the Needmor Fund was founded by the Stranahan Family to support “people who work together to change the social, economic, or political conditions which bar their access to participation in a democratic society.”
Paul and Phyllis Fireman Charitable Foundation	Homelessness	Based in Boston with a staff of four, the Fireman Foundation focuses on ending homelessness in Massachusetts, founding a nonprofit and a funders’ collaborative to that end. It is explicit about promoting “collaboration and dialogue with government and other sectors to deepen our impact,” as well as using “all our resources: money, political and social capital to advance the causes we care about.”
Rauch Foundation	Early Childhood Development, Environment	Based on Long Island, NY, with a staff of 5-7, the Rauch Foundation focuses its funding on early childhood development locally (both programs for disadvantaged families and advocacy for systemic change) and environmental protection in Maryland.
Schooner Foundation	Peace, Security, and Human Rights	Based in Boston with a staff of one, the Schooner Foundation funds policy-oriented projects advancing human rights in Africa including video/film, advocacy, research, and human rights monitoring.
Schott Foundation	Education Access	Focused primarily on New York and Massachusetts, the Schott Foundation works with a staff of 4-5 “to develop and strengthen a broad-based and representative movement to achieve fully resourced, quality pre-K through 12 public education.”

*Foundations included here were recommended by key informants as notable small family foundations investing in policy change. All quotations are from foundation websites.

How They Got There: Spotlight on Eight Dynamic Foundations

The central question of this report is how did small family foundations who are successfully and happily engaged in policy grantmaking get there? Is there a likely path to policy grantmaking or a “best practices” model that others could follow?

The answers vary, of course, but most of those we spoke with agree that there is a moment or state of “readiness” reached by small family foundations that do policy work. That readiness has one or more of the following three antecedents:

1. A benefactor/founder establishes a **policy mandate** by building structural societal impact into the foundation’s mission; and/or
2. The foundation agenda evolves through **generational change**, with new generations more eager to focus on policy for greater impact; and/or
3. The **foundation professionalizes**, often bringing in non-family board or staff, and adopts new strategic objectives and an issue-oriented focus that leads to policy.

This section explores each of these three roads to policy philanthropy by shining a spotlight on eight dynamic, small family foundations that have taken different paths to effective policy engagement.

MISSION & FOUNDER’S MANDATE

There are foundations, large and small, whose founders had a clear vision of investing in structural change in the public sphere. These foundations often

have a social justice component in their mission and broad mandates from a founder to benefit society or help change lives through enlarging civic participation. While these foundations often still make grants for direct services, they are more likely to have funded policy work from the beginning, and to have developed their own understanding of how to effect change. These foundations do not first have to be convinced of the worthiness of investing in advocacy or policy agendas.

The Access Strategies Fund and the Barbara Lee Family Foundation in Boston, and the Graustein Memorial Fund in Connecticut, have founders and missions that put them on a path of advocacy grantmaking from the beginning.

SPOTLIGHT ONE

Access Strategies Fund

Access Strategies Fund was founded in 1999 in Cambridge, MA by Maria and Greg Jobin-Leeds,¹⁸ with an explicit and unambiguous social justice agenda: to reverse the economic and socio/political powerlessness of communities of color in Massachusetts. The family members, each simultaneously involved in independent philanthropy or other foundation work, created Access Strategies Fund to give them a way to address longer-term policy work that came up as a result of their other philanthropic investments.

Said Board member Dayna Cunningham, “The family will be involved

“Policymaking is a consequence of patience, serendipity, and opportunities shrewdly seized.”

James Allen Smith¹⁷
VP and Director of Research
and Education,
The Rockefeller Archives
Center

¹⁷ James Allen Smith, “Private Foundations and Public Policymaking: A Historical Perspective,” in *Foundations and Public Policy*, James Ferris, Ed., The Center on Philanthropy and Public Policy at USC, 2009.

¹⁸ Greg is also founder and Board Chair of the Schott Foundation for Public Education.

“We think through different ways we would like organizations to be successful. Will they be able to build diversity; how will they build capacity?”

Board member
Dayna Cunningham,
Access Strategies Fund

in some work in Boston, and they’ll notice, say, that there’s an under-representation of African Americans in critical aspects of the political work, and the reaction will be: ‘Access Strategies Fund can do stuff here: we can bring people together to focus attention on this.’”

Access Strategies Fund does that by helping to develop institutional leadership in grantee organizations. Sometimes, that includes forging connections that only people with the Jobin-Leeds’ resources and networks can make. For example, the family’s support was significant to the 2006 election of Massachusetts’ first African American Governor, Deval Patrick. That can translate into access for the nonprofits that Access Strategies Fund supports. According to board and staff, the Jobin-Leeds can and do open doors at crucial moments.

The founders also recognized that their influence at high levels did not compensate for the gulf between their own white, Jewish experience and that of the communities of color whose opportunities they sought to advance. Kelly Bates, the Fund’s third executive director, has a background in diversity consulting and organizational management. She credited the family with making important choices to focus the Fund on the community and draw on local knowledge. “I think the family understood that if they were going to shift communities of color to the center of the civic arena, it was important to hire someone from that community to help them,” she said. “Also, they were motivated to professionalize and grow, have someone to work more directly with the community than they could.”

The communities with which Access Strategies Fund works are, indeed, diverse. A sample of grantees includes the Boston Workers Alliance, which organizes unemployed workers to challenge jobless-

ness in poor communities of color; the Chinese Progressive Association, a grassroots community organization that works to expand voter education and mobilization for full equality and empowerment of the Chinese community; and Centro Presente, a member-driven, state-wide Latin-American immigrant organization dedicated to achieving self-determination.¹⁹

With a background in organizational development, Ms. Bates has brought more focus to Access Strategies Fund’s approach to grantee support. “We think through the variables and different ways we would like organizations to be successful,” she said. “Will they be able to build diversity; how will they build capacity? Are women and people of color at the center of decision-making?” Ms. Cunningham agreed that “we spend a lot of time on fairly precise assessments of grantee capacity,” such as board development and leadership transition planning, and then “we see what we can do to help [that growth or change] happen.” Ms. Bates added that they’re discussing the meaning of “civic engagement” and how “to be much clearer about what we mean about success in electoral change.”

Even as Access Strategies Fund refines its definitions and looks for different ways to support its grantees, it has claimed early successes in areas such as voter participation. According to its reports, the MassVote and Civic Engagement Initiative have resulted in significant new voter registrations, and a 22 to 26 percent increase in voter participation at the polls by people of color and low-income communities. The voting gap between majority white neighborhoods and communities of color has almost closed in Boston.

SPOTLIGHT TWO

William Caspar Graustein Memorial Fund

Founded in 1946 by Archibald Graustein, the Memorial Fund (as it is known today) evolved and expanded upon the death of Archibald’s widow in 1993. Spearheaded by Archibald’s son and board member Bill Graustein, the Memorial Fund then adopted its current mission: “To improve the effectiveness of education in fostering both personal development and leadership.” It also chose to focus on Bill Graustein’s home state of Connecticut as the best way to have policy impact. “We’ve never been nervous about policy,” said Executive Director David Nee. “The need for advocacy was acknowledged at the beginning.”

