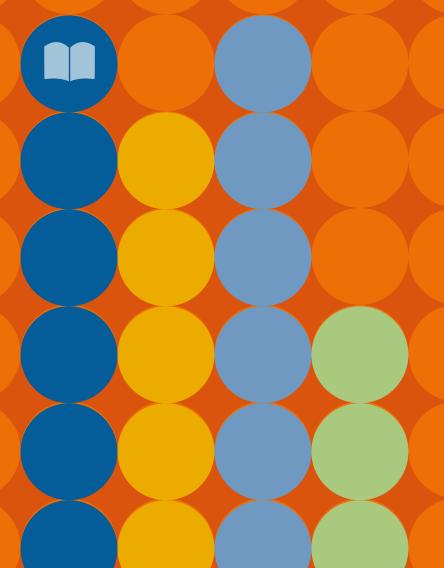# TEAMING UP FOR ADVOCACY

## HOW TO EFFECTIVELY USE A COLLABORATIVE TO DRIVE CHANGE

This guide captures the wisdom of philanthropic leaders who have participated in multi-party advocacy collaboratives. It synthesizes information to dig deeper and understand the pain points and levers of success tied to funding advocacy and donor collaboratives. Each bite-sized chapter is intended to make this work easy to reference and share, and to read as a full body of work or in pieces.

**doi.org/dgdf**

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# Introduction

"Funders need to collaborate more." How many times have we heard that? The good news: Funders are collaborating more. Today, there are all kinds of learning networks, aligned funding and strategy associations, affinity groups, and other structures that are making it easier for grantmakers to collaborate.

Many funders, however, are still apprehensive about funding advocacy. A Foundation Center (now Candid) analysis of a sample of the largest funders demonstrates that only 13 percent of overall foundation grantmaking explicitly supports policy, advocacy, and systems reform. The Atlantic Philanthropies observes that advocacy funding is too often "the philanthropic road not taken, yet it is a road most likely to lead to the kind of lasting change that philanthropy has long sought through other kinds of grants."

It's an easy road to avoid. Publicly taking a stand on controversial issues can be dicey for foundation leaders, and supporting advocacy can be complex, time-intensive, and risky. Stir the varied interests, goals, and personalities of a diverse group of funders into the mix and it becomes even more daunting.

Given the deepening concern—and increasing activism—sparked by the recent changes in political power and the rise in populism around the globe, that may be changing. Wherever you stand on the issues, it is hard to ignore the dramatic upswing in advocacy activity since the election. Some of it involves collaboratives successfully bringing together funders to advance important issues through public policy campaigns, communications, research, and strategic grantmaking. And they are getting results, despite the obstacles in their way.

If we are to overcome the inevitable concerns about joining an advocacy collaborative and understand what makes them successful, we need to ask: What distinguishes an advocacy collaborative from other kinds of collaboratives? For an answer, we spoke with several advocacy collaborative stakeholders. This is what we heard:

◆ **Advocacy collaboratives focus on very specific goals.** Advocacy funders are very clear about the policy change, reform, or institution they want to see. "The best policy collaboratives are laser-focused on very clear goals that everyone agrees on. They then analyze how and where that needs to happen, figure out what a nonprofit organization can do, and then put their funding behind it. In my opinion, if you don't do that, you're not a policy funder." That kind of focus "creates a sense of urgency about the worwk that encourages people to leave their organizational hats at the door and all work on the same team."

◆ **They flex and adapt.** Many funder advocacy collaboratives allocate at least part of their resources to providing rapid-response grants that move money out to groups on the ground in a timely fashion. "Our foundation had been giving long-term core support to some big national groups that were steeped in our issue. But we wanted to give more reactive, project-oriented money to organizations on the front lines on a much quicker timeline and at a much quicker pace. That's why we joined this kind of collaborative—it can do that."

Policy advocacy collaboratives also continually tweak their strategies to align with the changing political, economic, and social context. "In advocacy collaboratives, funders have to have a shared vision of what they're trying to achieve, even if they have to refine their strategies every six months. In other collaboratives with less pressing issues, there's no deadline, and you can lose focus or drift along. They're then more likely to become social centers for donors, rather than promoting advocacy for social change."

◆ **They offer support for capacity and field building.** Campaigns and policy wins are great, but they're just part of the equation in these kinds of collaboratives. "It's equally important to build the capacity of the organizations on the ground as it is to build the field overall so there's a strong infrastructure created that's not only able to react to policy-related opportunities when they emerge but also anticipate future opportunities." In short, "You can have a bunch of policy wins, but if there's no infrastructure to support the work going forward, it won't have as much impact."

◆ **They embrace complexity.** Advocacy and organizing cut across lots of issues, but foundations still tend to be rooted in siloed program areas. That can make it difficult to figure out where or how each funder can make advocacy and organizing work for them and their institution. "An LGBT funder joined our immigration rights collaborative because they understood how immigration reform affects their constituency. That's not the usual case, because most funders work in specific program areas and can't always see how their policy issues affect their institution's other program areas—not just one." And even when they do see it, the way their institutions are set up sometimes doesn't allow for this kind of cross-cutting grantmaking.

There are also different kinds of advocacy collaboratives. Some provide efficient vehicles for funders who don't have the staff capacity to do these kinds of grants and can "help get resources into the field more efficiently, strategically, and responsively." Some come together when there's a crisis with the sole purpose of being a "rapid response" mechanism for moving money out the door quickly to organizations that need it. Some just support research on an issue rather than organizing around it. And still others operate almost like a foundation by making grants through a pooled fund.

◆ **They acknowledge and embrace risk.** Advocacy collaborative funders accept that the work is inherently risky. "Our collaborative spent years supporting a major federal-level reform policy, and we lost. That was a huge blow that no one saw coming. All this money went into that strategy, and we got it wrong. Fortunately, the funders in the collaborative understood that you win some and you lose some—and their institutions understood that as well." Part of the risk is that a lot of this work plays out over the long term. "Policy change takes time, and many foundations aren't able or willing to stay the course that long. They get nervous when there aren't immediate 'outcomes'."

If those are some of the ways in which funder advocacy collaboratives differ from other kinds of collaboratives, what makes them successful? And how can grantmakers make sure that the considerable investments of time and money these efforts require pay off?

Those were questions GrantCraft posed to several grantmakers and grantees with deep experience as participants in advocacy collaboratives. We asked them to identify the challenges they typically faced and to provide some tips and stories that could help their peers navigate and overcome the tough stuff and maximize the potential for success.

And they delivered.

Our research surfaced a number of ways to overcome the inevitable **sticking points** that can torpedo even the best-planned collaborative policy initiative—things like groupthink and what to do when there's disagreement about where and how funds should be allocated. Interviewees

also offered some frank advice for grantmakers involved in these collaboratives when they get pushback from their institutions about that participation.

Respondents also laid out the benefits of these kinds of collaboratives and shared their insights to what makes them successful, including ways to get consensus on strategy—and what to do if that doesn't happen.

Structural issues are also important. Not the least of these are the tensions that can bubble up between big funders and smaller ones and whether and how to employ intermediaries or other kinds of external support. Respondents were particularly interested in how this work could be done in ways that engage grantees more as partners—rather than beneficiaries.

The insights noted above only scratch the surface of the practical wisdom and key findings we've collected, and we're sharing it with you as short pieces that make it easy to learn, reflect, and share. We've also pulled together what we believe to be some of the most useful publications, research, tools, and other materials on the topic at fundingadvocacy.issuelab.org.

As you prepare to dig into this series and its lessons, we want to leave you with two of our most important takeaways from the research: First, funders who are part of advocacy collaboratives tend to be fierce believers in their collective power, especially in moving the needle on big, often controversial, issues. Many foundations have historically shied away from such issues, but the tide seems to be turning. Today, we're seeing more interest by grantmakers in joining these kinds of collaboratives, which we suspect has a lot to do with a growing awareness of the impact policy advocacy work has had on issues as varied as public education reform, tax reform, the death penalty, gay marriage, and gun violence.

Second (and as noted above), a significant number of advocacy collaborative grantmakers said they were becoming more interested in finding ways to engage with grantees as partners, rather than as beneficiaries, in strategy development, field building, and even grant decisions. This trend not only reflects larger cultural shifts that, in part thanks to technology, have given people the power to participate more directly in everything from crowdfunding to online organizing, it also is a powerful and cost-effective way to walk the talk of social justice.

The series is intended for both seasoned funders looking to troubleshoot and strengthen work they're doing in an existing advocacy collaborative, as well as funders thinking of dipping their toes in the water. We included reflection questions to allow you to apply these lessons to your own work. And we developed a decision-making tree to aid the start-up process for prospective advocacy collaboratives. Let us know how you use the materials or if you have other resources to share.

## METHODOLOGY



This guide was originally synthesized as a content series, or suite of blogs posts, on GrantCraft. We captured the wisdom of philanthropic leaders who have participated in multi-party advocacy collaboratives and conducted a literature scan of how foundations talk about advocacy-focused collaborative work. Drawing on additional themes and ideas explored in earlier GrantCraft pieces about funding advocacy and donor collaboratives, we synthesized new information to dig deeper and understand the pain points and levers of success. Examples have been anonymized to ensure candor and clarity, as well as to broaden the appeal and applicability of wisdom derived from a specific collaborative example. The bite-sized articles are intended to make this work easy to reference and share, and to read either as a full body of work or in shorter spurts as is helpful and relevant to your work.

# What Are the Benefits of Being Part of an Advocacy Collaborative?

Grantmakers were remarkably consistent about the benefits of participating in advocacy collaboratives. These were:

◆ **Accessing knowledge from all kinds of experts, especially groups working on the front lines.** It's not unusual for funders to come into an advocacy collaborative knowing little about an issue. But they soon get the chance to learn directly from people with deep expertise—their colleagues, field leaders, and other experts. That's knowledge "a lot of funders probably wouldn't be able to access on their own and that leads to smarter grantmaking."

Members' institutions benefit from this expertise as well. Having access to "an ever-expanding grantee and funder network, along with other experts in the field, is a quick and easy way to radically expand what I bring into my own institution's grantmaking without having to expand our staff."

Expert intelligence also helps members spot trends and opportunities, find funding partners, and, together, act on information more effectively. Being able to get this information "at any given time is no small feat because these issues are often complex. I think responsible grantmakers build a lot of relationships—sometimes more than one person can hold—so having different points of reference helps you see partnership opportunities."

Funders agree that one of the most valuable aspects of being part of advocacy collaboratives is that they're better able to "see the bigger picture" and where their perspective or theory of change might fit within a more comprehensive advocacy strategy. "I've seen program officers come into a collaborative feeling as if they know everything about a particular issue because they were hired by their institution for that expertise. What they quickly find is that their perspective is one of several." For many grantmakers, this is new and humbling; it's easy to thrive on individual expertise. But, among others with valuable knowledge, the group mentality quickly shows its value. "Being part of a community of donors who are open to new ideas helps them see themselves in the work."

