

Field of Themes

Five Early Lessons from an Innovative Advocacy Approach

BY SCOTT DOWNES

“If you build it, they will come,” offers the omniscient voice to Ray Kinsella in the 1989 film *Field of Dreams*. What may be true in a fictional Iowa cornfield is often much harder to construct in the very real world of policy change through advocacy. Such is the challenge that The Colorado Trust is taking on while shaping a new advocacy strategy aimed at health equity policy solutions through a field-building approach.

Traditionally, philanthropic support of advocacy efforts entails identifying a policy target—for example, Medicaid expansion or insurance coverage for low-income children—and providing funding and other resources or assistance to support the pursuit of the necessary policy change and underlying strategies and tactics. This approach is merited when the policy target in question is clear, concrete, and can be leveraged to engage and mobilize key constituencies and influencers. However, many public policy issues are so expansive and complex that they cannot be boiled down to such specific targets and require a different approach from funders.

This is the position The Colorado Trust—a twenty-nine-year-old private, statewide health foundation—came to be in a few years ago. In working toward achieving health care access and coverage for all Coloradans, beginning in 2008, our experiences with grantees and other stakeholders repeatedly underscored a stark reality: Certain populations in Colorado (and nationwide, for that matter) consistently experience greater challenges in accessing high-quality, affordable health care and coverage and suffer poorer health outcomes than other groups. The findings of a Colorado Trust-initiated environmental scan in 2012—which included interviews, surveys, and meetings with more than a thousand Coloradans—further solidified the need to address such health and health care disparities moving forward.

In October 2013, The Colorado Trust announced a new vision of achieving health equity—that all Coloradans have fair and equal opportunities to lead healthy, productive lives regardless of race, ethnicity, income, or where we live. In effect, this evolution narrowed the communities and populations The Colorado Trust is seeking to serve while expanding the issues encompassed in the work we engage in and support.

Policy change through advocacy was identified as a key grant-making focus area under this new health equity vision. However, a typical approach to policy would not lend itself well to this new focus. There is no single policy solution to health equity, but rather hundreds of possible solutions that cut across different issue areas, such as health, education, economic opportunity, and others.

This prompted us to look at different types of approaches to supporting policy change through advocacy efforts. We researched how other foundations approached policy and advocacy; explored literature and emerging best practices; and, perhaps most important, engaged key stakeholders who themselves would play critical roles in this approach. This all culminated in the approval of a multiyear, multimillion-dollar investment to develop and build a field of organizations and champions focused on advocating for health equity policy solutions.

So, what is “field building”? It’s exactly what it sounds like—building, developing, and strengthening the component parts that make up an advocacy ecosystem in a particular domain. This includes having some shared identity and purpose, common standards of practice and knowledge base, strong leadership and grassroots engagement, and shared infrastructure to support and sustain the effort. For The Colorado Trust, this approach is well-aligned with our new health equity vision, given the expansive, cross-cutting nature of that focus area.

The initial phase of work included engaging a cohort of thirty-four organizations in planning and development. Through a competitive process in which 134 applications were received, grantees were selected based on how they would focus on health equity, engage in a field approach to advocacy, and engage both diverse partners and communities affected by various health inequities. In addition, the diversity and strength of the cohort of groups was gauged based on geography, populations served, and different types of advocacy capacities represented.

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The selected groups came together on a regular basis over a six-month period, so that the thirty-four entities comprising the field actually participated in its development. As this work progresses into the next phase, The Colorado Trust envisions that the groups themselves will move beyond planning and begin to develop and implement the needed capacities—at both an organizational and a collective, field level—to be effective players in shaping and influencing health equity policy solutions. While this effort is still in its infancy, valuable lessons have already emerged and helped inform how we go forward.