The Memorial Fund’s mission inspired three guiding goals for grantmaking:

1. To engage young children more deeply in their own education.
2. To support Connecticut communities in improving education for their elementary and pre-school children.
3. To develop both statewide and local leadership dedicated to improving and advocating for education.

Bill Graustein has stayed an active and present member of the foundation, urging research, community engagement, advocacy, and parent involvement. According to staff, he likes to ask, “What’s going on around here?” as a way of posing questions to be answered by better research.

Because they were newly focused on Connecticut in 1993 and wanted to know what education issues would resonate there, the Memorial Fund commissioned opinion research on key issues in public education from Public Agenda, which had helped the Edna McConnell Clark

Foundation do similar research in the south on alternatives to incarceration. The staff found the results surprising. “They found that the divide in terms of what was important was not along racial lines, but between educators and all others,” recalled David Nee. “The first thing on the public’s mind was ‘are my children safe?’ and ‘Are they learning the basics?’ Those were their top concerns in education.” The educators, he explained, “were on a completely different page.” They saw the public as complacent, especially about educating all children, despite the finding that 81% of people surveyed said that supporting schools in minority neighborhoods should be a top priority. Educators said that technology and more funding were keys to improving education.

The Memorial Fund published the results as “The Broken Contract” in 1994 and then worked with the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education and others to address these challenges. That turned into a commitment to sponsor community dialogue between residents and school officials. Staff member Nancy Leonard recalled that in the first efforts, before the development of the Community Conversations model used today, it was difficult to get to true dialogue. “Educators would be defensive and decide that parents just didn’t get it, or conclude that the district just needed better public relations about what they were doing.”

The Memorial Fund’s persistence and the continuing dialogues, however, eventually paid off. “The participants finally got to the point where they figured out they needed to listen,” Memorial Fund staff said. “Public Agenda went away for a year, and came back with a format that encourages sharing ideas and listening to people whom we do not ordinarily get to hear.” The new format formed the basis of the Community Conversations initiative, supported by two community organizers (who train a community in how to do a

“We already have a lot of access as grantmakers. So when we can create an opportunity for community voice, we do.”

Executive Director David Nee,
William Caspar Graustein
Memorial Fund

¹⁹ Grantee descriptions are adapted from the Access Strategies Fund website.

community conversation) and technical assistance from Public Agenda (which provided conversation starter videos and facilitation training). Today, communities use the Community Conversations approach for engagement, policy change, and research. Staff said it works in big and small ways. “One conversation in Bridgeport exposed that early expectations for kids weren’t being shared with parents. That led to an immediate policy change” in how the district schools communicated with parents.

The Memorial Fund’s biggest effort built even more on this early work. Its Discovery Initiative comprises 54 communities currently involved in creating and operating collaborative learning groups in districts that the State Department of Education identified as having higher concentrations of poverty. Communities use the direct grants, technical assistance, convening, and other Discovery Initiative supports to develop a local or regional action plan to improve education outcomes for children from birth to age eight.

The Memorial Fund also helped to create an early childhood affinity group and other collaborative efforts, and encouraged collaboration within and across communities. The executive director emphasizes that, unlike some other small family foundations, the Memorial Fund does not use personal influence as a strong piece of its policy leverage. “We already have a lot of access as grantmakers. So when we can create an opportunity for community voice, we do.”

While the Memorial Fund is pleased with the success of its initiatives, staff noted that the focus is always on community success, not credit to the Memorial Fund. “It’s all about access and quality of education. That’s the mission,” said David Nee. “So when Governor Rell made education a top priority, and we were asked to co-chair the Early Childhood Research and Policy Council that was created, our board was

supportive of using this ‘moment’ in policy. And out of that came the incentive grants to give more muscle to the communities to do policy work as well as other efforts, such as an early childhood campaign.” That local payoff is key for the Memorial Fund, he said. “Our board members have taken no role in the policy arena, and we try to be careful to be asked by grantees, communities, alliances, etc. before we act in that way. For us it’s more about raising community voice.”

SPOTLIGHT THREE

Barbara Lee Family Foundation

The Barbara Lee Family Foundation is a personal journey of a dynamic individual. Barbara Lee believes that women’s presence in elective office creates change because women bring a different approach to governing. As the foundation’s literature (and staff) repeat: “When there is a critical mass of women present – whether it is a neighborhood meeting, a corporate board room, or a senate committee – the discussion changes.”

As Deputy Director Dawn Huckelbridge put it, “Art is Barbara’s passion and politics is her mission. Barbara’s goal is social justice, and she accomplishes that by promoting women in government.” Barbara Lee is following a family legacy in bringing this foundation to life: her grandmother was a suffragette. She attended Simmons College and became a social worker, all of which focused her on women’s empowerment. Board member Fran Seegull, who joined the board in 2004 after collaborating with Barbara on its founding in 1999, said that the idea of strategic philanthropy articulated by Linda Hirshman at the Brandeis Women’s Study Board resonated with Barbara. The Barbara Lee Foundation’s effort to help women succeed in elected office grew from that idea.

Today, a substantial part of the Foundation is dedicated to moving women into public office as a vehicle for changing policy for women and for families. The Foundation has commissioned research to identify obstacles faced by women candidates and has developed strategies to overcome these obstacles, including civic engagement and voter participation efforts.

The other focus of grantmaking is for Barbara Lee’s other passion – contemporary art. The Foundation supports artists and institutions for the advancement of contemporary art.

Like many of the foundations researched for this project, the Barbara Lee Family Foundation began as a “kitchen table” foundation and has professionalized its operations over time while keeping its focus steady. Said Ms. Seegull, “Most family foundations tend to be about preserving the family name and being a good corporate citizen. The next new generation is using the tools of enlightened philanthropy to effect change. Even Barbara Lee has gotten more and more strategic over time.”

“In the beginning we were focused on women,” Ms. Seegull explained, “but grants weren’t very targeted. Now we really dig in and find out what nonprofit X is doing in terms of organizing or voter education. We conduct a strategic planning process every year to check in on our long-term vision, ask what we can learn from our grantmaking, find out if there are there new organizations of interest to fund. We understand in a more intimate way what we want to achieve and which grantees and partners can help us achieve that goal.”

Ms. Huckelbridge echoed these comments about strategy: “Because we’re small, we have to be more strategic to maximize impact, particularly in policy.

We try not to see our funding in a vacuum, but to see how grants complement each other – we want to be sure our grants create interconnectedness. But it’s not about getting grantees together, it’s more about creating a web of effort that ensures needs get addressed.”