◆ **Making investments and connections beyond what would be possible through their own foundations.** Advocacy collaboratives often give grantmakers a way to make investments they may be unable to make as individual program officers, due to mission, urgency, defined program areas and investment strategies, governance, or other structures. "The most meaningful advances for our constituency take place at the local level, where the collaborative I participate in has helped build a movement. As a national foundation, we aren't able to directly support that work, but the collaborative allowed us to go beyond our foundation's constraints and do something we couldn't do on our own." Policy change windows and funding needs can emerge quickly, in unanticipated ways, and with little prior notice. Fellow grantmakers from institutions with extensive procedures and layers of bureaucracy agree that being part of an advocacy collaborative makes it more possible for them to "move the money more quickly and in more targeted ways" than they can do individually. "It gives us a nimble way to

react and is a great adjunct to the core support our foundation has traditionally given to the big human rights and civil liberties groups." One grantmaker's foundation had quarterly cycles that required grants to be made in advance, most of which were large multi-year allocations, because the board wanted to see "big bets" and didn't want make a lot of small, short-time grants they felt would get them into the weeds. In many contexts, this is a valuable investment strategy. However, to every strong strategy, there's a downside. "We wanted to be policy funders, and that meant we had to find a way to give those kinds of rapid response grants. The funder collaborative we joined helped us do that."

Advocacy collaboratives can also give program officers a broader network of resources, more direct connection with the people they support, or with other communities affected by the foundation's work. "A lot of foundations don't have program officers who have direct experience working with Muslims, even though Islamophobia affects every issue we work on. If I'm working with an advocacy collaborative that has connections to that community or a program officer from that community, it educates me."

◆ **Leveraging and bringing to scale their foundations' investments.** Many grantmakers join advocacy collaboratives because their institutions can be more effective and have more impact collectively than individually. A donor whose collaborative now funds in 30 states points out that there was "just no way that I, as a national funder, could ever do this on my own well. Even though we're a big foundation, we just don't have the capacity." Funders who join advocacy collaboratives tend to recognize their foundation's limitations in supporting advocacy well, at scale in the real world, and so collaboratives are a way to join forces with like-minded funders to jointly move advocacy investments effectively and at scale.

Moreover, the public policy issues that advocacy funders deal with are usually bigger and more complex than one institution can handle alone, so collaboratives give grantmakers the chance to work with other funders with the same goals— "a system that's much more cost effective." Having extra sets of eyes, as well as checks and balances, doesn't hurt either.

Small foundations, in particular, benefit from participating by amplifying their voices. "We're only able to give a small amount of money to the collaborative's grantmaking pool, but we still get to vote on how millions of dollars in that pool are allocated. We're getting a lot of leverage being associated with these large amounts of money!"

Collaboratives also help provide additional services for grantees such as capacity building, technical assistance, and peer learning convenings—the kinds of "things individual funders like me can't or don't do but are critical to sustaining this work." Collaboratives that are staffed, for example, "can put together a docket that would take me years to be as competent in that space. And they also give the grantees help in marketing and communications. I want all that as part of my strategy!"

Finally, collaboratives can help sustain advocacy work. "For our foundation, the advocacy collaborative was a way to help build up the financial support for these issues by working with and continually finding other funding partners to make sure that when we left, there would still be other funders in that space." Joining forces puts a stake in the ground to say that philanthropic support for a given issue isn't going to go away, even when approaches and investments at individual foundations might shift.

◆ **Improving grantmaking practice that builds the capacity of foundations and their leaders themselves.** Advocacy funders say collaboratives improve their grantmaking in powerful ways. They help program officers strategically map what's going on in the field, identify gaps, and think more deeply about how their institutional funding can best fill those needs. "Our advocacy collaborative functions as an efficient team

where we think about who's doing what in this small network of deep-pocket funders and learn where everyone's funding. Then, as a group, we figure out where to plug those holes so we don't duplicate what's already sufficiently resourced. The collaborative construct and the people who staff it allow us to do this really well." For organizations and staff that may not spend time independently scanning, it is baked into how collaboratives must operate.

Individual funders also believe their grantmaking is improved because the information shared through the advocacy collaborative is more comprehensive, timely, and rich. "When I first got into philanthropy, I didn't know what I didn't know. I was thinking more about individual grantees that had interesting theories of change or were doing appealing work. When I joined the advocacy collaborative, I saw what other people were funding and why, how their strategies were different, and how they were viewing the issue. That led me to a more nuanced view of what my strategy could look like and then shape it in a way that dovetails with others without being duplicative."

Being part of an advocacy collaborative also opens funders' eyes to other options and opportunities. "If I were doing this grantmaking on my own, I'd miss important pieces about my issue. For example, I knew a lot about immigration, but I'd never thought about how it intersects the LGBTQ community or the law enforcement aspects of this issue. Now I get it because my colleagues have been so helpful in educating me about it."

## NOW REFLECT

◆ What do you hope to get out of advocacy work that you can only do in partnership with other funders? What's the value add of your participation (or potential membership)?

◆ If you're not getting the benefits you anticipated, why not? Are there ways to engage other collaborative members in finding ways to address this?

◆ How do you talk about the benefits to other staff at your foundation? To trustees? Do they understand? If not, are there ways to strengthen your case?

# What Makes Advocacy Collaboratives Successful?

What's the most important factor in successful advocacy collaboratives? Funders were unanimous: Clear and well-defined goals that all members understand and support and can return to often when there's confusion or conflict. The sharper and narrower the goals are, the better. How does this help?

◆ **It frames a more strategic discussion among collaborative members for the work.** "You have to be focused on a solid target, whether it's overturning Citizens United or getting comprehensive immigration reform. Even if it's not successful, having this target forces you into a strategic conversation."

◆ **It leads the collaborative to be more specific with grantees about what it's doing,** which, in turn, ensures more on-target applicants; rather than having new and broad appeal, the collaborative can more clearly and narrowly articulate a focus.

◆ **It helps mitigate tension when there are disagreements about strategy or direction.** "When our collaborative, which had abolishing the death penalty as its major goal, would drift from that or get hung up with disagreements, we'd always bring it back to the goal we all agreed on: abolition. We reminded the group that we were all there to achieve that end goal so we needed to do everything we could do to win." The goals in this case serve as an accountability mechanism.

◆ **It keeps the work focused on action,** rather than "devolving into funder continuing education and things like joint site visits, which are important, but they often aren't particularly action-oriented. Rolling up your sleeves and digging into specific policy objectives is an experience funders don't always get to have because their job is usually focused more on doing due diligence."

◆ **It's easier to measure progress and success.** The fuzzier or more complex the issue is, the harder it will be for funder collaboratives to figure out whether they've been successful. "We had very specific policy ends: A Supreme Court decision in our favor and state referendum wins. That's really different than saying 'racial justice' is your goal. You can't get 100 people in a room to agree on what that is! So, how are you going to figure out if you've moved the needle?"

◆ **It creates a clear marker for evolution or disbandment.** For some collaboratives, the right thing to do is to "go out of business when they've reached their goals, rather than sitting around asking 'what should we do now?'" Still other collaboratives find that reaching their goal creates a moment to evolve and redefine what the group can achieve together.

In addition to well-defined goals and agendas, there are several other factors that point to success:

◆ **Sticking with it over the long term, with the understanding that success will not necessarily be the result.** Policy change is difficult, and it doesn't happen overnight. Collaboratives can help funders hold steady.

"Grantmakers who are part of advocacy collaboratives have to be patient and go into these things understanding that sometimes it takes years to see any kind of change." And, even after seeing change, policy could be reversed by changes in government or other factors. Because many advocacy collaboratives also provide capacity building support—for both individual grantees and the larger field—sustained commitment is doubly important. "But you have to provide this kind of technical assistance if you want to be successful. You can't just drop money into groups or locales and hope for the best. It takes time, patience, and focus."

Staying the course, however, can be a heavy lift for a lot of foundations, which tend to "change up their strategy and/or programs every few years." To deal with this, advocacy funders say that they enlist their collaborative colleagues to pull together a strong case and make commitments to each other that will help persuade their institutions to stay the course. "Our collaborative did this as a group, which each of us could use at our own foundations. We saw that it helped make our institutions feel less anxious about the work because they were able to say, 'look we have other funders working with us.'"

Policy work is risky, and the policy environment is always shifting, meaning that sometimes even the best funder collaboratives may fail in reaching their goals. "Funders who want to join these kinds of collaboratives have to make sure they and their institutions are clear that this work can be very unpredictable and there is always the specter of failure looming over you. You—and your foundation—have to be able to accept that." While sticking with it is something successful collaboratives do well, funders also caveat that "knowing when it's time to change approach or even stop working is very tricky. There's a need to balance staying with the plan long enough to know whether it's working, but not so long that resources are spent in vain." Funders focused on the end result need to remain vigilant about

monitoring progress, changing contexts, and emerging opportunities to reflect on—and update—strategy to stay on course.

◆ **Getting the right mix of funders to participate.** So much depends on having the right mix of people at the table, advocacy funders say. "In our collaborative, we had a nice mix of different kinds of foundations and individual donors. We also had big and small foundations. Having that kind of diversity brought a lot of different and important perspectives to the table." Small foundations, in particular, "often have a lot to contribute beyond money, so we're able to take advantage of that by using a more inclusive approach."

Having funders with diverse skill sets at the table is also important. "If we were all experts on these issues in the same ways, we wouldn't have been as successful." And, diverse backgrounds across factors such as race, religion, military service, physical ability, sexual orientation, academic training, family structure, and beyond brings essential perspectives that help overcome a single-background narrative. Having members that belong to population groups directly affected by the work of the collaborative is especially essential.

And, of course, there's always the issue of chemistry. "Whether a collaborative works well is about who's at the table. Do they participate? Do they show up? If the time isn't well spent or the process isn't getting you to a good set of decisions you feel good about, it won't succeed. You'll also lose participation if you're unable to find a way to get people to agree and work together well because people won't feel positive about the experience." While "chemistry" isn't a checkbox item that is necessarily seen from the beginning of work together, it is something that is usually known after the first few meetings. Collaboratives with good chemistry understand how to listen to the "gut feeling" of how different people and organizations will gel together, and build the composition of the group accordingly.

◆ **Building and breathing a culture of trust and collaboration.** While it might seem logical that funder collaboratives would be, well, collaborative, developing those kinds of cultures can be challenging. "When we started, the field was relatively new, and funders were just getting to know each other as a new group so they had to build trust, which takes time. But we knew that if we were going to get alignment around a shared strategy, we were going to have to trust each other first. As a long-time advocacy funder and activist, I've seen that no matter what the issue, the more funders know and trust each other, the more successful they are."

Grantmakers say it's important that the collaborative's members—especially long-time members—and staff be intentional about promoting an inclusive and informational culture that adds value to people's work. "Like any good organization, you have to make it a political home that people like. You can't do it on dry merit alone. People have to feel affirmed."

Making new donors feel comfortable is also important. Some collaboratives have existing members invite new members out for drinks or coffee to answer questions they might have before a larger meeting. Others have a culture that encourages new members to "say anything at the table, and you're not considered a 'junior' member. It's good for new members to see that and be embraced by everyone. This kind of openness and acceptance makes it easier to recruit new people to our advocacy collaborative."