Time and Space Are Important Needs

The typical culture of advocacy is to do more with less: The demand for your time, energy, and expertise usually outweighs the supply. Most individuals and organizations that play a role in the spectrum of advocacy activities are stretched for time and space and thus may lack the ability to take a step back and consider what needs to be in place to build an effective field of advocates and champions—not just in their own organizations but also the collective landscape. What kinds of capacities need to be in place? What skills and support structure should be developed? What can we do better individually and collectively? The time and space to consider these questions as a field, as a collective group, does not happen on its own—it needs to be supported through funding and incentivized accordingly.

Value of Different Perspectives

In selecting thirty-four grantees for the first phase, we actively sought out organizations that provided diverse views, values, and approaches to advocacy, constituencies, and roles (e.g., service providers, community organizers, policy advocates, etc.). Through the course of several meetings, this diversity generated interesting questions about policy change and the necessary underlying strategies. Is it better to disrupt the policy-making apparatus altogether or try to work within existing structures? Is it more effective to develop and strengthen leaders and champions, or is power building within communities themselves a better approach? Should the starting point focus on building a campaign with a policy goal, or should the goal be building a movement toward a shared purpose? There are no easy answers to these questions, nor are the choices necessarily mutually exclusive. The Colorado Trust did not—and has not—stated a preference on these different and sometimes divergent perspectives. Rather, we have tried to embrace and appreciate the spectrum of perspectives and approaches of which a strong advocacy field can be composed.

There Will Be Skepticism

Building a strong field aimed at policy change through advocacy requires not just a clear-eyed vision for a particular issue domain but also strong buy-in from participants. We approached this through a participatory process that has engaged grantees themselves in the planning and development of the strategy. This method has not been without its challenges; even now, in the later stages of the six-month planning phase, we are still met with understandably skeptical questions about “what we really want” and “what [The Colorado Trust’s] plan really is going forward.” This skepticism is likely due to several factors, including the power dynamics too often characteristic of the relationship between funder and grantee. There is a history of funders promoting a participatory model yet setting expectations that do not align with those practices and clearly operationalizing what is meant by “participation.” Undoing that skepticism has required patience, repetition, and, over the long term, having the attention, space, focus, and commitment to a participatory approach.

Intentionally Capture Knowledge

As Lucy Bernholz and coauthors noted in *Building to Last*, “In many cases, a foundation’s most useful investment in new fields is the time and efforts it puts into supporting both the creation and sharing of knowledge.” From the outset of this work, formally instituting an evaluation and learning component has been critical to capturing, analyzing, and reflecting on the ideas generated from the planning process. In particular, given the nascent and participatory nature of this work, it has been critical to design evaluative approaches that reflect the needs and key questions that emerge from grantee organizations’ experiences and, in turn, provide timely, actionable data and information that can support decision making for both the grantees and The Colorado Trust.

Value of General Operating Support

Too few foundations provide general operating support for policy change through advocacy. Fear of risk, lack of control, and lack of accountability are all contributing factors. The Colorado Trust itself only began providing general operating grants to support advocacy in 2008, and it was not until 2014 that we had an open call for applications for advocacy general operating grants. However, general operating support brings many advantages for funders and grantees alike. There is greater efficiency, more opportunities to build trust and cultivate partnerships, and more of a shared responsibility in the

decision making of how dollars are invested in capacities and resources that support policy change through advocacy. In the context of an advocacy field-building approach in an issue domain as complex as health equity, general operating support also enables and empowers the development of complementary capacities across different and diverse partners rather than the limited scope of project-based funding. This provides greater flexibility and a more adaptive frame of support to help influence, shape, and respond to the policy landscape. Over the long term, we view this as an essential part of advancing health equity policy solutions.

Engaging in this field-building approach does not guarantee the advocacy outcomes we aspire to achieve. Building an effective field does not automatically mean that the desired policy change will happen. Rather, it requires a sustained effort, long-term focus, and putting the lessons we learn along the way into practice.

Reference

Bernholz, L., S. L. Seale, and T. Wang. 2009. *Building to Last: Field Building as Philanthropic Strategy*. San Francisco: Blueprint Research + Design and MacArthur Foundation.

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