Unlike some foundations led by influential individuals, the Barbara Lee Foundation does not get involved much in direct policy advocacy or using its founder’s personal influence. Instead, the foundation relies on traditional grantmaking (it recently shifted to a policy of not accepting unsolicited grant requests), and leveraging other dollars for grantees so that it is not a sole funder. Ms. Huckelbridge explained, “Sometimes if you fund a project and there’s not enough buy-in from the community, it won’t work.” Typically, that means their grants involve either a challenge or a matching grant component.

Still, Barbara Lee’s approach represents a strategic shift from solving a problem to addressing the cause of the problem. “The whole practice of philanthropy has undergone a sea change where some foundations have shifted from funding direct service to solving upstream challenges,” said Fran Seegull. “If you can effect change in policy that changes root causes, you can ameliorate the downstream problems. This is at the heart of strategic philanthropy.”

Even though Barbara Lee and the Barbara Lee Foundation stand as an example of a founder and mission-driven policy grantmaker, its staff and board believe they are also part of a generational shift or perhaps just a new era in philanthropy. Said Ms. Huckelbridge, “The ‘old school’ of giving was to institutions. Creating change is ‘new’ giving. And policy work is vague and ambiguous. You can’t own it, put your name on it. In philanthropy, there’s a need for both.”

“The ‘old school’ of giving was to institutions. Creating change is ‘new’ giving. And policy work is vague and ambiguous. You can’t own it, put your name on it. In philanthropy, there’s a need for both.”

Deputy Director
Dawn Huckelbridge
Barbara Lee Family Foundation

GENERATIONAL CHANGE AND THE “YLVISAKER MOMENT”

Small family foundations often begin at someone’s kitchen table. Many stay there, with the founders and their checkbooks as the totality of the foundation’s structure. But those that continue through generations, with children and cousins eventually joining the board, face issues of structure and decision making that can become bogged down in complicated family dynamics, internecine arguments, and geographic dispersion.

According to many of our interviewees, these family dynamics may be additional reasons why small family foundations (except for those founded with an advocacy agenda) tend to favor grantmaking with direct service or institutions as their focus, rather than policy and its messier cousin, politics. Families that have grown and dispersed often also have a mix of political viewpoints with which to contend, and many are reluctant to introduce religion and politics into the boardroom, just as they keep them from the family dinner table.

Even those that had a visionary founder sometimes need something or someone to move the family from the traditional “where does our name go?” orientation of family philanthropy to what many interviewees characterized as the “what needs to be done and how can we help?” mentality of a board ready to do policy work. Two structural changes can catalyze and signal that shift. One is generational change, which we consider in this section. The other is professionalizing, which we consider in the next.

Generational change brings new blood, and often a younger dynamic, onto the family board. As the staff of the Barbara

Lee Foundation suggested, investing in change is “new giving.” Younger board members may also be more willing to take risks, bring a more professional approach to foundation structure, or come with an activist agenda. Each of these contributes to the possibility of the foundation adopting policy grantmaking into its portfolio. When one or more board members begin to push a policy agenda, that is its catalytic “Ylvisaker Moment.”²⁰

One New York foundation that asked to remain anonymous for this report had a generational evolution that brought new voices and energy to the board, while the Sills Family Foundation experienced its generational shift when one of the original board members ceded his spot to his daughter. In each case, the generational change brought with it a shift in perspective and individuals with strong views about how to expand the foundation’s impact.

SPOTLIGHT FOUR

A NY Family Foundation

Founded in the 1960s and initially focused on family issues in one NY community, this family foundation realized that with the passage of time and the addition of two new generations to its board, local philanthropy no longer engaged board members. Many of the newer members had never lived in the community. The foundation realized its “Ylvisaker Moment” in 2001 when newer board members led the foundation through a strategic planning process, creating a new governing structure, a subcommittee on research, and an expanded agenda that included a national portfolio.

Building on its local successes, the Foundation sought to document the lessons it had learned and to promote those lessons with other funders working on the same issues. One board member convinced the family to invest in academic research as a first step and make a major commitment to a series of national studies.

Key to the successful transition from local funder to policy funder were two factors: the idea to approach policy work beginning with research, to be sure that what they believed to be effective actually worked, and the early lesson that collaboration with others could leverage their small amount of funding. But learning how to collaborate, and with whom, took a while.

“The timing was right for our message because of the atmosphere that had taken over during the Bush administration,” recalled one of the new generation of board members. “For partners, we first went to the really big funders like Gates who were making multi-million dollar grants on this same issue, and here I was in my mid-20s and from a tiny family foundation; they weren’t buying.”

Instead, the Foundation capitalized on its own network of friends, in this case its executive director and a senior officer at a national foundation, and secured a discretionary grant to partially support the research it wanted to do. This launched their involvement with the issue and simultaneously brought the Foundation prominence with some of the bigger players in philanthropy.

Meanwhile, younger board members and the staff began to work the policy

angle, attending philanthropy and topical conferences, networking with other foundations, serving on advisory boards, and bringing feedback to others on the Foundation board. The feedback loop, both the board and staff interviewees said, kept the Foundation’s interest in the work at a high level.

Being a presence, networking, and learning the players paid off when a board member was approached with the opportunity the foundation had been waiting for. An organization had been doing research comparing states on the issue of interest to the foundation and had found staggering results. Without funding to publicize the findings, this explosive information would sit on a shelf. The board member called an emergency meeting and turned around the funding necessary to make a big splash. Released with both a press conference and congressional briefing, the report garnered significant media attention: over 800 news stories about the findings appeared the first day. Since then a national advocacy campaign, technical assistance efforts at the local level, and myriad policy debates have occurred because this small family foundation stepped in to raise public awareness on an issue at the right time.

More recently, the Foundation has been active in national affinity groups concerned with its policy interests, further expanding its influence in the national conversation on policy and approaches. The staff credits all this to the younger generation, and a significant piece of it to one or two board members: “It’s not about fear or not knowing what we can do. It’s structural. If everyone (on the board) were like [them], we’d be moving faster.”

²⁰ Paul Ylvisaker is credited with leading a revolution at the Ford Foundation in the late 1950s and 1960s, bringing its board and grantmaking into its modern era of major investment in public-private partnerships for urban renewal, intellectual development, public service, and social activism. The urban renewal initiative called the Gray Areas Program was his brainchild. The Council on Foundations’ annual Ylvisaker Award for Public Policy Engagement encourages philanthropists to emulate him by recognizing those who have effectively engaged in policy grantmaking.

ADVICE FROM SMALL FAMILY FOUNDATION PEERS: TEN KEYS TO SUCCESS IN POLICY INVESTING

1. Network, Network, Network

This advice came from countless funders. Small family foundations, they said, will never have everyone beating a path to their doors like the big players, so we have to stay on the phone, go to the meetings, join the coalitions, get to know the nonprofits, and read the research. Martha Toll said, “Encourage family foundations to go out there and do more.” Said Emily Tow Jackson: “I asked a lot of questions, I reached out to other people who were running bigger foundations and got them to tell me about what they did. I go to conferences – and always sit next to someone I don’t know. So many people have done this before me. NYRAG¹ was great. It’s all about learning and taking stuff on and trying.”

