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# SIXTEEN GRANTMAKING CHARACTERISTICS TO EFFECTIVELY SUPPORT PUBLIC POLICY ADVOCACY

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## FUNDING STRUCTURES

1. *Offer multi-year support*
2. *Provide flexible funding*
3. *Ensure grant agreements don't include unnecessary restrictions*
4. *Adjust requirements in order to support community-based organizations*
5. *Respect the legislative calendar*

## FUNDING CONTENT

6. *Support all the elements of an effective campaign*
7. *Fund commensurate with expectations*
8. *Enable collaboration among organizations that need to work together*
9. *Ensure those most impacted are at the policy table*
10. *If you ask someone to do something, pay them*
11. *Support implementation too*
12. *Give enough to enable organizations to build the operational infrastructure needed to engage in advocacy*

## FUNDING ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION

13. *Leverage both programmatic and policy grantmaking*
14. *Expect appropriate deliverables and evaluation, including the long-term, intangible but necessary, deliverables of building capacity, trust, and relationships*
15. *Recognize that the funder role is different from the advocate role*
16. *Dig deep when stars align for a big win*

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# INTRODUCTION

Foundations and other grant-makers often start their grantmaking strategy focused on supporting direct services, specific programs, or research – all important elements to achieve their overall goal. That experience often leads to a decision that reaching their broad goal – whether it be saving the environment, educating children, or protecting the right to vote – requires public policy engagement. So, they add public policy to their strategy (consistent with legal rules), widening their impact.

Funding advocacy is quite different from funding programs, with different rhythms, benchmarks, grantees, rules, expectations for funder actions – and levels of risk and controversy. Therefore, grantmaking structures, policies, and procedures that may have been initially set up to support programs need to adapt to the different conditions and needs for policy engagement.

Of course, foundations can take many actions, in addition to funding, to inform the policy process. They can use their communications platforms, convene stakeholders, and enlist other funders. But creating the conditions for change, including engaging the people most affected and knowledgeable, requires money. This brief outlines the characteristics of grantmaking that best supports effective policy education and advocacy.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF POLICY ADVOCACY, COMPARED TO OTHER PROGRAMS

Funding policy advocacy, as contrasted with funding programs, is different in many ways, such as:

- Advancing large-scale, systemic changes, particularly solutions that address equity, are often more controversial and put a much greater spotlight on the foundation.
- Specific local, state, and federal laws govern what foundation staff can and cannot do, and how their funds can be used.
- The policy environment can change very quickly – literally in an hour – as sudden events unfold or different leaders come into power.
- There are specific rhythms to the policy process, especially at the state level, when legislative sessions are generally busiest February – May.
- Benchmarks of progress are different, and success can take years, or decades.
- Changing policy requires even broader coalitions than operating most programs, which are more often administered by a defined set of organizations or actors.
- No matter how strategic a grantee may be, or good their campaign plan is, policy change still may not happen.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF GRANT-MAKING THAT SUPPORTS EFFECTIVE POLICY ADVOCACY

Grantmaking that effectively supports the difficult task of informing and advancing policy change has specific characteristics that reflect these circumstances, including

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some that directly apply to advancing equity. Of course, funding may not have all of these characteristics, but the more grant-making practice reflects these elements, the more successful it will be at empowering grantees and creating the conditions needed for change. These recommendations are divided into three sections: **(1) the technical funding structures, (2) the content of what gets funded, and (3) considerations across the funding organization.**

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## FUNDING STRUCTURES

### 1 OFFER MULTI-YEAR SUPPORT

Policies often take years to change, even when conditions are ripe. Success often requires large populations to understand the issue and their advocacy role; relationships that are built up over many years; long-term data on risks and benefits; and new people to move into leadership roles. Often policymakers will introduce an idea or a piece of legislation multiple times before it is finally enacted. Multi-year funding, and consistent support that takes into account the ups and downs of policy progress, enable grantees to plan and execute a necessarily long-term strategy. This type of funding is especially important to build the capacity of grassroots organizations that can mobilize the people most affected by policy change.