◆ **Including the field affected by the collaborative's work in shaping the strategy for the collaborative.** Many grantmakers believe that advocacy collaboratives work best when their strategies reflect the involvement of the issue-specific field and its stakeholders— from helping to set priorities to designing the strategy. "If you're in our collaborative, you have to agree to work with and take direction from the strategic leadership of the campaign we're supporting and who aren't grantmakers. They are the strategists, and if they say, 'the next six

months, we really need communications' or 'next year, we're getting bills in Utah and South Carolina so let's work there,' we'll listen to what they say and align our funding accordingly."

Some funders, however, believe that grantmakers and the field can have parallel strategies as long as they're mutually complementary "and there's communication between the two." What's most important, they say, is being clear about grantmakers' role in the process—not just to the collaborative's members but also to strategists leading the campaigns. "You have to have a sense of who you are in the field. Are you another advocate? Or are you a partner with the grantees in the field? Are you a collaborator? Or are you taking a more traditional approach—being more at arm's length from the grantees and being in control of making the decisions? It's important to be clear and transparent about this with grantees."

◆ **Leaving egos at the door.** Advocacy funder collaboratives, funders agree, aren't the place for big egos. To be successful in a collaborative, "individual members need to be committed to contribution not attribution! They need to check their institutional egos at the door. The focus needs to be on what the group is doing and who they're doing it for—not on who gets credit."

Compromise and humility play an important role. "You're joining with others, and you broaden your focus when you sit down at the table. You decide you'll be more effective in a collaborative than you would be on your own because there's strength in numbers."

◆ **Hiring quality staff or facilitators.** A number of advocacy funders point to staffing as a key ingredient in successful collaboratives. "We've been able to pay for the staffing at our collaborative. Two of those staff members came from foundations that had donated to the collaborative. Other funders have thought about applying for these jobs, which says something about the quality of the staffing. If you can afford it, hiring smart staffers is a smart move the collaborative should support."

Sometimes that staffing comes in the form of an intermediary. "I've found that collaboratives that have used intermediaries well tend to be quite effective. They have to be supported, though, because they provide a lot of additional services for grantees like capacity building, technical assistance, and convenings—a lot of the stuff that individual funders can't or don't do but that are critical to sustaining this work!"

Having a "strong facilitator who's not a grantmaker"—either as part of the staff or as a consultant—is also important, many grantmakers say. "There are many occasions collaboratives may need to call in an external facilitator— disagreements about strategy, personality conflicts, analysis paralysis, and other issues that the group may be unable to resolve itself. We've found them to be enormously helpful in getting us unstuck."

◆ **Promoting strong leadership.** Some grantmakers say that the best advocacy collaboratives "are those with someone—or a group of funders—with a clear vision and who can bring people along with that vision." An important part of that leadership is being ever vigilant to potential problems or challenges that could derail the group's commitment or solidarity to the goals they agreed on.

That doesn't necessarily mean that collaboratives have to have a formally-elected or appointed leader. Rather, all members should feel comfortable in assuming the role of helping the group keep on track when it starts to veer off. That sometimes requires different skill sets. After serving as the leader of an advocacy funder collaborative, one grantmaker said that she'd come to realize that leadership isn't just about vision or "keeping the eyes on the prize." While those are important, if she ever led a collaborative again, she'd approach that role differently—"less as a director and more a facilitated leadership approach. I've learned how important good facilitation can be when it comes to keeping collaboratives running smoothly because so much is about facilitating decisions, not forcing them."

◆ **Building a strong field and infrastructure to support ongoing policy work on the issue(s).** A striking number of funder advocacy collaboratives view field building as important as "wins." "You can have a bunch of policy wins, but if there's no infrastructure to support the work going forward, it won't have as much impact."

There are many ways to do this—capacity-building assistance, organizational development support, general support. The important thing to remember, however, is that while "policy goals are the priority, advocacy collaboratives also have to keep their eyes on the infrastructure behind pushing for those policies." Without it, another funders says, "this work will never be sustainable."

◆ **Funders see value in their participation.** Successful advocacy collaboratives have robust participation. "Grantmakers have to perceive that they're getting a lot of value from their involvement. Otherwise, they'll leave because they want their time to be well spent." Maintaining participation and longevity, in fact, can be a good barometer of what's working for the people participating in the collaborative. "If they don't show up or don't participate or leave halfway through—those are warning signs."

Unsurprisingly, the more people know and trust the other collaborative members, the more incentive there is to participate. "Four or five times a year, we'd meet as a group and just be in a room where we spent full days together. We got to know each other well and build trust, because we not only talked about issues but had meals together. You can't underestimate the value of that." The opposite is also true: "A collaborative I was part of only met once a quarter for two hours. People didn't see the value of participation vs. value of 'just funding the effort' because funders didn't really get to know each other. For these things to work really well, you need a lot of funder engagement."

## NOW REFLECT

◆ What do you see as the most important factors in predicting success?

◆ How many of these elements do you see reflected in your collaborative?

◆ Are there other factors not mentioned here that you think are important contributors to a collaborative's success? What makes them important?

# Types of Advocacy Collaboratives

Advocacy collaboratives come in different forms, and a foundation's structure and capabilities might lend itself more easily to some than others. However, foundations that actively participate in advocacy collaboratives may find themselves participating through several different formats.

With the Atlantic Philanthropies ending its grantmaking, it offers an excellent example for reflecting on how one foundation has participated in learning networks, strategic alignment networks, and pooled funds to collaboratively pursue advocacy interests.

## LEARNING NETWORKS

A learning network is a group of funders who come together to hear what's happening in a field or issue area, share information, and explore potential strategies for making more effective investments. In addition to information sharing, collaboratives of this type "allow donors to amplify their voices to show the rest of the funding world that the issues they're working on are important and, hopefully, increase the number of funders supporting those issues." Learning networks may also subdivide into working groups to provide like-minded funders with a "safe space" to share information about grantees and the field or bring in speakers to learn together about more specific issues.

Members of learning networks often find opportunities to align some of their grantmaking through shared or complementary strategies, and it's not uncommon for pooled funds or strategic alignment networks to grow out of learning networks. One pooled fund got started, a grantmaker recalled, when a handful of learning network members decided that "a more unified,

collective effort was needed to raise the visibility" of a policy issue after years of trying, "somewhat unsuccessfully, to motivate increased giving by talking one-on-one with colleagues at other foundations." The pooled fund drew heavily on the "strong relationships and cohesion" that had developed among network members.

The Atlantic Philanthropies actively participated in the Executives' Alliance for Boys and Men of Color, a funder's learning network associated with My Brother's Keeper. **Read more** about this learning network.

## STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT NETWORK

A strategic alignment network is made up of funders who share a mission, strategize together, and work in concert to obtain publicity, traction, and impact—but who still do all their grantmaking independently. Some networks of this type create intermediary organizations or other structures to advance a strategy, which then receive support directly from network members. Membership in strategic alignment networks is often selective, with formal governance and contribution requirements.

A grantmaker in a collaborative that aimed to shift both environmental policy and consumer activity recalled that each meeting would end with an informal tally of what should happen next and where grant dollars were needed: "We'd ask everyone where their interests were and what

grants they were considering making. Then we knew what was covered and what was still needed." Later on, he explained, "side conversations" about how to fill the gaps "could happen with less pressure."

The Atlantic Philanthropies helped anchor the Funders for Alternatives to the Death Penalty, a strategic alignment network active until 2012. Interestingly, several of the members then created a pooled fund, the Themis Donor Collaborative. Read more about this strategic alignment network.

## POOLED FUND

A pooled fund is a "pot" of money toward which funders contribute and from which grant dollars (or program-related investments) are disbursed. Money from the pot is used without distinguishing the original donor. Some collaboratives allow "one funder, one vote," no matter how much money the funder puts in the pot, while others adjust voting privileges based on the amount contributed. Belonging to a pooled fund may entail a large commitment of a grantmaker's time and energy, or it may simply require a financial commitment. In either case, the day-to-day work of the collaborative is often carried out by staff or consultants, with donors serving on steering committees, setting strategy, and making decisions. Pooled funds do many of the same things foundations do: analyze issues or fields to determine the most effective grantmaking strategies, issue requests for proposals, conduct site visits, assess potential grantees, and select grantees. In addition to providing financial resources, many feature capacity-building services, such as training or technical assistance, networking

## STORIES FROM THE REAL WORLD

*Pooled funding isn't easy. It's hard to get people to agree on what should be funded, especially if there isn't a designated staff person to manage it. Aligned funding is easier, I've found, because you don't need as much buy-in or staffing. Also, all foundation staff are accountable to their board of directors so they can work together to find a piece of the puzzle that fits within their own organization.*

*Our advocacy collaborative's minimum for donors used to be $100K/year, and those funds are allocated to a pooled fund only. Now it's $250K. We had one funder who couldn't do that, and they left. We tried to give them a heads up, but it was a painful decision because the funder was very valuable. We didn't want to lose this institution, but people felt that relative to the size of the fund the minimum is proportional.*

*Any funder in a pooled fund wears three hats: their institutions' priorities; their own priorities; and the collaborative's priorities. People often get confused as to what hat they're wearing. I'd be sitting at a collaborative meeting seeing so much of this confusion and conflation going on. Funders need to think about how much they're willing to surrender their own voice and interests for the sake of the collaborative. They need to think about what the bandwidth is for their own institution to make sure its needs are being met. And they need to think about the degree of risk their foundation is willing to tolerate. Sometimes, funders don't think about all this, and they end up arguing for things that aren't even remotely close to what was going to get funded.*

*A major issue with pooled funds is how decisions get made. Is there one organization, one vote? Or skewing by money? If the first person says "one person, one vote," it's hard for someone to challenge that who may be sitting on a pile of money because they don't want to come across as the heavyweight.*

opportunities, peer learning, and help with advocacy or public communications. Grants are sometimes allocated to intermediaries based more locally, which, in turn, regrant to organizations of which they have firsthand knowledge. Local funders may also be asked to match national funders' contributions in some way.

The Atlantic Philanthropies participated in the National Security and Rights Collaborative, which is still evolving and will continue to move forward even as Atlantic exits the field. **Read more** about this pooled fund.

## NOW REFLECT

◆ What advocacy collaborative model feels most comfortable for you personally? Why?

◆ What model feels most intuitive for how your foundation structures other partnerships?

◆ Do any of the models feel "easier" than others? How might the sticking points be simpler?

# Groupthink

Groupthink—we all know it when we see it. Eyes glazing, heads bobbing, and everyone agreeing (even when they don't). That can pop up in any kind of funder collaborative, but it can be more common in advocacy collaboratives because working in an ever-changing policy environment means less time for analysis and more demand for quick action.

As one funder notes, "If you're focused on really specific advocacy targets and you have only a certain amount of money to reach those targets and you're relying pretty much on your colleagues and staff to determine whether you'll be successful, it's really easy to forget to take a step back and look more objectively at what you're doing." Collaboratives can be proactive in building preventive measures about groupthink into their processes from the get-go. "Participating funders need to be diligent about bringing in other perspectives and making sure the people at the table are comfortable expressing different views."