2. Hire Professional Help

Consulting groups such as The Philanthropic Initiative (TPI) or Foundation Strategy Group (FSG) kept coming up in our conversations. Small family funders relied on professional help from such agencies or from trained staff to think about organizational structure, approach, or the substance of an issue (if your board does not have the expertise). Said Deb Iarussi: “We knew we didn’t know what we were doing, so we found TPI. I really recommend that family foundations use advisors. Many don’t have professional guidance, and it’s really been so important.”

3. Find a Niche Issue

Adding limited resources to a broad field or putting a few thousand dollars into a multi-billion dollar initiative will not satisfy most family funders. Funders we spoke with advised starting with an issue that moves you, and then looking around for the gap in funding. Where can you make a difference, even with a little money? Once you’ve found that issue, learn all you can about it, and become the most important resource for that well-defined niche. Deb Iarussi put it this way: “Limit your issue areas – go deep in one area and then stay focused, on message.”

4. Be an Information Gatherer & Disseminator

Having roundtable discussions with nonprofits and legislators about issues you’re interested in is a great way to start. Funding data collection and publication, getting this information to advocates, the media, and to legislators, and then meeting with them all to discuss solutions are terrific ways to bring attention to your issues. Be an Information Gatherer & Disseminator. Diane Sierpina of The Tow Foundation said the data can not only inform but can also “shame” legislators into making your issue a priority. It can also help a legislator find an issue to champion that provides him or her special status. “Then,” she said, “we join our advocacy colleagues to keep up the pressure from the outside while our public partners work from the inside. The resulting reforms have been very gratifying.”

Surveys or a close look at a sub-population can also open up important dialogues and make your foundation more credible. Barbara Lee believed women behaved differently in government, but her message was more credible after she funded research from the Center for American Women in Politics that quantified women state legislators’ voting patterns, showing that they were more likely than men legislators to fight for families.

5. Join Collaborative Funds (or Affinity Groups)

All our interviewees talked about the benefits of affinity groups and collaborations of small foundations (and sometimes larger foundations) for learning and for leveraging small grant funds in policy work. Said key informant Julie Peterson, “Collaborative funds that are staffed help small foundations feel protected and supported, especially if the issue is politically sensitive. Collaborations that include local and national funders also allow the big foundations to get the ‘local view’ provided by family foundations that have parochial knowledge. Collaborative funds reduce everyone’s level of risk because the pool spreads the risk. Because of this, a collaborative can make riskier grants than any one foundation might make on its own.”

Jennifer Berman of Maverick Lloyd had a similar perspective: “It’s really helpful for folks new to grantmaking to be part of affinity groups and to learn about how grantmaking happens. And though

¹ The New York Regional Association of Grantmakers (NYRAG) has changed its name to Philanthropy New York.

TEN KEYS TO SUCCESS IN POLICY INVESTING (continued)

I might communicate most with other smaller foundations, it’s also helpful when we’re saying the same thing to a grantee that one of the largest funders in a collaboration is saying. Consistency of message helps regardless of how much money each funder is putting in.”

6. Consider Funding Research

Find the leading academics or a policy organization doing good work on your issue and see if you have a research agenda in common. Raising or answering the important questions is a way to educate and coalesce your board around an issue before debating what you can do about it. Research is chronically underfunded, so small family foundations can have a big impact in defining what issues are important.

7. Expand to Policy, Don’t Stop Service Funding

Many interviewees suggested that funders would be reluctant to invest in policy work if it meant scaling back on commitments to the more concrete work of service provision or institution building. Many said this was the wrong way to think about it. And a few pointed out that very involved policy funders, like The Tow Foundation, still focus the majority of their giving on service grants. It’s important to do both, they all emphasized, and as Julie Peterson pointed out, Carnegie effected enormous change by building libraries. “There are lots of ways to get at systemic change,” she noted.

8. Organize, Educate, Mobilize

Some funders believe that the key to policy change is in successful organizing. One of them, Jennifer Berman at the Maverick Lloyd Foundation, said, “We have to have the base there to hold our officials accountable. In the past four or five years I’ve heard a lot more about community organizing in the foundation world. Now, with Obama, everyone’s going to do it.”

9. Offer to Make Connections Happen

Said Jason Franklin of the 21st Century School Fund, “Ask grantees: who do you need access to? What meeting needs to happen? Foundations don’t think to offer this and grantees don’t think to ask

for it, but it’s something important we can do. Once I had lunch with someone who was trying to get access to some information. And I could just make one call and ask for that information – so I did and got a meeting. A \$25K grant wouldn’t have helped, and I didn’t have money at the time anyway, but I got them what they needed.”

10. Be Patient

Recognize that progress in policy work looks different than success in other grantmaking. Said Kelly Bates at Access Strategies Fund, “The gay marriage issue is a perfect example of what every foundation wants: identify an issue, fund the work to build critical mass, acceptance, a legal strategy; get the big win – the structural change. But it usually doesn’t work that way.” Access Strategies Fund, and most of the others we spoke with, fund grantees for a long time – with no predetermined cutoff. Also, counseled Deb Iarussi, “be willing to fail on your way to knowing what you can do.”

SPOTLIGHT FIVE

Sills Family Foundation

Deborah Sills Iarussi's grandfather, with his three sons as the appointed board, founded the Sills Family Foundation, but Ms. Iarussi's father gave her his place. The foundation has only recently begun working in policy and advocacy, although the work clearly energizes Deb Iarussi in ways that other grantmaking does not.

"I think there's ignorance about policy, that it's lobbying and it's illegal," said Ms. Iarussi. "But there's so much more. I found out about it by meeting Emily Tow.²¹ And I just thought: wow, that's what I want to do."

What helped bring policy into their portfolio, however, was finding a place where others were not putting money and where there was a human need that matched the foundation's interests. Ms. Iarussi spoke of the experience of seeing Hour Children, a program that works with incarcerated women's children and noted "it really spoke to us in terms of justice issues". She explained that this made them look hard at issues affecting incarcerated parents.

The issue of incarcerated mothers became Ms. Iarussi's "niche" issue. While many funders were involved in criminal justice and needy families, there was a gap when it came to the needs of these children and their moms. "My big goal is I'd like to change sentencing and what happens to mothers and kids during this process," said Ms. Iarussi. "But you can do both. There's plenty of direct service that needs to be done on the way to getting policy changed. So while we're still funding direct service, like parenting education in prison, now

we also fund Justice Works, which is about the Rockefeller Drug Laws – advocacy and education."

Indeed, the majority of Sills' grantmaking is still in direct service projects, as is true for many of the foundations funding policy work. Ms. Iarussi and others stressed that doing both policy and service philanthropy helps alleviate some of the angst that family foundations often feel when first looking at policy work.