### 2 PROVIDE FLEXIBLE FUNDING

A plan to educate policymakers and the public that was created in December may need to shift quickly when circumstances change in March (as was so vividly illustrated when the COVID-19 pandemic hit). Because the policy context can change in the blink of an eye, grantees need the flexibility to change their plan to respond to both opportunities and challenges. While the most flexible funding vehicle is general operating support, if that is not possible, funders can allow grantees to shift strategy and actions as needed. A close working relationship, as allowed by law, will help grantees feel able to communicate about turns in the road and ensure funders know why changes are needed.

A second form of flexibility is the ability to use some funds for lobbying, if the grantee chooses and it is in compliance with relevant laws. While most advocacy activity is educational in nature, it is virtually impossible to win significant victories without the ability to do some direct or grassroots lobbying. As outlined in [Building the Advocacy Infrastructure to Win Equity Victories for Children and Families](#), not allowing grantees this legal flexibility hinders true community engagement. It is disrespectful of the time and effort community members expend in getting in front of policymakers if their messages are limited to telling their stories instead of asking directly for what they need.

While private foundations **cannot** earmark funds for lobbying, they can give money to organizations that lobby and allow that flexibility through general operating support or [specific project grants](#). Public charities, including community foundations and women's funds, **can** earmark funds for lobbying. In addition, private donors can create or support alternative funding vehicles, such as 501(c)(4)s and Limited Liability Corporations (LLCs), that can support lobbying. For example, the family behind the Heising-Simons Foundation created the Heising-Simons Action Fund, a 501(c)(4) that supports activities that the foundation often cannot. Funders can also support organizations in creating a larger base of individual donors, which has many benefits, including expanding their communications outreach and increasing flexible funding

through membership fees and donations.



Over the past few years, the Langeloth Foundation has shifted its grantmaking practices to give grantee partners more flexibility, including to be active on policy change, so that now, with very few exceptions, nearly 100% of our funding is multi-year, general operating support grants.

*Scott Moyer, President, Jacob and Valeria Langeloth Foundation*



### 3 ENSURE GRANT AGREEMENTS DON'T INCLUDE UNNECESSARY RESTRICTIONS

As described above, it's important to exclude unnecessary language that restricts grantee expenditures more than required by law. For example, agreements for general operating support grants should have language that says “**no funds are earmarked for lobbying**” but they need not and should **not** have language that says “**no funds may be used for lobbying.**”

### 4 ADJUST REQUIREMENTS IN ORDER TO SUPPORT COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

Advancing policy change almost **always** requires educating and engaging constituents, especially those most affected by policies and who traditionally have less access to power. These leaders include people who are diverse in many ways – people of color, people with disabilities, members of the LGTBQ+ community, and those with a range of lived experiences. Many funders are considering how to better support community-based organizations that are led by, have direct relationships with, and are trusted by, people of color as well as other constituents who need to be able to speak out.

But these organizations may not have the administrative/financial infrastructure that larger organizations do, such as a large board of directors, three years of audited financial statements, ability to write long proposals or reports, etc. Funders need to consider what requirements are absolutely essential for due diligence, and what requirements can be adjusted in order to engage the people who most need to be heard. For example, some funders have scrapped written progress reports in favor of verbal conversations with foundation staff. Another strategy is aligning grant request procedures so applicants can use one set of information for multiple funders, as in the [JustFund](#) platform.

To facilitate grant-making to frontline and people of color-led community organizations, The Libra Foundation practices trust-based grant-making. Daniel Lau, Democracy Frontlines Fund Initiative Officer, shared that The Libra Foundation does **not** require organizations to submit grant applications or reports. Program officers take responsibility for learning about grantees' work and for checking in with partners at least once a year.