That can be difficult if members were activists before they became funders—something that's not uncommon in advocacy collaboratives. "This can be good and bad. Good, because it infuses the collaborative with first-hand experience and knowledge. Bad, because it can sometimes devolve into a small club of insiders who aren't always objective."

Groupthink also rears up when funders have very close relationships with their grantees and are committed to seeing them succeed—so much so that they'll "tell their boards the collaboratives' investments are good even when they suspect their grantees aren't."

So how can funders involved in policy collaboratives stave off groupthink?

◆ **Bring in outside experts to challenge the group's assumptions.** "It's pretty easy to bring in dissenting voices—like people who are policy wonks or lobbyists or staffers from congressional offices. Some of the most effective people we've found to fill this role are those from the 'opposition.' They're insiders who have a lot of knowledge, might have a different point of view and aren't necessarily beholden to your grantees or funders." Ask collaborative members to brainstorm a list of people who could potentially serve in this role and commit to inviting them to upcoming strategy discussions or grantmaking discussions.

Relatedly, stop seeing people who disagree as "naysayers," and instead, as valuable contributors to the planning or grantmaking process. One grantmaker says her collaborative deliberately pulls in people the group knows have no dog in the fight because they can be "honest brokers who aren't aligned with the funders or the grantees to call you on your biases." To help these folks do that well, it's important that members ask clarifying questions and engage authentically in what should be a discussion, rather than a "debate." Collaboratives can also ask each member to connect over coffee with a person with whom they disagree before the next meeting.

## STORIES FROM THE REAL WORLD

A funder collaborative working on federal-level immigration reform for several years was certain that—finally—a pending Supreme Court decision would swing their way. Unfortunately, that didn't happen.

*It was a huge blow no one saw coming. Millions of dollars went into that strategy, and we got it wrong. Why? I think it's because we forgot to build into the strategy that we, as a group, had blind spots and didn't figure out how to address them so that we'd be prepared if the decision didn't go the way we wanted it to.*

The member went on to share how the group should have interjected some accountability mechanisms into the process:

*We should have role-played our board members asking us why we didn't get the win we expected [if we lost] because it would have forced us to consider we might not win and come up with a clear answer about why we didn't.*

That can be difficult, though, because it requires getting honest information from grantees, who need to articulate what went wrong and expect funders to ask this—which doesn't always happen.

*That leads to a vacuum in doing the kind of post-analysis that's needed to learn from mistakes. The danger is that the cycle can happen again when you have the same groups pitching the same kinds of strategies in front of a group of funders who never really were sure what went wrong initially.*

Auspiciously, the collaborative was able to make lemonade out of lemons. Another member reported:

*This failure actually forced us to take a hard look at our strategy and see whether it was feasible going forward. We decided to change it up and focus our efforts at the state level. [If the federal reform legislation had passed] our collaborative probably wouldn't exist anymore or gone on to something else. Not winning the issue pushed us to redirect a lot of our resources and energy down to state-level policy work. Now, we've become more of a bottom-up entity, when we started as the opposite!*

◆ **Build constant questioning of who is being funded and why.** Groupthink flourishes when there's little or no pushback. But there's usually not a lot of incentive for people to do that in the "nicey-nice" culture of the social sector. And there's even less incentive for grantees to play that role. "Grantees tell funders what they want to hear so the money keeps flowing, and then you get to the end, and it's a failure, you're not sure where you started seeing danger or pushback because there wasn't enough accountability as to how the money was being used along the way. There has to be ongoing accountability for your investments—individually and as a whole—to see how they're panning out over time."

In short, members need to see constructive critique as an essential part of the group's due diligence process. One way to do this is to make "poking holes" a standard part of every meeting, or, to empower a particularly strong group member to be the designated critic of every idea or approach. Some grantmakers set aside time in every meeting for presentations—about strategy, funding dockets, grantees, whatever—to suggest and consider potential downsides or challenges with each.

◆ **Establish a more formal advisory council or structure.** One education policy collaborative created an "education scholars advisory board" that provided knowledge and research to the

members and their grantees about the issues, as well as potential strategies. "It was an incredible list of luminaries who provided a lot of value to grantees through learning networks and meetings, as well as our group of funders who benefited from their expertise and perspectives, including their ability to call out questionable data or decisions."

◆ **Recognize grantees as the experts they are.** Funders can really fall into a bubble because they "tend to just talk to themselves. They need to talk to grantees and listen. Better yet, they need to take what they say into consideration in their decision making." Another funder is blunter: "If you really want honesty, talk to people who think that what the grantees are saying to funders is BS." One way to do that is to ask external advisors or intermediary staff members to interview grantees and, better yet, non-grantees about what's working and what's not, and why. Their responses can then be relayed back to funders unattributed.

## NOW REFLECT

◆ How much does our collaborative lapse into groupthink? Why does that happen? What can we do about it when it does?

◆ How comfortable do I feel about speaking up when I disagree with the group about something? What would make me feel more comfortable?

# Personality Conflicts

From big mouths to big egos, personality conflicts can be a major factor in sinking a funder collaborative, but it's often pushed aside because, well, it's personal. As one funder notes: "Policy change is hard enough, but it gets even harder when there are really strong personalities involved, and they want to do it a particular way. Or it's 'their' money and if they don't get what they want, they don't come back. Sometimes all of that doesn't happen very elegantly, and that can lead to hard feelings."

At the same time, strong and "distinct" personalities are often critical to imagining new solutions, leadership, and moving work forward. "Avoiding strong personalities isn't the answer. Some of my favorite and most successful collaborators would have been barred!" The sticking point is not strong personalities themselves, but rather how various personalities are managed in a group setting. Ideally, personalities can complement one another to create a positive, collaborative, and forward-moving spirit. However, as we heard from many funders, that ideal can be challenging to achieve, and can have serious consequences.

So, how do funder policy collaboratives deal with this prickly issue?

◆ **Push, push, push for open communication that ensures everyone is listened to and heard.** That can be difficult because funders "don't really like to be entirely honest with one another. We're always looking at how our resources can be aligned or leveraged with others." One way to get around that is to simply accept that consensus "isn't usually feasible so just accept that and aim for good communication that provides clarity about where people are and where they want to go. So even if there are decisions made that some don't agree with, they at last feel heard, and there's less potential for conflict."

◆ **Get outside help.** Sometimes just having a fresh set of eyes or, better, a person with mediation or facilitation skills in the room, can break up interpersonal logjams. "In our collaborative we had members whose need for credit would pop up continually. We decided to have some direct intervention with those folks, but we realized it'd be better to call in a facilitator to help. We put the issues on the table and talked about them. We had to deal with it. We couldn't let it fester."

◆ **Build in opportunities for collaborative members to get to know one another as people, not just colleagues.** Socializing in more relaxed settings is not just fun; it's an important part of creating a collaborative culture. "Going out to dinner or lunch or having a drink after work gives colleagues the chance to kick back and have more honest and informal conversations that can really build authentic relationships. It's especially important to do these things with new members so they feel welcome." For a more formal activity that allows collaborators to connect, taking a personality or work-style quiz and sharing the results can be an interesting way to celebrate different approaches and begin to learn how different people in the group communicate best. Another recommends convening the collaborative over the course of two or more days because that allows for a "lot of socializing and time for chatting with

other funders about things not on the agenda." Yet another says that her group also invites "grantees or people outside our field to join us. By putting all these different groups of people together, we're creating value because funders are getting to have the kinds of conversations they wouldn't necessarily have with one another or other folks on their own."

◆ **Choose members carefully.** Most funder collaboratives are donor supported, which means that fundraising and member cultivation will be part of the group's work. That can sometimes lead to chasing the money, rather than assessing whether potential donors will actually be good partners. "Some people are better suited to be in a collaborative because they're open to new ideas and are collegial. Our collaborative has some big heavy hitters who could swallow up the small funders in a second, but they don't stand on ceremony. They see value in everyone at the table rather than sucking up a lot of room and air."

Other groups aren't so fortunate. "I was coordinating an advocacy collaborative that was going to involve someone who had a lot of money and cared about the issue. But it was clear he wasn't going to be a good partner because he wanted a lot of say about what got done and how. If that happened, the other partners would lose control of the initiative. So, I asked the group: 'We can invite that person to be part of the collaborative, but do we want to?' They decided not to, but even if the decision

had gone the other way, they realized it's really important to think about who you want to be part of a collaborative."

◆ **Assess your own ability to be part of a collaborative and be honest about your limitations.** Funders agree that unless you're willing to let go of a fair amount of control, "you have no business being in a collaborative, which requires letting go of the need to drive your own agenda and realizing that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Also, funders need to be transparent with the group when they're caught between their institutions' desires and their own desires. "If you're there to learn and that's pretty much it, you need to put that on the table, especially if you're going to be a hold out on other agendas. And if you're holding out because of your institution, you need to say that too." And, finally, there are the practical realities. Do funders have the time and energy, personally, to commit to this work?

◆ **Prepare diligently for meetings.** The more organized and prepared the collaborative's leaders or its staff is before meetings, the less chance there is for misunderstanding. "The secret to minimizing conflict is going in and knowing what it's going to look like. That means you have to talk to people beforehand, and people need to know what to expect. I have very focused conversations with each attendee before every meeting so they know what the docket looks like. I ask what their concerns are and try to address them, or at least, prepare them for disagreements."

## NOW REFLECT

◆ How willing am I to set my own desires and ego aside to work in a larger group toward a common goal?  How willing is my institution to share credit?

◆ How do I feel when personality conflict arises in a group?  What could my colleagues and I do, individually, to help deal with conflict?

◆ Does our collaborative have a policy or understanding as to how we'll determine when we need an external facilitator or some other kind of help to deal with conflict?

◆ How do we ensure that everyone's voice is heard?

# Agreeing to Strategies

While it's essential that funder policy collaboratives have sharp, clear, and measurable goals, the options for reaching those goals can be overwhelming. Communications, research, advocacy, litigation, grassroots organizing, and internet activism are just some of the tactics and strategies funder collaboratives use to move the policy needle. That makes decisions about homing in on a focused strategic direction challenging, to say the least.

Members of a collaborative working to abolish the death penalty, for example, knew that the only way they would meet this goal was through a Supreme Court decision. But they weren't clear how they were going to make that happen. "There were members who thought the best way to do was Way A or others, Way B. Some saw it as a moral issue so they wanted to support the Catholic Conference or organizations representing people with family members on death row. Others saw it as a legal issue so they wanted to fund lawyers and access to justice."

Disagreements aren't always a bad thing, though. "We've found that funders representing different wings of the movement contribute valuable stuff to our strategy development. We wouldn't be where we are if everyone was doing the same strategy. Does that mean some people get less support sometimes? Sure, sometimes, but that's just part of the process."

How do grantmakers get consensus about a strategy?