The Sills family has also reached out to others to leverage their dollars effectively. Currently, Ms. Iarussi is recruiting other family funders, along with some much larger foundations, to a new collaborative focused on incarcerated mothers and their children. Interestingly, some of the funders talking to her about the collaborative have been straightforward about the limits of their involvement: "one family foundation who is probably going to join our collaborative said flatly to me 'there's no way my foundation is going to do advocacy work.'"

Ms. Iarussi was reflective about why family foundations have trouble with policy. "People like the concrete, something to put a plaque on," she said. "You can't put a plaque on policy." On the other hand, she recognizes that if a funder doesn't have the time or inclination to get to know an issue, "those easy prejudices come out that a lot of people have against policy in general – it's too hard, too long-term." It's usually just that they aren't well enough informed, she said.

Perhaps, through working with the collaborative and seeing the many ways foundations can invest in policy, even reluctant foundations might have their own "Ylvisaker moments".

PROFESSIONALIZING THE FAMILY FOUNDATION

More than any other steppingstone to engaging in policy philanthropy, board members, staff, and key informants cited becoming more professional in approach as the key to small family foundations' successful engagement in policy. Even family foundations that begin with advocacy in their mandates or that have a new generation bring them to an "Ylvisaker moment" frequently cite increased professionalism as the most important element in improving their policy work. In many cases, going through a strategic planning process or hiring professional staff creates the room and impetus for policy grantmaking. In this section, we look at several foundations in which professionalizing made room for policy work in the foundation's portfolio.

For some, professionalizing means hiring outside professional help such as consultants or an advising firm; for others, it means hiring professional staff well versed in organizational management, the substantive focus of the grantmaking, or both; for others, it means taking a business growth approach to grantmaking, joining groups, conducting strategic plans, and/or thinking of philanthropy as an investment with returns rather than as charity that ends with the cutting of a check.

Indeed, many foundations discover policy through a strategic planning process that helps the board identify (often for the first time) a set of goals for the foundation rather than simply a set of areas in which they are interested. Typically, a foundation will have already reached out to a consultant before undertaking a strategic planning process, and that is the beginning of the shift.

It should be noted that foundations with a policy mandate aren't necessarily prepared to do policy work. Some families

don't have the substantive expertise; some don't have the time or desire to engage at such a high level in their work, particularly as many of them are volunteers; some don't have enough family members to do the work; and some need to finesse a family dynamic that constrains decision-making. In those cases, hiring professional staff can be essential. Said Kelly Bates, executive director of the Access Strategies Fund, "One of the strengths of the Leeds was that they would get things started and then move over and give it to folks who could take it to the next level. The staff really does the work now, but it's a transition, establishing trust with staff. And it was probably important that they had an outside consultant to help with that transition – role coaching and the like – in the five years before I came on board."

SPOTLIGHT SIX

Maverick Lloyd Foundation

The Maverick Lloyd Foundation philosophy is that "We must be vigilant stewards of the land and of our democratic societies." The ambitious vision of the couple that founded Maverick Lloyd (and still forms the board) is "to leverage the resources of our foundation to create ripples that lead to substantive changes that help make the world a better place to live for all people." The geographic focus of their efforts is in Vermont.

For a long time, the trustees pursued that vision on their own, with help from administrative staff. Then, two years ago, they decided to look carefully at how to provide for the future of the foundation. Rather than move immediately to involving the next generation of family, they first wanted to clarify the foundation's goals. The result was a strategic plan and a new executive director with professional credentials in a key area – organizing – as their first staff member

"People like the concrete, something to put a plaque on. You can't put a plaque on policy."

Deborah Sills Iarussi,
Sills Family Foundation

"We can be very responsive quickly if there's an urgent need, whereas in big foundations, there can often be a year lead time before things even get to a board."

Executive Director
Jennifer Berman,
Maverick Lloyd Foundation

²¹ Emily Tow Jackson heads The Tow Foundation in Connecticut, featured later in this report.

“Policy philanthropy is about time and strategy. The board has to ‘get it’ and want to do it.”

Executive Director Martha Toll,
Butler Family Fund

with substantial authority for moving the foundation forward.

Executive Director Jennifer Berman calls the Maverick Lloyd Foundation “tiny – the endowment is currently around \$4 million.” But the foundation took its professionalizing seriously and went through strategic planning for the first time last fall. Ms. Berman recalled, “When I started, there wasn’t a clear focus. The trustees felt as if they were just reacting to proposals. It was very unsatisfying for them.”

The founders already knew, she said, that to effect change, they had to look at the presenting problems from a systems perspective. Services, she explained, “don’t address the why” of the problems people experience. The difficulty with their previous approach, however, was that sometimes their work seemed systemic, but on closer examination, it wasn’t having the hoped-for effect. Ms. Berman suggested that one can “look at one piece of the system, not the whole system” and miss something important. Or, even if a family foundation focuses locally, it can still spread itself too thin. Again, Ms. Berman explained, “Prior to strategic planning, we’d done work around environment, agriculture, death penalty, human rights and immigrant detention. Now we’re down to two areas: environment (climate change) and death penalty.”

The foundation works in a specific state or region where they often make a three-year commitment (to see impact and change). They have reached out to funder affiliate groups (such as Funders for Alternatives to a Death Penalty) to leverage their \$15K-\$25K grants and “really make a difference.”

Collaboration with other funders is key to policy leverage, but, echoing what others in the field said, Ms. Berman acknowledged that it isn’t easy. Where certain entities feel entitled to “be at the table,” even when it is unclear what specific assets they bring to it, it is more difficult to make collaboration

work, she said. Further, “it doesn’t make sense for us to have grantees competing for these dollars, so we need to take the time to learn together what’s happening around the big issues and fund the key leverage points. But that requires us to do an honest analysis of whether what we’re doing is working. And when you’re putting money into one direction, it’s often hard to question whether that’s the right place to be spending money.”

The other change that Maverick Lloyd has come to is thinking more strategically about the impact of small grants. Said the executive director, “Our strategic advantage is base building for neighborhood organizations that need new staff – that’s where small grants can make a big difference” – it didn’t necessarily make sense that big organizations were getting \$10K grants from them. Also, she pointed out, for big-ticket needs like death penalty litigation, the bigger funders are the right people to respond.

Maverick Lloyd has had success with coalitions of small foundations. Recently, for example, the Maverick Lloyd Foundation, the Butler Family Fund, and the Fund for Nonviolence put together funding for a Texas organization that needed money quickly. “We can be responsive quickly if there’s an urgent need, whereas in big foundations, there can often be a year lead time before things even get to a board.”

SPOTLIGHT SEVEN

Butler Family Fund

Founded in 1992 with a board of seven from one family, the Butler Family Fund has from its earliest days supported organizations that address problems through systemic change, advocacy, and policy reform, in addition to direct services, initially funding in the areas of homelessness and at-risk youth. The infusion of a new generation to the board and the ensuing evolution in its governance,

however, led the Fund to a clearer articulation of substantive focus and approach.