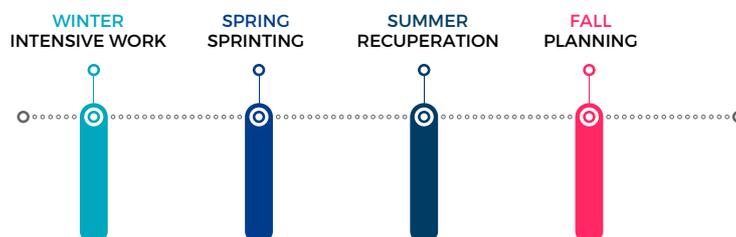
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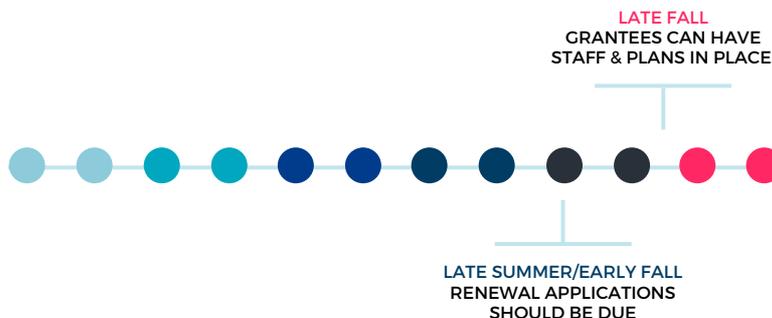
## 5 RESPECT THE LEGISLATIVE CALENDAR

Policy campaigns at the local, state, or federal level must follow the rhythms and deadlines of the legislative calendars. For example, most state legislatures meet somewhere between January - April, and even those with year-round sessions usually create their budgets during that time frame. Four states (including Texas) only meet every other year, and many states' sessions are only about 90 calendar days. Congressional and local government calendars are more complicated but also have their own timelines.

Focusing on state policy, because of this compressed time period, the pace of work during critical periods is incredibly intense. And planning for the following year depends on the outcome of the legislative session. Over the course of the year, advocacy organizations generally start planning in the fall, and work intensively under rigid schedules in the early part of the year, often at a flat-out sprint in the spring. Early summer is a time of recuperation and taking stock, and then it all starts again.



Funders need to consider those schedules when timing their grant decisions. For example, for state policy advocacy, renewal applications should be due in the late summer/early fall, after the legislative sessions are done and grantees have time to plan. Decisions also need to be made quickly enough so that grantees can have staff and plans in place to be ready to go in the late fall. And grantees will greatly appreciate no requests for extra work - reports, site visits, etc., - in the height of the legislative season.



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## FUNDING CONTENT

### 6 SUPPORT ALL THE ELEMENTS OF AN EFFECTIVE CAMPAIGN

A significant policy engagement initiative will have many elements - a decision-making structure, the policy agenda, supporting data, educational activities, community engagement actions, etc. Expecting a campaign to succeed when only a few elements are supported is like expecting a skyscraper to rise with funding only for blueprints and carpenters. One foundation doesn't need to support all elements - ideally, the foundation would support the elements that fit their structure best, and recruit other funders for other elements.

## 7 FUND COMMENSURATE WITH EXPECTATIONS

Virtually all nonprofits, by definition, have multiple funders, each with their own characteristics. They must juggle staying true to their mission while also appealing to different funders' priorities. If a funder wants a multi-issue organization to focus its attention on particular topics (assuming they fall within the grantee's mission), or the funder wants a big change, it needs to fund commensurate with that expectation.

Similarly, if an advocacy issue or campaign is highly associated with one funder, it may be very difficult for organizations to find supplemental money from other philanthropies. This is especially true of major campaigns named after a particular funder. If a foundation wants to be known for a particular issue, it must be prepared to fund appropriately.

Ideally, funders that are in the same geographic or topical area would collaborate on the policy agenda and not put grantees in the position of trying to either meet many different expectations, or persuade a funder to jump onto an established campaign that's solely associated with another philanthropy.

## 8 ENABLE COLLABORATION AMONG ORGANIZATIONS THAT NEED TO WORK TOGETHER

One of the key hallmarks of an effective policy campaign is the need for many organizations to work together. To advance a major children's issue, organizations whose primary objective might be health, education, or child welfare may need to speak with a unified voice. Some organizations may have strong networks among parents or local residents, while others focus on educators. Choosing which organizations to support is often an opportunity to advance equity – both in terms of the policy agenda and the strategies to achieve it. In many situations, these organizations ask the same funders for support, so it is essential that the funders not foster competition among organizations that must collaborate in order to succeed. Ideally, funders would support a set of lead organizations to create a public education plan that includes roles for the necessary participants. Then they would either fund that plan, or engage other funders to provide sufficient resources.