◆ **Stipulate a crystal-clear policy goal(s).** To get there, go around the table and ask members what's uniting them in this. Ask everyone to say what they think the goal is to make sure people are on the same page. "Our collaborative agreed that we wanted to work on a particular issue, but everyone had a slightly different take. One foundation saw it through a health lens, and another saw it through a human rights lens. But we all still agreed on the larger goal. Having that clarity is essential because you can go back to this when there are disagreements about strategies or tactics."

◆ **Accept that there will be some disagreement…** "We try to get a plurality of funders around one particular strategy. That's not always easy. One colleague struggled with it not being a consensus process. He felt much better, though, once he was fully engaged, even if his views were overridden."

◆ **…but deal with it through dialogue or bringing in outside experts.** Disagreements about strategic direction can often be resolved through "a constant process of dialogue at the table," including facilitated conversations. Through that process, "we've really seen funders get it. They start to understand the strategies they weren't paying attention to before and how they work together. And they see how the groups we're funding are getting results using these different strategies. So, it starts to make more sense why we have different strategies and priorities."

Another funder agrees: "We had some funders join who thought the collaborative wasn't funding enough of their thing, but by sitting at the table, over time, they saw the value in the analysis and being part of a collegial group of people. They saw that resolution is more organic, rather than people winning or losing."

◆ **Get out of the ideological bubble.**

A grantmaker with years of experience in advocacy collaboratives strongly advises her colleagues to rise above seeing issues as a "Right/Left battle" because some of the most successful efforts work across all kinds of ideologies. "That kind of alliance building gives collaboratives an

## STORIES FROM THE REAL WORLD

*Our death penalty collaborative started out with the concept of 'movement-building,' to abolish the death penalty, which made it hard to prioritize resources. After about six years, we moved to a campaign-style model that targets specific states and litigation strategies with the most potential to reduce death sentences. It was challenging to move to this new model because it involved making hard decisions about which organizations would be funded. There were also multiple views about how the campaign should be established. So we hired an outside consulting firm to interview everyone and then work with us to make those decisions.*

*Our collaborative decided to support both litigation and grassroots organizing as strategies toward our policy goal because we believed both were important and complementary. Over time, however, we were surprised to see how much these strategies were working cross purposes because of a lack of respect and trust between the litigators and the advocates. Lawyers were usually focused on a particular case that an individual was bringing to the court, while advocates were more focused on the broader constituency and how public policies would affect them. So we decided to reframe our work in terms of 'corridors of change,' rather than one huge strategy. When something was brewing in the courts, we'd bring in the litigators to talk about it with the advocates, and when something was emerging in the state legislatures, we'd bring the advocates in with the lawyers there. They all started talking to each other and, eventually,*

*understood each other's value and importance in moving the issue. We actually helped kill a very bad bill in one state because of this process!*

*The tension between two donors who saw things differently in terms of strategy and weren't interested in talking about alternatives became an opportunity for our collaborative to find ways to incorporate both perspectives. Rather than fight about who was right and wrong, we took the two foundations on a joint site visit, which gave them the chance to stand down from their differences and see places to do something together. Now, they're seeking a joint proposal from one organization that will be submitted to both funders. You have to find those places where you get people to stand down. It's on a continuum. You get yourself lined up, but there's some work to do in the middle usually so you try to find these points.*

*Our immigration collaborative had debates on where to invest its field-building money—whether it should go to anchor organizations in traditional immigrant-receiving states/cities or toward building the capacity of groups in places where immigration was a relatively new phenomenon. It was painful to consider moving money away from high-performing, longstanding grantees that are continuing to expand and can do more with funding. When there are different feelings about allocation of funds like these, we resolve this through well-facilitated conversations. We talk until we come to consensus. We also evaluate what we've done so we can look back and say, "Did we make the right call, or should we have done something different?" and learn from it.*

outstanding opportunity to learn more about what's going on outside their own ideological bubble. I fund groups from Left to Right, and at a meeting, I mentioned that I was funding one particular libertarian group. People freaked out, but my attitude was, 'if it gets us across the finish line, I'll fund the devil himself.'"

◆ **Be open to new perspectives on old issues.** A funder who'd been part of an immigration reform collaborative was confused by a new member's suggestion that the group pay more attention to how this issue affected LGBTQ people. "I didn't understand why or how that related to our collaborative. It seemed off track to me. I didn't vote against it, though, because we're a collaborative, and we talked about it a lot first. I'm glad we funded in that area, because as time went on, I learned a lot about how this issue was actually very related to our work. In fact, we incorporated it into the collaborative's overall strategy, and it became one of the most successful things we've ever done!"

◆ **Keep in mind that the best strategies can and do change, depending on context.** The immigration rights collaborative mentioned above started out with a federal-level policy goal that initially saw grantees as the "ground troops" that would push reform over the finish line. Today, it has a different view. "We now look for successes at the state level that have changed life for the better for immigrants, and we lift these up as just as worthy as the 'grand goal' of federal reform. A lot of federal-level bills, actually, required what we thought were terrible compromises, and we just didn't think they were compromises worth making. If you have a terrible bill that's going to legalize half the people here, and deport the other half, that's hard for the field to support, and it takes all of the air out of your own supporters sometimes. That's the tension: You can seriously depress your own base if you're hitching your wagon to a vehicle you have to hold your nose to drive. Now people are willing to fight for more piecemeal but better than a Grand Bargain that's more punitive."

## NOW REFLECT

◆ Do we have a clear and mutually understood policy goal?

◆ What is our process for deciding on the strategies for meeting that goal? What if there is disagreement?

◆ How do we know when to revisit or question an agreed-upon strategy? Are there interim reflection points?

# Does Size Matter?

Ask grantmakers what the biggest hurdles are in any kind of collaborative venture, and 99 percent will mention the tension between "the big foundations and the small ones" or "the national funders and the local funders." Because policy work occurs at the local, state, regional, and national levels, it's important that advocacy collaboratives try and involve grantmakers working at all these points.

Unfortunately, that isn't always the case. As one funder recalls, "We had national and local funders, and there was an awful lot of tension between the two. A set of the national funders, especially, thought they knew everything and how the work should roll out. They weren't respectful or kind to the local funders, who they thought should be grateful just for participating in the meetings but letting national funders call the shots. National funders were arrogant. Local funders were angry, saying, 'we live here and we know what's going on.'"

Left unaddressed, this split can torpedo a collaborative's carefully-designed strategy. As one local grantmaker shared, "When the big funders think it's a good moment to do something at the federal level, that changes what happens on the ground because they control resources. We were doing a lot of mixed grantmaking at the local and federal levels, but when a federal policy opportunity was imminent, we all had to get on board behind that because the big funders were going there."

Tension around these issues can lead to member drop off. "There's always been a little tension about the big funders and too much deference to them. It's a delicate balance between having a democratic process and knowing that the collaborative still has to fundraise from donors, especially the big foundations. And they have to keep those major donors happy. That makes it hard for a minority donor or one who's not mainstream. You have a say, but you're still a minority. I knew that so I kept my investment at the minimum amount. When they raised it, I left."

What can grantmakers do to mitigate these tensions?

◆ **Create more equitable decision-making structures.** Some advocacy collaboratives build in structures that allow participating funders—no matter how big or small—an equal say in grant allocations. One intermediary recognizes that their collaborative's members have different-sized checkbooks, "with some putting in five times more than what others are. So we've tried to make sure the decision-making structure is equitable because we've found that the advocacy collaboratives that work best are the ones in which everyone's voice was equal."
Another funder, however, isn't convinced. "I know one advocacy collaborative whose structure was very complicated, with matching requirements for local donors. On the positive side, it was good because it led to more equity among the participants, but it also led to the 'tyranny of the small donor' in that sometimes smaller donors would be adamant that something wasn't 'PC enough' and would hold decisions hostage because of this."

## STORIES FROM THE REAL WORLD

*When I was a program officer at a small local foundation, we recognized that because of our size, we needed to branch out and develop relationships with bigger funders, as well as with allied organizations in the field. That's one of the main reasons we joined a collaborative. When we came in, we made it clear we were coming in to learn and develop relationships with everyone in this space. Our strategy was to build these relationships and then, after a couple of years we'd be in a better position to advocate for our agenda, and that's exactly what happened. We didn't come into the collaborative championing our agenda right off the bat. We got to know the big funders and the big nonprofits they were supporting and developed relationships. The result was that down the road, we were able to get the support of those foundations and organizations for our agenda.*

*I was a program officer at a small foundation, but also one that had a different theory of change than the rest of the funders in our collaborative, so I always felt my strategy was a little peripheral. While I appreciated being part of the collaborative, it was hard to persuade others to fund more in the areas that I thought were under-funded. Had I been a bigger funder, I may have had more impact, but I was perceived as a niche funder. Once in a while, if there were others who were thinking similarly, I could push an argument and try to expand their thinking. I was strategic and used this to leverage my grantmaking.*

*We had one very large funder who came in to the work very non-collaboratively. They didn't want to involve the field—in fact, they said it was "immoral" to do—and their desires dominated the work. We didn't deal with that very successfully because everyone was afraid to challenge them since they were paying for all the collaborative's infrastructure. And they weren't open to dialogue so there was no dialogue. One of our members actually walked out at one point! What did we do? Not much. We ended up just waiting it out till this big funder left.*

*Our policy collaborative was mostly national funders working on immigration issues. Then one day, we got a request from a small local foundation to be a member. They were only focused on their community, but it was one that had experienced a horrible crime committed against immigrants, so they wanted to do something about this population and immigration reform. But they couldn't do it alone, so they joined the collaborative. And when they came in, they brought with them an invaluable local perspective that was extremely helpful to our work overall.*

◆ **Be intentional about open communication and giving all participants a voice.** This is where culture plays a role. The group "needs to agree that they'll keep an eye on the processes to make sure the largest funders don't control the decision making. Or appoint someone to do that." Everyone also has to recognize that "each member brings something different and valuable to the table, including small funders, many of which have a huge amount of knowledge and experience about what's going on at the local level."

◆ **Recognize that different types of funders have much to learn from others.** This is especially true with local and national grantmakers who are both working on the same issue but from various angles. "National funders sometimes think they know everything, but then they start hearing what's going on in communities from the local funders sitting at the table. That information can then be fed into developing strategies that help ensure that the public policies enacted at the federal level are implemented effectively at the local level." And vice versa for local funders, many of whom

"appreciate learning more about what's going on nationally and having the chance to hear from public policy experts and organizations they might not otherwise have the chance to interact with." In short, while it might initially feel easier to pair similar foundations with one another for collaborative advocacy efforts, the opportunity to learn from different kinds of grantmakers is lost and could even hinder the group's ability to develop strategies that, because they take account of different perspectives, have a higher likelihood of succeeding.

## NOW REFLECT

◆ Is it important for our collaborative to have different kinds of philanthropic institutions at the table? If so, why? If not, why not?

◆ Are there different membership requirements for different sizes/types of institutions? If so, what are they? How are they decided?

◆ What do/will we do if/when there is conflict between members from different kinds of institutions? What kind of process do we need or have to deal with this conflict?

# Grantee Roles and Relationships

Yes, there's a power imbalance between grantmakers and grantees. Yes, everyone acknowledges it. Yes, even very experienced grantmakers wrestle with it. And yes, everyone says they try to break it down.