According to the Fund’s website, “When we started, we had some general ideas about alleviating poverty and making a difference. Now we can better articulate what we believe and how we hope to bring about change.” The Fund focuses on homelessness and criminal justice reform, especially in the areas of the death penalty and juvenile justice. They remain committed to funding advocacy groups and encouraging public education and debate, especially on controversial topics such as the death penalty. Recognizing that to be effective, their relatively small grants must leverage access to a larger pool of public dollars for issues such as low-income housing, Butler decided not to limit itself to state-level policy change or giving and has remained committed to a national focus.

Founding Executive Director Martha Toll has been a big part of the Fund’s increasingly involved approach to policy philanthropy. The founding president, she said, “set the tone for our advocacy work,” and the current president is “very entrepreneurial,” resulting in exciting new partnerships. In addition, Ms. Toll raised the Butler Family Fund’s national profile with her approach to coalition building and philanthropic networking.

“The family is spread between San Diego and London, so we were always going to be national in focus,” said Ms. Toll. “But policy philanthropy is about time and strategy, and both our board presidents have contributed so much of both. The board has to ‘get it’ and want to do it.” And, she added, it’s also important to have professional staff dedicated to the work.

The key to the Fund’s success has been in leveraging their resources. Helping grantees leverage small grants to have bigger impact is something Ms. Toll understands well. “We are a lead funder on homelessness, even though

we’re small.” For example, she said, the housing trust fund campaigns they fund at \$25K leverage public funding in the tens of millions. “We were the first national funder in the L.A. [housing trust fund] campaign,” she explained. “We gave them the ability to say, ‘OK, we have a national funder.’”

But not all leverage is financial. “A lot of the leverage we have comes from the ability to invest staff time” said Ms. Toll, “and a lot of that is the support and latitude the board gives the staff.” What does she do that is so influential? Other people say that Ms. Toll is indispensable to almost every major coalition working on issues of homelessness and juvenile justice right now. “I sought out the leadership roles in our professional associations, affinity groups, so even though we’re tiny and can’t contribute a million dollars, we’re national and it’s a really great way for me to extend our reach. I’m on the phone all the time; it’s all about personal relationships,” she explained. “I’m very active in Funders Together to End Homelessness, Funders for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, and The Neighborhood Funders Group. So although we are just a fraction of the budgets of the groups we fund, we hope our name really means something.”

SPOTLIGHT EIGHT

The Tow Foundation

Begun in 1988, The Tow Foundation began with a mission to help those in need and an array of personal interests that became its early grantmaking areas. But second generation family member and Executive Director Emily Tow Jackson saw the foundation’s role somewhat differently. As Senior Program Officer Diane Sierpina described it, “Emily professionalized the foundation. She went to workshops and put the software and processes into place that created a structure for effectiveness.”

Ms. Tow Jackson concurred. “Right from the beginning, I thought we needed to move away from the informal processes that were in place, so I looked carefully at how my father had operated as a successful businessman and encouraged our board to apply the same principles to the running of the foundation.”

Professionalizing brought the foundation to a structure that emphasized leverage and an entrepreneurial approach. “It’s how small foundations make big change,” Ms. Tow Jackson said. She thinks constantly about which issues to take on as well as networking, building coalitions, and demanding that grantees articulate larger gains from each grant in order to attract other funders.

The new structure and approach, in turn, led Tow to policy grantmaking. “Everything we do is informed by the philosophy of ‘where can we work where there’s a social liability but no public attention or just a lack of will?’” Ms. Tow Jackson explained.

Early on, said the executive director, the trustees discussed focusing on disadvantaged family and youth, but wanted to find an area where impacts would go beyond individual programs. One grant that seemed to have the potential to leverage Tow’s investment with state dollars concerned juveniles returning to the community from parole. “We agreed to spend a year doing research on juvenile justice in Connecticut,” recalled Ms. Sierpina, “visiting prisons, nonprofits; we held four roundtables with the board and nonprofits and advocates and policy people. At the end of that year, it was clear juvenile justice in Connecticut was a good choice for Tow because there was so much work to be done and no one else was doing it. We could really have impact.”

Ms. Tow Jackson was quick to add that small family foundations needn’t worry that funding policy work means giving up other grants that satisfy family history

or interests. “Some families think of it as an either/or and I think of it as a both/and. Much of the money we give away is still family interest grants. But the most powerful and influential grants are through this small initiative in Juvenile Justice. I do think that if you can look at it as an enhancement rather than as an alternative, it sells itself.”

By being committed to both direct service and systems change, with the added approach of leveraging dollars, the small Tow Foundation has made a big name for itself. Diane Sierpina said, “The Youth Transitions Funders Group is a forum where we have significant influence. The group has grown and evolved into a way for program officers to network around these issues.” Tow also works with the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Eckerd Foundation, and others, and “we were influential in getting MacArthur to choose Connecticut as one of its ‘transformation’ states,” she said. “It’s exciting to help seed things.”

“Once your money is in a foundation,” Ms. Tow Jackson explained, “it is there to serve the public; it’s not your money anymore. If you don’t want to do that, then keep the money and just write checks to charities that have personal meaning to you. I feel this work brings with it a charge and an obligation to serve the public good – my board has embraced this and maybe that’s why it’s been easier for us to expand into policy work.”

One thing that helped sell the Tow family on policy work was the common experience of learning about a new issue. “If you can get the board to identify a societal problem and decide to address that issue, or connect the dots for others to do the work,” said Ms. Tow Jackson, “you get educated together and the learning becomes a family enterprise. That’s empowering. Picking what you think is impossible to fix, that no one else is working on, offers tremendous opportunity to make a difference.”

Ms. Tow Jackson added that getting

excited about what she calls “deep impact” can bring a board together. She tells this to other family foundation members who are frustrated that their boards are limiting themselves to funding ‘pet projects.’ “A lot of philanthropic advisors don’t give this type of advice,” she said. “The standard is to tell you to pick your passion and fund that, but, in my experience, that is more likely to divide a family board than bring them together. When we talk about leveraging impact for social change, it’s exciting. The idea of investing like we do brings our board together.”

Ms. Sierpina believes professional staff support has been important to Tow’s policy philanthropy. “I have a background in government. We facilitate conversations between our grantees and government. We require – explicitly – our grantees to lobby and advocate within legal limits,” she explained, adding, “I feel fortunate that I work for a foundation that’s unlike others in this regard. Here, staff participate in every board meeting and are seen as part of a team that guides board decision-making.”

“Legislative advocacy is something you have to commit to for the long haul,” said Ms. Tow Jackson. “It’s delicate ground: you have to build rapport with policy makers. We would have been seen as adversarial if we’d just jumped in, putting people on the defensive and feeling as if we were sticking our nose into their business.” So Tow got informed, did research, asked for meetings with stakeholders throughout the justice system, found out who was working on the issues, and consulted on which legislators might be approachable

as “champions.” It worked well.