## 9 ENSURE THOSE MOST IMPACTED ARE AT THE POLICY TABLE

One of the most important responsibilities funders have is using their resources to help those most impacted by policies, and those who are less likely to have access to policymakers, secure decision-making roles. This includes roles in the campaign, as well as being at the table when advocates and policymakers are setting agendas, making the case, negotiating language and compromises, and monitoring implementation.

As Barbara Chow, Education Policy Director at the Heising-Simons Foundation, notes, "We need to use our privileged position to ensure better policies by supporting those closest to the problem to be directly involved in determining solutions."

## 10 IF YOU ASK SOMEONE TO DO SOMETHING, PAY THEM

Following up on the point above, if the approved policy engagement plan requires actions by specific organizations, they should be paid for that work. Too often, only the lead organizer gets just enough support for their own efforts, with others expected to contribute time or find other funding on their own (which is hard to do). This dynamic has a profound effect on equity as it often impacts community-based organizations

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that are expected to participate in the campaign as well as find local residents who can make the case for change. Funders can address this by providing lead organizations with sufficient funds to give grants to essential partners, and/or funding them directly. They also need to ensure that funding includes not only staff time but also the costs of community members communicating with policymakers, including translation, travel, childcare, etc.



Our c4 funding for Under 3 DC supports a comprehensive advocacy infrastructure. Our c3 funding from the Bainum Family Foundation and other funders has supported the time of our direct service partners to engage their parents in telling their stories to decision-makers.

*Kim Perry, Executive Director, DC Action*



## 11 SUPPORT IMPLEMENTATION TOO

The work isn't done when the "ayes" exceed the "nays." Many great policy victories have faltered in the implementation stage. Grantees have a role to play in commenting on regulations, providing feedback as programs are rolled out, and advocating for funding and against repeal attempts. Sara Slaughter, Executive Director of the W. Clement and Jessie V. Stone Foundation, vividly highlights their support for implementing legislation on principal preparation programs, noting "In making the case for us to fund implementation, one of our grantees made the analogy that most of the accidents related to climbing Mt. Everest happen on the way down."

## 12 GIVE ENOUGH TO ENABLE ORGANIZATIONS TO BUILD THE OPERATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE NEEDED TO ENGAGE IN ADVOCACY

Participating in advocacy requires staff skills and infrastructure that are distinct from those for direct services. Mobilizing community members, especially those who have first-hand experiences with services, requires building the capacity of organizations that can reach them, and that they trust. An important equity strategy is to fund grassroots organizations led by local people in order to strengthen their existing advocacy capacity or expand their skillset to add advocacy. New infrastructure can include legal counsel to understand the laws, the ability to track time for lobbying, software to manage a network of contacts, etc.

Grassroots organizations, including those led by people of color, may not have the resources to build their employees' skillset on topics such as organizing new groups or the legislative process. Funders that want to see community experts in positions of power and influence will need to support these organizations to build the necessary capacity to advocate not just for a narrow issue but across their entire agenda.

According to Joslyn Davis, Vice President of Policy and Partnerships, StriveTogether provides multi-year, flexible funding to state coalitions to help them construct and maintain a strong policy infrastructure focused on equity. It builds the capacity of these coalitions to advance a long-term policy agenda by engaging both grass tops leaders and community members closest to the problems and solutions.

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## FUNDING ACROSS THE ORGANIZATION

### 13 LEVERAGE BOTH PROGRAMMATIC AND POLICY GRANT-MAKING

Foundations that fund both programs and policy advocacy in the same area can leverage the expertise and networks in both arenas. Direct service providers and their networks are important sources of insights on policy changes, compelling evidence for needed changes, and progress on implementation. Funders can include participation in advocacy work as part of their direct service grants (recognizing that it takes time).