Reality suggests otherwise. Even the most egalitarian and self-aware grantmaker can slip into the "I know best" mode. Think not? Don't ask other funders. Ask grantees. Better yet, ask grantseekers who didn't make the cut. Most will say that no matter how hard funders try—and some do—they usually aren't able to step outside the bubble.

One funder said they constantly have to remind their colleagues that even just one grantmaker sitting at a table is going to change the dynamic, which is why she always allows time for grantees to converse without her or her colleagues in the room. "Funders like to think they're very self-aware about their power and that they can keep this in check, but it doesn't matter. Even if they don't say anything, just their presence is going to affect what's discussed, by whom, and with what angle. There is always going to be someone in the group that 'shines' for the funder."

While other kinds of funder collaboratives may struggle with this issue, for advocacy funder collaboratives, it's something that has to be addressed—publicly and frequently. Advocacy work demands clear and focused strategies that both advocates and their funders understand and, optimally, agree to implement together—all while constantly communicating and sharing information about real-time challenges and changes in the policy environment.

But who makes the decisions about which strategies will be employed? Funder collaborative members? Grantees? Or some combination of both?

A number of grantmakers say that they're asking these questions more and more because of a surge of interest in participatory philanthropy, as well as growing awareness about the importance of walking the social justice talk in advocacy efforts. "We need to rethink how funders engage with on-the-ground actors as partners in this work. What does that look like, and what are the good models for doing so? Why not let the field leaders craft the strategy and then funders support it? If we're preaching social justice, we need to walk the talk of empowerment and participation."

That view isn't always the norm. "My grantmaker peers often don't honor what's coming out of the field. There's a lot of funder arrogance, which is a tremendous problem in the field, and I don't know how to address it." Another agrees: "Too much of advocacy work is funder-driven. I'd rather that these ideas and strategies come up from the ground and have funders come behind them. In our policy collaborative, funders developed the framework for the field, and there was a lot of tension around that. Funders are never the experts; it's always the people in the field doing the work." Yet another funder who's been involved in funder collaboratives where funders "see themselves as thought leaders rather than facilitators" believes those were never as effective as they could have been otherwise.

Some funders say they are very intentional about involving non-grantmakers as much as possible in their efforts. "It's essential for the people involved in an advocacy collaborative to have a close relationship with the field. They tell us what they

## STORIES FROM THE REAL WORLD

*As the leader of an advocacy collaborative-funded national campaign, I find that sometimes funders forget that the time frames are different when groups are in campaign mode. Yes, grantees want long-term funding, but I think it's more important that grantmakers understand the priorities of the moment, which can change overnight in a policy battle, and allocate funds to these. But often, the advocacy collaborative donors are doing longer-term investments in stuff that's not necessarily a priority. If I were in their place, I'd reduce funding for non-essential groups right away, but that doesn't happen because the funder mentality is loyalty to these groups. Funders need to be pushed to balance the competing interests of loyalty and interest in groups that are dealing with what's going on NOW.*

*I never participated in a campaign that wasn't started by the advocates themselves. In our issue area, there were 15 nonprofit leaders who saw an opportunity but had no resources to do anything. We met with this group repeatedly and felt strongly that these were the people to do the job. Unfortunately, other donors in this space who were more controlling about what the money would be used for disagreed, which was frustrating. We eventually made a grant to a national coalition to work on the issue, which allowed it to decide how the resources would be used, and it was money well spent.*

*In our collaborative, we bring in non-grantmakers as advisors on the grants, but they don't vote on the grant allocations. Staff from the national campaign our collaborative supports on this issue sit in and advise us on how best to capitalize on opportunities using a set of well-defined benchmarks. We also have someone there with expertise on what's going on, policy-wise, in five or six states to advise us on the law in these states. All of these people inform the process and have a very important and active voice.*

*I think that kind of participation is fundamental to a good advocacy collaborative. Otherwise, the collaborative starts representing the opinions of the biggest bullies at the table.*

*We had six local funds under our collaborative, each of which functioned differently than the others. In two of our sites, grantees were part of the decision making process, which is atypical. In one model, the grantees sat with the funders and made decisions about the percentage of allocations that would go to organizing and advocacy groups. In that site, they wanted organizing groups to be the leaders, but they wanted those groups to be smarter in doing their work by partnering with a legal advocacy group and media organization. In another site, the evaluation and shared goals/priorities were decided by grantee partners rather than the funders, but that imploded because funders didn't want to give up that much power, and it didn't allow them to be accountable to their own institutions.*

*We're a national campaign representing a lot of groups working on this issue. We serve as advisor to the advocacy funder collaborative and have a little money to make small grants or hire contractors to do specific things in a state or county that's on our priority map that's independent of the grantmakers. We do meet with them twice a year to set priorities and discuss how those have changed as a result of what's happened in the field that year. We describe what's going on on the ground, and we have a lot of conversation with the funders about it. We also do briefings for funders throughout the year about key issues and to update them on what we're doing. That seems like a lot of interaction and involvement, and it is. But there really hasn't been much exchange backward from the funders to us. They pretty much still make the grant decisions. The good thing is that I'm there representing the field, so if there are questions, my colleagues can provide information. Happily, I don't recall any grant decisions that were different from what we recommended.*

need and want. Our job is to move the money out to the field. We don't know where to invest it unless the field tells us." Another adds: "The groups we support are our ears and eyes as to what's going on around the country. That's why we're always talking to them. Our staff talks to them regularly then shares what they've learned with everyone in our collaborative. In fact, we sometimes may over-rely on our grantees and have to be proactive in getting other information outside of the grantee pool!"

However, even with this intentional dialogue, there are challenges. True candor is sometimes hard for funders to hear, even if it's in the context of sincere, open dialogue with grantees. "Unless grantees feel comfortable that they're not going to get penalized for being honest, they'll never be honest! The collaborative needs to create some system or feedback loop where everyone sees the value of honesty."

There is also the issue of favoritism: "There are certain grantees with charismatic leaders, but those aren't always the organizations that necessarily need the resources. The small advocacy groups are often doing the on-the-ground work and really need the resources. Sometimes, we had to watch money going out to the former, which was hard." The open dialogue may create the illusion of equity and inclusion, but instead simple makes it easier for the most charismatic, connected groups to raise their voice and access resources.

Ironically, the tendency for advocacy collaboratives to provide multi-year grants—something that is in short supply overall and that most nonprofits "would kill for"—can contribute to these issues. "Unfortunately, when funders in advocacy collaboratives make large multi-year grants to individual projects, there's a deep relationship of loyalty that's created, which is heightened because it's a group of people funding these projects. That sometimes causes a drift between the collaborative's strategy and the organizations that are getting funding." Moreover, it "jams up the resources that might be needed quickly in light of a policy challenge that requires another kind of organization to step in and deal with it."

What can advocacy collaborative grantmakers do to deepen their relationships with non-grantmakers?

◆ **Be intentional about asking whether and how organizations can be involved in the collaborative's work at each point in the process**...Not every collaborative can involve non-grantmakers all the time and in every situation, but there's value in being intentional about finding opportunities to do so. "It's surprising how many times funders don't think about involving grantees more directly in funding efforts. Non-grantmakers can be asked to provide information and analysis, as well as advice about strategy and even helping to make grant decisions."

◆ **...but not always just asking for input.** There's a difference between input and authentic participation. Are grantees' suggestions taken seriously? To what degree are they actually integrated into strategy or funding decisions? "Funders need to recognize the difference. I'm a non-grantmaker who manages campaign efforts; I want to know before I engage with a collaborative whether they have resources that can be brought to be bear before I expend the one thing I never get back, which is my time. I see so many practitioners who say 'this collaborative wants all this information, but there's no promise of any support.' But busy organizers and advocates will drop everything to meet the demands of a funder and may never get anything for it. Some of us are now stopping to ask 'What do we get out of this' and if the answer is 'little,' we think it's a waste of time."

◆ **Be transparent about the collaborative's process, criteria, and grant decisions.** Nothing creates more confusion and misunderstanding than advocacy collaboratives that "obfuscate or just don't convey what they're doing and why to the field. This work is so time sensitive, when there is miscommunication or confusion, it has a ripple effect across the entire campaign." Even funders agree that as robust as an advocacy collaborative infrastructure might be, most still tend to operate as a black box. "There's a total mismatch of expectations and lack of

understanding because the process is shrouded in mystery. There needs to be more transparency about how decisions get made, who makes the decisions, how much money funders have. Otherwise, grantseekers get discouraged, and funders don't care."

◆ **Check on the loyalties.** Periodically check to make sure the grantees getting resources are those that need them rather than those who've been supported for a long time or have more name recognition. One of the best ways to ensure this is to bring in outside experts to challenge the group's assumptions on a regular basis. To encourage honesty, ask them to provide anonymous comments on the collaborative's strategy and/or funding decisions.

## NOW REFLECT

◆ Should we involve grantees (or non-grantmakers) in our decisions about priorities, strategies and/or funding? If so, why and how? If not, why not?

◆ How will/do we see non-grantmakers? Are they partners in this work? Leaders? Implementers?

◆ What kinds of policies do we need to put in place regarding potential conflicts of interest, confidentiality, protection against retribution, etc.?

# Do We Need Staffing?

"We can do this stuff by ourselves." "Staffing costs too much."
"We'd rather use our funds for grants, not administrative costs,
which are too high."

Ask any grantmaker who's been part of an advocacy collaborative, and they'll tell you they've heard all these comments when funders don't want to pony up for staffing. That's frustrating for grantmakers who believe—and have seen through experience—that the most effective advocacy collaboratives are staffed in some way, e.g., consultants or intermediaries.

There are several advantages to staffed collaboratives, including their ability to provide:

◆ **Deeper due diligence.** Intermediaries or staff do a lot of due diligence for funders that program officers sometimes can't do alone or don't have the ability to hire themselves. "Good staffing for these kinds of collaboratives can have incredible value for each participant's grantmaking, because expert staff are constantly overseeing and evaluating the grants going out the door."

◆ **Capacity-building support for grantees.** Staff or intermediaries often offer high-quality services and resources for grantees beyond grants. "Our intermediary gives communications and marketing trainings, brings in experts to work with grantees, holds convenings and networking meetings, and a does a lot of other things that funders' grantees benefit from and that they don't have to pay for directly. Most program officers can't provide these because their budgets are often stretched, and even if their foundation could, it'd probably be much more expensive to commission outside consultants for these services. The intermediary does this much more cost efficiently." And, because this kind of support is coming from a designated provider, it can help quell the tendency of some grantmakers to offer unsolicited opinions about what grantees could or should be doing.

◆ **A buffer and access point between funders and grantees.** Staff or intermediaries serve as interlocutors for grantmakers and grantees who can sometimes have difficulty communicating honestly and directly. "With an intermediary, you have staff who aren't funders, and that gives them more leeway to work with grantees, be a bridge builder, and resolve differences because program officers aren't always able to have honest conversations with grantees with how things are going." And, on the grantee side of the equation, having a clear contact person and flow for paperwork makes processes simpler to navigate.