“A big key to our success is that we convened groups of advocates and began by building a coalition. The coalition then defined the issues at the state level and launched the campaign. The campaign, in turn, groomed the champions,” said Ms. Tow Jackson. Board members also raised the profile of the coalition. Ms. Tow Jackson described the role this way: “As a foundation, we have our own relationship with policy makers. You can go in as a pure voice for a cause, and you’re not beholden to anyone. We supported the juvenile justice coalition by drawing the attention of the policy makers to it and its issues, but then the coalition provided the information, the data, and everything substantive that a policy maker really needs to be an effective advocate.”

The Tow Foundation model of policy investing shows, as Ms. Tow Jackson put it, that “It’s not about the money. “ We gave away \$7.5 million last year; we have three staff people. But I never walk into the room feeling less powerful than someone else from a national or larger foundation. If you’re well informed and have something to offer, then you should have the confidence to be a player. We’ve always known what we’re doing is important and that we’re making a difference for youth and families who touch the justice system. And we’ve been successful at bringing statewide and national funders into Connecticut on the strength of our funded programs and their prospects for high impact. That shows that what you’re doing has national influence and potential.”

“Once your money is in a foundation, it is there to serve the public; it’s not your money anymore. If you don’t want to do that, then keep the money and just write checks to charities that have personal meaning to you. I feel this work brings with it a charge and an obligation to serve the public good – my board has embraced this and maybe that’s why it’s been easier for us to expand into policy work.”

Emily Tow Jackson

Many foundations understand evaluation of grantmaking as holding grantees to a standard of accountability. The California Wellness Foundation recently contributed another compelling reason for foundations to evaluate their giving: “to examine whether we are making the most effective use possible of our grant dollars.”²²

This latter definition, according to those interviewed, may be particularly important for changing the expectations and practice of evaluation for policy grantmaking. Small family foundations noted in particular that the fluctuations and incremental changes of policy success make evaluating each grant very difficult. Moreover, many foundations thought it important to “back off” advocacy grantees in terms of demanding typical “results” because of the slow and circuitous path of policy change.

Many of our interviewees also admitted that they don’t have rigorous evaluation systems for traditional program grantees, much less for their policy or issue-based grantmaking. Indeed, the most common response to the question of how policy grants are evaluated was “we don’t do this very well” or “we’re trying to get a better handle on that.”

Here we offer comments and advice from small family foundations about evaluating policy philanthropy.

Calibrate Evaluation to Your Long-term Objectives

We have had trouble satisfying ourselves that there was a good way to do evaluation. If you’re going to fund advocacy, you’ve got to know you’re not going to get results right away. If you fund education around a ballot initiative in CA, where they need a 2/3 majority to win, and they get 60%, that’s a win, but of course the initiative loses. You have to have your own sense of what success is.

— Martha Toll (Butler)

I think many foundations struggle with this. We evaluate depending on what’s appropriate for the grant. I struggle personally, too, because we fund groups of people on the ground who we trust and believe know best what the strategy is. So we can evaluate on some level, but who

are we to say what’s the right or wrong approach if we are not involved in the day-to-day work?

— Jennifer Berman (Maverick Lloyd)

Policy Success is About Increasing Community Capacity to Advocate

Our approach to evaluation of grantees is to look at increase in capacity to do this work. With the communities and statewide, we’re interested in their success over the long term. With policy, it moves forward and back. We look for parent engagement – is there parent leadership training going on, are those parents influencing policy? Who’s at the table for community action plans? The advocacy agenda – how coherent is it? Whose voices were heard?

— David Nee (Graustein Memorial Fund)

Don’t Worry about Evaluating the Grantee. Evaluate Whether You’re Seeing the Change in Which You’ve Invested

We do a lot of visiting and go by our gut: do we think it’s going well? Justice Works has been focusing on Rockefeller drug laws and now those laws are being changed. But is it due to Justice Works? I don’t know, but [the change we wanted] is happening.

— Deborah Larussi (Sills)

We look at whether there’s progressive change over time. Are they building membership, leadership so that they’re poised to make an impact? Are they building coalitions with other groups? Is there momentum? There are different ways to measure momentum. Are members involved in advocacy? Are they mentioned a lot in the paper? Even if they don’t get the win, are they building the right civic structures to succeed eventually?

— Kelly Bates (Access Strategies Fund)

We’ve adapted many of the tools bigger foundations use. We do try at a high level to see what our portfolio impact is. It would be easier if we were a foundation that did jobs creation: your return on investment is homogeneous. We have heterogeneous return on investment.

— Fran Seegull (Barbara Lee)

We measure the impact of our investments in both direct service and policy reform on our key issue, juvenile justice. We are confident that our foundation’s direct advocacy and investments have contributed to a significant drop in youth in the juvenile justice system and to improved treatment for those involved and those returning home.

— Diane Sierpina (Tow)

²² Tom David, “An Approach to Evaluation at The California Wellness Foundation,” www.tdavid.net

Supporting Small Family Foundations to be Successful Policy Philanthropists: Concluding Thoughts

Most of this report speaks directly to boards and staffs of small family foundations about leveraging their resources for significant impact on issues that matter to donor families. The key messages from the field as discussed in this report are clear:

1. The small family foundation is successfully motivated and ready to invest in policy when it has a founder’s mandate to do so, when its board seeks greater impact by addressing “upstream” challenges that affect broad swaths of society, and/or when it professionalizes its practices and shifts a portion of its giving to strategically chosen, issue-specific investments.
2. Policy investing strengthens, rather than dissipates, the potential impact of a family foundation’s contributions in areas of personal concern.
3. Don’t fear issue discussions; embrace them. The learning process regarding issue investing can energize and build cohesion among members of a family board.

The myriad organizations - such as consulting firms, academic institutions, philanthropic “challenge” groups, or other foundations – that wish to support the development of the philanthropic field may use reports like these to gather ideas on what might strengthen connections and efforts with small family foundations to advance policy philanthropy.

In this last section, using the comments of small family foundations and others, we make preliminary suggestions about where more could be done for or with small family foundations pursuing policy investment.

LESSONS FOR PHILANTHROPIC PEER ORGANIZATIONS

These organizations should consider supporting different kinds of philanthropic collaboration. One funder commented that “it does feel a little lonely sometimes” at small family foundations. Some suggestions:

- **Convene groups of funders and staff** that focus on the practice of policy philanthropy (as opposed to affinity groups that collaborate to advance a particular issue). “We would be avid users of peer-to-peer mediated support in a learning group where people are really committed,” such as teachers use in what is called a Professional Learning Community, said one funder.

