

Philanthropy & Public Policy – The Role We Can All Play

Funders Forum

Thursday, May 8, 2014

The 2014 Maine Philanthropy Center Funders Forum on May 8th brought 86 attendees from Maine and New England to Point Lookout in Northport, ME for a half-day immersion into topics relevant to their work, including the role of philanthropy and public policy.

Barbara Leonard, Vice President of Programs, Maine Health Access Foundation and chair of the Maine Philanthropy Center Board of Directors introduced a panel discussion with the goal of building a common understanding of the spectrum of roles that philanthropy can play in public policy and why this is an increasingly important strategy for achieving greater outcomes and impact.

Celeste Amato, President of the Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers, shared her perspective and her organization's experiences working across what she termed as both the Big "P" and the little "p" of policy work. In her view, "*Policy* is what we want to influence, *advocacy* is how we do it and *lobbying* is something foundations don't do." As the Baltimore area loses larger corporations, she finds the philanthropic sector taking on more leadership and becoming an increasingly more powerful voice in making sure pertinent issues are raised and debated. Celeste now finds her regional association is often the one pushing groups for action at the end of a meeting.

Wendy Wolfe, President of Maine Health Access Foundation, believes that "policy insures sustainability" of the things we most care about. Her organization's public policy committee is made up of both grantees and staff as MEHAF believes that the work needs to be guided by the people it's going to most affect. "You can't lobby but you can engage in the public discussion." A foundation could also help provide targeted research on a topic.

John Shoos, Executive Director of the Sam L. Cohen Foundation, finds his organization more and more thinking about system change. "The issues we are working on are embedded in complex issues that require both strategic thinking and policy changes." John talked of the importance of working with public officials to share knowledge and shape opinions.

Karen Heck, Senior Program Officer of the Bingham Program, talked about their tri-fold focus on public policy, professional development and community health. She sees all three issues as very intertwined and feels foundations can contribute to public policy discussions with research, stories from grantees and helping groups develop a common language and a unified message.

After hearing the perspectives shared above from Maine and away, participants engaged in table conversations about the role their organization has played to date in public policy and what are some of the issues they are currently grappling with. The room was abuzz with lively conversations. Some highlights shared included:

- Many funders and non-profits are already coming together and getting to know each other and the work in more depth – they have a lot of data and information that could be shared with the public and policy makers.
- Many policy changes are administrative in nature and are accomplished through efforts that never involve going to the legislature. This is definitely a place where foundations can lend expertise.
- One funder has added a new question to their grant applications: "What public policy challenges are you facing?" This gives their organization potential direction for their public policy efforts.

Barbara Leonard closed the session by sharing Maine Philanthropy Center's plans to convene a task team to figure out how the philanthropic network might better coalesce around public policy activity and how MPC might best support that work. She asked the audience for a "Five Finger Vote" to indicate their support for MPC trying to move this work forward. The result was a resounding vote of confidence for MPC taking on this work.