“We used our decades of research and programmatic experience in promoting entrepreneurship and education, as well as tapping the knowledge of our grantees and national networks, to develop and support [America’s New Business Plan](#), creating policy recommendations at the local, state and federal levels,” stated Larry Jacob, Vice President for Public Affairs, Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation.

### 14 EXPECT APPROPRIATE DELIVERABLES AND EVALUATION, INCLUDING THE LONG-TERM, INTANGIBLE, BUT NECESSARY, DELIVERABLES OF BUILDING CAPACITY, TRUST, AND RELATIONSHIPS

One of the concerns funders often express about investing in policy change is the challenge of measuring progress. While policy deliverables are different from program successes, there is a growing body of literature on specific measures (see reference list). Population changes won’t happen for a long time, so grant-making needs to reflect appropriate deliverables, such as civic leader support, media coverage, and community engagement. While some are specific and readily counted, others are harder to measure but still essential to success, such as building the advocacy skills of community members, especially those of color, and the time to build relationships and trust. An essential principle in evaluation of policy change is measuring contribution not attribution – policy change is a team sport, and expecting grantees to claim sole credit for advances will ultimately defeat the collaborative spirit necessary for success.

### 15 RECOGNIZE THAT THE FUNDER ROLE IS DIFFERENT FROM THE ADVOCATE ROLE

Many new foundation staff experience the sudden and heady change that comes with control of resources – people return their calls, laugh at their jokes, and look for nuances in every phrase. Moving from a direct advocacy role to the foundation role can be disorienting, as staff fight feelings of distance and even irrelevance to the work. (Of course, this can be somewhat less true for public foundation staff.)

They can often continue some of the same work, but in many ways and for many reasons (including legal requirements for private funders), their actions need to reflect their new role as a grant-maker. Especially in private foundations, they **facilitate** rather than carry out the advocacy work. They need to determine when grantees should be out in front, and when they should use their protected position to take a leadership role.

They provide information, but recognize that grantees must make the strategic decisions. They use their peer-to-peer connections to bring in other funders. They build understanding and support for the craft of policy advocacy grant-making within their own foundation. That increased understanding facilitates changes in the foundation’s grant-making practices that will support effective advocacy.

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## 16 DIG DEEP WHEN STARS ALIGN FOR A BIG WIN

While there are many reasons for foundations to consider increasing or reprioritizing their payout, one important factor is conditions that are ripe for a major policy advance, especially one that addresses the root causes of inequity. This development can happen because of newly-elected leaders, startling new data, a public tragedy or a compelling personal story. Moving a major policy item is much more feasible when these conditions align – think of the difference between paddling a surfboard in the still ocean and catching a 100-foot wave. So when conditions align for the rare big win, it's critical for funders to take advantage of an idea whose time has come by providing the needed resources, even beyond their routine grant-making.

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[ADVOCACY CHECKLIST](#)

[BUILDING THE ADVOCACY INFRASTRUCTURE TO WIN EQUITY VICTORIES FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES](#)

[FOUR TOOLS FOR ASSESSING GRANTEE CONTRIBUTION TO ADVOCACY EFFORTS](#)

[IMPLEMENTATION BEYOND HEADLINE VICTORIES](#)

[MAKING THE CASE: FOUNDATION LEADERS IN THE IMPORTANCE OF MULTI-YEAR GENERAL OPERATING SUPPORT](#)

[NO ROYAL ROAD: FINDING AND FOLLOWING THE NATURAL PATHWAYS IN ADVOCACY EVALUATION](#)

[PHILANTHROPY ADVOCACY PLAYBOOK](#)

[PUBLIC POLICY AND ADVOCACY FOR GRANTMAKERS,](#)

[RELATIONSHIPS MATTER: PROGRAM OFFICERS, GRANTEES AND THE KEYS TO SUCCESS](#)

[SAY WHAT YOU MEAN AND MEAN WHAT YOU SAY: USING LANGUAGE THAT DISTINGUISHES BETWEEN ADVOCACY AND LOBBYING](#)

[THE HARD WORK OF DEMOCRACY: A CASE FOR LEISURE](#)

[WHY PROGRAM OFFICERS SHOULD EMBRACE THE BORING](#)

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## Need More Guidance?

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