◆ **Alternative vehicles through which to provide financial support.** National funders can't always support local groups or organizations that might be out of their program area, but they can do it through intermediaries, which are public charities and able to fund projects foundations may not be able to.

◆ **Can operate behind the scenes.** The best intermediaries, some funders say, are those that are low profile and let their work speak for itself. "As an intermediary, we don't promote ourselves very much. People want an intermediary that does its job – not compete with itself for recognition. That can be a tension if you don't manage this well. How do you market something that's not a product unto itself? We're only as good as our grantees and funders."

Other challenges to a staffed collaborative:

◆ **They can operate too independently.** Some funders have found that intermediaries can take on a life of their own that may or may not advance the collective goals. Or that staff get invested in preserving their jobs. Or, they do so much work, funders "show up at meetings and don't have enough knowledge to challenge what they were recommending."

◆ **They're a buffer between funders and grantees.** While this can be a strength, we can also think of intermediaries as adding yet another layer between the funders and the grantees—there's always someone in between. "That's not just how some foundations want to operate." Another concern is that intermediaries distance grantees from their funders. "We need to be on the ground because it makes a world of difference in your ability to assess a program's

## STORIES FROM THE REAL WORLD

*I've participated in advocacy collaboratives in which each foundation makes its own grants but shares an aligned strategy, requests proposals from the field together and decides how to fund them through consensus. We operated this way because we didn't want to spend money on staffing. After a while, we decided to pay a consultant to get the dockets together. It was fairly unstructured in terms of having an intermediary but because there'd been more ad hoc collaboration or communication among funders previously, it was an improvement. Now we're a more formalized collaborative structure, which one of our large funders set up. We have a program officer and fundraising staff who devote time in raising money for the issue. We've found this to be more efficient.*

*The most fulfilling aspect of this work is with the grantees. Every day, I'm given the chance to think about what would help them and increase their capacity to sustain their work. I get to interact with most of them around their organizational health as well as strategy. And it has an impact. In one state, for example, when one of the organizations was funded originally, they were in crisis. It was a terrible time, but now it's a lot better; our grantee has grown tremendously. Now, we're seeing the leaders who've come out of that state becoming police chiefs and such and having an impact on how policing impacts their town. As much as I love the donor table, those*

*meetings will always pale in comparison to what we've witnessed in the field with our grantees.*

*I'm always surprised that some funders don't understand the importance of having an infrastructure for the collaborative itself. Our advocacy collaborative has five full-time staff. That sounds like a lot, but we all agree that without staff with all that expertise, we wouldn't get the amazing results we've gotten. I think funders who try to do this on the cheap find that donors and grantees don't get what they need. On the funder side, the intermediary we use does deep due diligence work to help us figure out what groups to support, including groups that I wouldn't have the time or reach to get to. On the grantee side, the intermediary provides all kinds of technical assistance and often serves as a bridge builder between the funders and non-funders. And because the staff aren't grantmakers, they can have more honest conversations with grantees about how things are going.*

Some funders, however, have a different point of view.

*I don't think every collaborative has to have staffing. You have to look at the goal of the collaborative. There are some funders who are happy with running their collaborative and doing it on the cheap. That's not necessarily a bad way to go when funders may know exactly what they want to do and are comfortable with that. My personal feeling is that there's room for all of it, but you have to figure out what you want to get out of it and make that happen.*

effectiveness. That's especially true in policy advocacy collaboratives where you really have to make hard-nosed decisions about how you're going to make change so it's important to know what's going on."

◆ **There can be conflicts of interest.** One big issue is when intermediary staff who are hired to be experts on the issue are still part of a structure that's legally responsible to the intermediary, rather than to the collaborative. As one grantmaker notes, "A collaborative staff director I know does whatever the larger donors in the collaborative and their colleagues want because the intermediary gets so much support from them. That means they don't do anything to offend the donors, which is unfortunate because they demand a lot, and then staff cave into those demands."

## WHAT WORKS?

Whether a collaborative chooses to use staffing, consultants, an intermediary, or simply its members to work toward its goals, there are several models that seasoned advocacy collaborative grantmakers have watched play out. Some of the practices that have worked well include:

◆ **Let the members work.** "I've found that the best intermediaries are those that let the funder members do the program officer work, for example, go on site visits, look at proposals, share responsibilities for doing the kinds of program officer work. As a result, they had a much deeper relationship with the grantees than if they were focused on administrative work."

◆ **Hire staff that has clout.** "Whether to use staff depends on how credible the staff is. Our foundation staffed our advocacy collaborative, and we had automatic credibility because of our long history of work on the issue. But that's not always the case. Sometimes if one foundation is providing the staffing, you can't be sure whether it's their show or, if they're using an intermediary, whether it's the leadership you want or need."

◆ **Practice transparency.** "There's always a challenge when you're paying some percentage of your funds to an intermediary because it raises tensions between what's going out to the field and how much it's taking to run the effort. To make it work, it has to be all transparent, agreed to and all the time. In our collaborative, there was agreement that 15 percent of the national funders' contribution went to the intermediary, 12 percent of which went to the management of the fund itself, and only 3 percent to the intermediary. Local funders paid 12 percent, 3 percent of which went to the intermediary's overhead and the rest to management of the fund. That was actually a pretty lean structure, but it was never perceived that way so we needed to be REALLY clear about our financial reporting. Still, there was always some natural resentment about how much the intermediary was getting."

◆ **Look for strong facilitators.** "Having strong staff, especially facilitators, for these collaboratives is essential. Great facilitators who can talk to everyone one on one and facilitate funder meetings are really important and are skill sets we prioritize in hiring."

◆ **Ask for strategic analysis and landscape scanning.** "Our intermediary has developed a more comprehensive reporting process that our collaborative funders use to show their boards and institutions about the work they're doing in partnership with other funders. We ask grantees for their accomplishments, what they tried and what didn't work across different categories such as promoting policies at the state and local levels, changing the national debate, advancing civic participation, strategic communications, base building, etc. Then we take between 300-500 pages of this information and make an aggregate grid that's about four pages long. That document is very flexible: Funders can take whatever their institution is most interested in and "lead" with that row of the grid. It's VERY specific too, showing what's happening state by state. We have maps showing where policy actions have taken place and other visuals that show progress. We do it this way because if all we did was track change at the federal level, we'd have very little to show for it—we wouldn't have a field. Instead, we're showing all winnable campaigns all around the country."

## NOW REFLECT

◆ Do we need some kind of staff capacity for our collaborative? If so, what kind of structure would meet our needs?

◆ How will staffing add value to members? To grantees?

◆ How will this infrastructure be supported?

# Chasing the Money

A perpetual challenge in funder advocacy collaboratives is making sure there are adequate funds for grantmaking, which usually requires members or, if an intermediary is being used, staff to fundraise.

And, like any fundraising, there's always tension between the need to secure contributions and maintaining a commitment to the mission or goals of the collaborative. As one funder notes, "Advocacy collaboratives are balancing two things: developing the collaborative's work and building support for it at the same time by getting support from other funders. As you add new funders, you need to stay true to the vision."

Making sure the collaborative is sustainable also requires the group to "constantly bring in new members," which can "give up some sense of loyalty to the old group. And that can lead to tensions. Like any social club, the tensions between new and old members are always there. It's hard for any entity to be adaptive."

How can advocacy collaboratives sustain financial realities?

◆ **Work with talented fundraising staff and members.** "We've had two phenomenal directors for our advocacy collaborative. When one came in 2006, they'd already run a similar kind of large collaborative that was very successful, and understood what it meant to serve both donors and grantees, take fundraising seriously, and organize donors. From this director, we all learned about the profession of donor relations. When they came, we were at $3-4 million, and when they left, we were at $16 million, but we were worried we'd lost our secret sauce. But

we got someone with even more experience in the substantive work and equally as smart and skilled at donor relations, which has been key to our success."

◆ **Develop budget savvy.** "It's important for collaborative staff to not only have substantive knowledge about the issues, but to also know how to do advanced budgeting and juggle a lot of pots of money. They need to know how to keep the spreadsheets about what everyone's given, all the grant terms (that are different) and each initiative's sub-budget in their head. Our directors have always been good at figuring out 'where can we get the money to do this? And is there a donor to do it?' And they've been good at collaborative juggling—there are so many pots of money, they had to be matchmakers, as well as make sure we were going to make it to the end of the year with enough money. That's not the normal program officer skill set, so the collaborative staff needs to have it."

◆ **Cultivate new members who are a good fit…. before there is a financial crisis.** Advocacy collaboratives suffer when new members are invited into the group that may not be a good cultural fit. Spending time strategically inviting new members who will grow the group's financial capacities and contribute meaningfully programmatically and to the group dynamic works towards long-term sustainability.

## NOW REFLECT

◆ What are our fundraising goals? Do we have a plan or process to ensure sustainability?

◆ Do we have staff and/or members with fundraising and budgeting skills? If not, how can we strengthen our capacity in these areas?

◆ Do we have clear parameters about "chasing the money" and/or what we'll do if this is taking precedence over our mission or program goals?

# "My Foundation is Nervous About Policy Advocacy"

Yes, foundations are allowed to support policy and advocacy. Yet, many still balk. Even in funder collaboratives that are doing advocacy work, there are sometimes members who feel like they're "not allowed to do this," even though they are.

One collaborative working on income equity issues, for example, had an opportunity to advocate for expanding a tax credit. "We thought it was finally the moment to get foundations to step up and make calls, write letters, etc. We even did a webinar, but we got so little interest! We think it's because the funders who are in our network tend to be senior program directors, rather than the chief person in charge. Their legal staff has warned them about boundaries but lawyers tend to have different—and sometimes incorrect—interpretations of what's allowed. 'This'll never get by legal' was a common response."

## STORIES FROM THE REAL WORLD

*Our criminal justice reform collaborative that was mobilizing around an upcoming Supreme Court case had advocates submit one proposal so money could get out the door quickly. Part of this grantmaking was for strategic communications that targeted the justices themselves through things like op-eds and articles. Some of our donors didn't like this because they felt that advocating directly with justices wasn't respecting the sanctity of court so we decided to tap members who didn't have this problem to support that part of the strategy.*

*Some of our donors were skittish about advocacy so they tried to be neutral and support things like giving research data to influentials under the assumption that they'd make better policy decisions with this information. Over time, though, they started seeing that you're not going to be able to go the distance with just the facts. You have to have strategic communications and support for organizing on the ground. To make the point, we invited some new funders with deep experience in this kind of advocacy to join the collaborative. They were very credible and persuasive about the ways in which more targeted advocacy gets results and helped shift the doubters to believers.*

*You have to know how to leverage all the funders' resources in an advocacy collaborative. We had one foundation that was interested in our issue, but they'd never worked in this area before and were nervous about being perceived as too political. Also, their main reason for participating was to develop a relationship with a big foundation that was part of our collaborative. I could have challenged that motivation and risked deterring them from participating at all, but instead, I created a pu pu platter that gave them choices about what they might fund based on what they were interested in—like funding the research, rather than organizing, part of the strategy. This kind of mismatch happens all the time because donors won't necessarily say what their motivation is to join a collaborative, so you need to give them options.*

Another grantmaker says his biggest frustration is when his collaborative is moving toward a more aggressive advocacy strategy, and a member will hide behind their foundation "by saying things like 'I can't because our foundation won't go along with this.' How do you argue with that? They'd already come with their decision made as to which proposals they weren't going to support." To address this, the collaborative decided to package the docket around this member's needs, which was easy because "we had other members who were "more flexible and able to pick up the rest of what needed to be done."