- **Organize community support groups.** “We’ve gotten a lot out of collaborating with other foundations, but we do it in an ad hoc way,” said one funder. “We call the people we know. We need more forums for peer-led groups, peer-led learning by region, by mission, by subject.”
- **Develop common assessment and reporting tools** specifically for small family foundations investing in policy. “What kind of reporting requirements are commensurate with the size of the grant and the capacity of the grantee?” asked one funder. Another said that standardization would diminish “burden on the grantee,” an objective of her foundation.

LESSONS FOR PHILANTHROPIC SUPPORT/RESEARCH ORGANIZATIONS

These organizations should consider making available low-cost networking/learning options to small family foundations. Many of those interviewed belong to professional associations, but opportunities for conferences far outweigh willingness or ability to invest time and money in that kind of effort. One comment was fairly typical: “It’s about the money. It’s not a good use of our resources – we want our money to go to grantees. I’ve seen conferences that look great; I would love to do that, but I look at the price and throw it away.” Another funder said, “We join these groups in the hope that there will be opportunities for collaboration.”

- One funder suggested that academic institutes act as conveners: “it would be great to have access to the resources and research, and the university might have an independent perspective on who should be in the room.”
- Another funder suggested that meeting size and scope, sometimes more than price, were important. She said, “I haven’t found the bigger conferences all that helpful. The stuff about managing family dynamics, etc. – it all seems so obvious. One thing I did learn was about the life cycles of an organization, and about how to read financials, but that’s not three days’ worth.”

LESSONS FOR LARGER, NATIONAL FOUNDATIONS

Larger foundations might work more strategically with smaller foundations to capitalize better on what each brings to the table. Said one key informant: “The big foundations can put in millions to do these huge initiatives in multiple locations, but their investment is always just a few years’ duration. Local family foundations

are the key to sustainability over time.” For example, multi-site initiatives might include cultivating local small family foundations interested in the focus of the initiative (e.g., juvenile justice, education reform) so that when initial funding runs out, there is an informed local infrastructure to consider the long-term, flexible support necessary for the incremental work of systemic change.

LESSONS FOR COMMUNITY FOUNDATIONS

Community foundations might help link small family foundations to local organizations and policymakers. One funder pointed out that, while the regional associations and groups like the Council on Foundations do some “matchmaking” to introduce ideas and organizations to foundations, community foundations are better situated to do this on a local level. Community foundations could:

- Serve as a clearinghouse for advocates/potential grantees that don’t have the resources or time to look for the small family foundations that might be interested in their work.
- Use their local convening power to bring policymakers and small family foundations together to discuss issues of potential import.

Appendices

APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol for Key Informants

The Sillerman Center project, supported in part by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is exploring the involvement of small family foundations in policy change. By speaking with a range of foundations and key informants involved with policy-focused philanthropy, Sillerman hopes to show how different small foundations have become successfully involved in policy grantmaking, what obstacles still exist to this kind of work among small foundations, and what still remains to be done to support and encourage more and better policy-focused philanthropy among this less often studied group of philanthropists.

For the purposes of this project, a “small family foundation” is a foundation that distributes funds of a single family donor/founder, has four or fewer professional staff, and continues to be directed by donor family board members (partially, if not exclusively).

We define policy-oriented philanthropy as grantmaking or foundation activity in one or more of the following areas:

- Legislative or regulatory advocacy (Foundation staff speaks directly with lawmakers about current issues)
- Funding issue-specific organizations that do policy work (think-tanks, research institutions, advocacy organizations)
- Financing or conducting public education, such as media campaigns, voter education, documentary film
- Funding coalition-building at the grassroots, e.g. through community organizing
- Other philanthropic leverage – individual family members might use personal influence, convening power, create or join affinity groups of funders, etc.

QUESTIONS

1. The philanthropy field seems to have reached a rough consensus that foundations, and small foundations in particular, are taking baby steps in the direction of funding policy change. Do you think that’s true? If yes, what are the constraints? If no, what has been the driver to get more foundations involved (and why does the misperception persist?)
2. Why should small family foundations fund policy work?
3. Are there policy-focused activities better suited to smaller family foundations (as opposed to those that should only be attempted by larger, national foundations), and why?
4. Have you known specific small foundations to be actively engaged in policy and successful? If yes, how do you define “success” and to what do you attribute the success? Alternatively, have you known of foundations that have been less successful, and to what do you attribute the difficulties?
5. How do you think “the field” can be better supported to improve the chances of small foundations venturing successfully into this work?
6. Whom else should we talk to? What else should we ask?

Interview Protocol for Foundation Representatives

The Sillerman Center project, supported in part by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, is exploring the involvement of small family foundations in policy change. By reviewing relevant literature, and speaking with a range of foundations and key informants involved with policy-focused philanthropy, Sillerman will produce a report showing how/why different small foundations have become successfully involved in policy grantmaking, what obstacles stand in the way of this kind of work among small foundations, and what still remains to be done to support and encourage more and better policy-focused philanthropy among this less often studied group of philanthropists.

For the purposes of this project, a “small family foundation” is a foundation that distributes funds of a single family donor/founder, (in most cases) has four or fewer professional staff, and continues to be directed by donor family board members (partially, if not exclusively).

We define policy-oriented philanthropy as grantmaking or foundation activity in one or more of the following areas:

- Legislative or regulatory advocacy (Foundation staff speaks directly with lawmakers about current issues)
- Funding issue-specific organizations that do policy work (think-tanks, research institutions, advocacy organizations)
- Financing or conducting public education, such as media campaigns, voter education, documentary film
- Funding coalition-building at the grassroots, e.g. through community organizing
- Other philanthropic leverage – individual family members might use personal influence, convening power, create or join affinity groups of funders, etc.

QUESTIONS

1. How long have you served as _____ for the Foundation?
2. Above I've described a range of foundation policy work. Please talk about how much the Foundation's efforts have focused in these areas and your perspective on its success in becoming involved where it wanted to be (in any of these areas), and the success (or challenges) you feel the foundation has had in achieving its aims.
3. What do you think is the ultimate goal of the foundation's involvement in policy work? Why do policy work, in other words, rather than services or programs?
4. Has the thinking about policy grantmaking changed over the years at the foundation? If yes, how and why?
5. Is there a particular example of a policy grant/initiative that went very well and one, perhaps that went badly that we could talk about? What was it about the foundation's approach or role that made a difference in the outcome?
6. How do you perceive the role of small foundations such as your own relative to the larger, national foundations, particularly in this area of policy influence? How can small foundations partner successfully with larger foundations? Can they? Or should small foundations mostly work with each other?
7. How do you assess the impact of your policy investments? How do you think that could be improved?
8. It's been suggested by some in the field that philanthropy in general and small foundations in particular are taking only baby steps in the area of policy grantmaking. Do you think that's true and, if so, why?
9. What professional supports -- outside organizations, research, technical assistance, etc. -- help the foundation do its work? If there could be more help available to support policy work in particular that was targeted to small foundations, what would it provide?

The Sillerman Center For the Advancement of Philanthropy

Our mission is to strengthen philanthropy that advances social justice through research, education, practice and leadership.

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