What are some of the ways that funders have addressed these issues?

◆ **Figure out what members can support.** Funders can pick off pieces of the strategy that may not be as contested in their institution and support it either in a collaborative's pooled fund or through their own institutions. "We do this regularly when we create our strategies. We'll say, 'you take this state, and I'll take this one' or 'you support the communications part of this, and I'll do the grassroots organizing.'" Be aware, though, that the more sub-strategies there are, the more complex the overall strategy will be, especially if all are funded simultaneously. "You need to constantly be monitoring that there's enough money for optimal allocation."

◆ **Be honest about your foundation's limitations—up front.** Stress comes from a lack of transparency or clarity on where people's institutions are heading. "If a funder is joining a collaborative but has to pull out in two years or isn't going to support a certain set of activities, they need to tell people that early on, even though it's not easy to do."

◆ **Have an honest conversation about risk management.** There's no question that this work can be risky because it's unpredictable, fast-paced, and grappling with complex issues often mired in politics. It's important for funders to be up front about this with their institutions and boards but to couple this with evidence of the collaborative's impact, as well as a reminder

that being part of a larger collective can diffuse individual institutions' risk. At the same time, being a member of a collaborative can also help diffuse this risk, because "there's safety in numbers," as one grantmaker observes. "Individual members, as a group, minimize the risk, because the collaborative absorbs it."

◆ **Accept that some funders will opt out.** When creating advocacy strategies, "you begin by saying 'This is what we want to do; are you in?' because you don't want an outlier. We ended up with people who were uncomfortable and they left. You have to be okay with that."

◆ **...but provide some alternatives.** Before letting donors walk out the door, explore whether there are ways to keep them involved that won't bump up against their institutions' policies. Some donors, for example, have their institutions' blessing to make grants to a pooled fund, but others don't. To get around this, one advocacy collaborative asked their intermediary to set up a structure that would give members the option of making donor-directed grants. "We also do that for funders who feel strongly that their money needs to support a particular group or groups."

A national funder that was part of an advocacy collaborative decided it was "too advocacy focused" and announced it was pulling out. To prevent this, the group established a special fund that would allow this foundation a way to make grants that supported the work but not necessarily its direct advocacy components. "It became a companion fund to the pooled fund."

◆ **Educate other funders about the importance of policy work.** Besides participating in these kinds of collaboratives, funders can also use their bully pulpit to speak out more about how this work can have powerful impact. One grantmaker publishes materials and holds webinars for colleagues about how to support policy efforts and how it can leverage their investments. It also provides technical assistance and toolkits to funders and holds an advocacy institute every year.

◆ **Tweak the vernacular.** Sometimes it's just about the language used to describe this work. "I know one giant foundation who says 'we don't do advocacy,' but they do. Sometimes it's just about the nomenclature so it's important to clarify."

◆ **Be patient.** As one funder notes, "Sometimes you just have to be patient because a lot of foundations will start out by saying they want to fund things like mentoring programs, but when they start getting into the educational policy issues behind this—like the lack of educational opportunity for some kids—they realize there are policy issues to consider as well. You have to be patient and keep giving these funders examples of the big picture."

It is important to understand that foundations with c-3 and c-4 statuses have different rules. "You have to be really sensitive about how you're discussing issues and strategies when you have donors in the room who aren't c-4s." While the laws are nuanced and different foundations and their advisors will have different interpretations and thresholds for what activities they will and won't do, advocacy collaboratives need to agree to a shared threshold from both a philosophical and legal perspective as part of defining their strategy.

## ADVOCACY COLLABORATIVES MAY NOT INTEREST EVERYONE...

Some grantmakers urge caution when deciding whether to join a funder advocacy collaborative, pointing out that it can be a big investment of foundations' time and money. For foundations that already know what they want to do and are set on doing it, being in an advocacy collaborative will probably not be of interest to them.

Individual foundations may want their own work on an issue to be the signpost for their institution, rather than that of many other institutions.

One grantmaker tells colleagues who are considering becoming a member of a funder collaborative to think carefully about whether and how funding through this mechanism will add value beyond their own efforts. "If they can't come up with a better reason than 'it makes me part of a bigger pool,' that may not be sufficient. We all care about this issue, we believe in these strategies and tactics, that's good, but I think you need to have more than a common interest in an issue. You have to be able to let go of my need to drive your foundation's own agenda and believe that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

In recent years, there has also been the emergence of new types of funders who prefer to develop and implement their own initiatives and strategies. As one intermediary director notes, "Lately, I've seen a few of the newer foundations, which tend to be more directive and less collaborative, wanting to do it themselves. Engaging them in these kinds of collaborative funds is difficult because they don't see the value in them. Maybe we haven't done a good job in talking about them or because they're coming from a different place or because we lack a shared language and vision with them. The sector-wide associations also aren't facilitating these conversations, and newer players aren't initiating them. Whatever the case may be, if we want to see advocacy collaboratives grow in strength and impact, we're going to have to figure out some venues in which to have these conversations."

## NOW REFLECT

◆ How does my foundation define advocacy? Does it have a policy about supporting this work?

◆ Does our collaborative provide funding options for members whose institutions may not be able to support advocacy directly?

◆ What is our process to map out the work so that members are able to see where their institution might provide the greatest value in supporting that part of the work?

# Tool: Decision-Making Tree

Members of a prospective advocacy collaborative have a lot of decisions to make together. Experienced funders said that clarity on these issues early on is essential for good relations and success later on. Here's a rough guide to aid the start-up process.

## PURPOSE

◆ Do we want to advance an issue, strategy, or field? Or something else? For example: More funding for public education (issue) through community organizing (strategy) as part the education reform (field).

◆ What are the specific goals we want to see implemented? For example: passage of a particular bill, Supreme Court decision, policy implemented at local/state level, countering opposition attacks, public awareness and/or action about our issue, research/data about the issue, etc.

◆ On what level will we focus? Local, state, regional, national, or international?

◆ What are our core values and commitments?

◆ What strategies will we use as a group to reach our goals (e.g., grants, capacity building for grantees, communications, research, etc.)? Which strategies will we support through our collaborative work (e.g., community organizing, policy advocacy, research, communications, state/local work, etc.) Are these similar or different? How and why?

◆ How will we decide on strategies? Will grantees/field experts be involved? If so, how? How will we safeguard the interests of grantees; for example, will we require that donors commit

"new money" only to the collaborative's funding (i.e., funds above and beyond what they're already providing through their own institutions)?

## STRUCTURE

◆ Do we want staffing for our advocacy collaborative? If so, what do we want them to do (e.g., back office, docket preparation, due diligence, evaluation, etc.)? Are there some tasks we want to do?

◆ Do we want to be a pooled fund? Or one that's strategically aligned?

◆ If we are a pooled fund, how will this be structured and administered?

◆ Is there a financial commitment required? Will there be a minimum commitment? Should larger institutions commit more (e.g., a "sliding scale")?

## MEMBERSHIP

◆ Will we limit the size of the advocacy collaborative or involve as many funders as possible?

◆ Who is eligible to participate: foundations, individual donors, public funding agencies, etc.?

◆ Do we want a diverse set of members (e.g., local, small/large, national/local, private/corporate, etc.)?

- Will non-grantmakers participate? If so, how?

- What is the financial commitment required, if any?

- How will we safeguard the interests of grantees; for example, will we require that donors commit "new money" only to the collaborative's funding (i.e., funds above and beyond what they're already providing through their own institutions)?

- Will members be expected or required to participate in meetings and events, review grant proposals, serve on committees? How much time do we expect these activities to require?

- How will we identify and incorporate new members and how often will we do this?

- How will we build strong relationships, trust and a collaborative culture among members?

- If conflict occurs, what will we do about it?

## GOVERNANCE

- Will there be a formal governance committee (e.g., chairperson, steering committee, etc.)? If so, what will their responsibilities be? How will they be selected?

- Will the full membership make grantmaking and resource decisions? Will others (e.g., staff, steering committee, advisors, grantees, etc.) be involved? If so, how?

- How will we make decisions? Will each funding institution or member have one vote? Or will voting privileges be proportional to the amount of members' financial commitments?

- What if we reach an impasse and can't decide? How will we resolve this?

## GRANTS AND RESOURCES

- Will we use an RFP process or open application? Or will we invite applications or otherwise narrow the pool of potential grantees? Will we use a common application?

- How many grants or other resources will we allocate annually? Of what amount and on what grant cycle?

- If we are going to regrant, will smaller or local institutions be required to match commitments in some way?

- Will we provide financial resources only or other supports such as technical assistance, networking opportunities or other kinds of capacity-building help?

## EVALUATION

- How will we determine whether we've been successful?

- How will we measure progress toward our goals? How will we measure the outcomes? Impact?

- Will non-grantmakers play a role in evaluation? If so, how?

## SUSTAINABILITY/ TERMINATION

- If we don't plan to exit in the near future, how will we sustain this work over the long term? How will we fundraise/bring in new donors?

- What is our exit strategy?

- How will we know we're ready to end the advocacy collaborative or move it to a new home?

# Credits

We thank the following individuals who graciously shared their time and wisdom through interviews or other forms of information sharing for this series. Additionally, we drew from conversations with grantees of several donor collaboratives, to whom we extend our gratitude.

**Annmarie Benedict**, former senior program executive and director of grants monitoring, The Atlantic Philanthropies

**Paul DiDonato**, president, Proteus Fund

**Betsy Fairbanks**, president and CEO, Fund for Nonviolence

**Melinda Fine**, Ed.D., director of philanthropy and strategic partnerships, TCC Group

**Taryn Higashi**, executive director, Unbound Philanthropy

**Henderson Hill**, emeritus and chief advisor, Eighth Amendment Project

**Helena Huang**, former director of philanthropy and communications, State Voices

**Ben Kerman**, former head of strategic learning and evaluation, The Atlantic Philanthropies

**Anita Khashu**, program director, Four Freedoms Fund

**Michele Lord**, president, NEO Philanthropy

**Geri Mannion**, program director, U.S. Democracy and Special Opportunities Fund, Carnegie Corporation of New York

**Suzette Brooks Masters**, former program director for migration, JM Kaplan Fund

**Ami Nagel**, co-director Economic Opportunity Funders (formerly known as GIST)

**Rebecca Rittgers**, former director, Themis Fund, Proteus Fund

**Stephen McConnell**, president, Civic Participation Action Fund

**Katherine Peck**, senior vice president, Civic Participation Action Fund

**Martha Toll**, board member, Funders Together to End Homelessness

**Monona Yin**, former director of Freedom from Fear Award, NEO Philanthropy