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# POLICY MATTERS

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Policy Levers to Reduce Poverty and Build Prosperity  
in the Upper Midwest and Pacific Northwest

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ADVANCING PUBLIC POLICY STRATEGIES FOR POVERTY  
REDUCTION – AN INVITATION TO FOUNDATIONS:  
A Practitioners Perception of Possibilities

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## INTRODUCTION

Public policy matters in people's lives. That is the guiding principle of *PolicyMatters*, a new series of issue papers underwritten by the Northwest Area Foundation.

As we launch *PolicyMatters* in 2009–2010, the Foundation is celebrating its 75th year of service to the Northwest area: Washington, Oregon, Montana, Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Iowa. We seek a future for this region in which those who have been impoverished and marginalized, whether in urban, rural, or American Indian reservation communities, share in real opportunity and lasting prosperity. We work toward that future by making grants and mission-related investments. But we are also committed to sharing knowledge of what works, convening conversations about the region's progress, and advocating for change. In that spirit, *PolicyMatters* is intended to spark reflection, discussion and innovation.

Why focus on policy? Because policy decisions shape the flow of the people's resources through government expenditures, with profound consequences in our communities. Public policy touches on issues as diverse as asset accumulation, early childhood and K–12 education, college access, housing, immigration, workforce development, tax and budget policy, and retirement security. In all of these areas and many more, the people's resources are flowing in patterns shaped not by some invisible hand, but by decisions made by human beings. A critical question is: Whose perspectives inform those decisions? Our Foundation cannot achieve its mission if the proven and promising organizations we work with – or low-income people themselves – are absent from the policy debates of our time.

*PolicyMatters*, therefore, will lift up voices from the field. We hope these perspectives will be useful to practitioners, advocates and decision-makers as they work toward policies to reduce poverty and build sustainable prosperity. Motivating us in this and all our endeavors is a vision for the future of the Northwest area:

- We see a region known for its highly skilled, well-educated population, its living-wage jobs, and its healthy, vibrant communities.
- We see a region characterized by thriving local economies within thriving natural ecosystems.
- We see a region whose strong public institutions, business community, and nonprofit sector collaborate to address pressing needs and help build pathways to prosperity for all residents.
- We see a region whose people are organized and empowered to lift their voices and actively shape the civic, social, political and economic life of their communities.
- Ultimately, we see a region whose rich culture of engagement and opportunity makes it a prized place to visit, to invest, and to live, and where all residents have a fair chance to live free of poverty.

Innovative public policies are essential if that vision is to become a reality. Let us know whether you find *PolicyMatters* helpful in spurring the development of such policies. But more importantly, make sure your voice is heard in what we hope will be a vibrant, ongoing public conversation about the future of our region and our nation.



**Kevin Walker**  
*President and CEO*

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# ADVANCING PUBLIC POLICY STRATEGIES FOR POVERTY REDUCTION – AN INVITATION TO FOUNDATIONS: A Practitioners Perception of Possibilities

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Poverty reduction, in order to be significant and sustained, requires a realignment of power. It requires changes to structures, systems, political culture and political will. Nonprofit engagement in public policy advocacy is one important component of a comprehensive approach to poverty reduction and an essential strategy for change. Foundations have the power and position to foster and advance the social sector's role in achieving change.

Americans who never before understood, or even considered, what it means to experience poverty are coming to know that any one of us and our families could be vulnerable to the shocks of our economy. There is increased recognition of the meaning of failed systems and foreshortened opportunities. Jobs, housing, health care, education, ownership and opportunity cannot be assumed to be certainties for anyone. For many, these have never been available. As many foundations continue their long-standing commitments to poverty reduction, and as even more look at broad new approaches to rebuilding prosperity, nonprofit advocacy is an essential component of a comprehensive movement for change in priorities and policies.

Nonprofits, and the foundations and donors who support them, will help to reshape the dialogue and design the solutions to poverty. This paper is intended to provoke discussion and commitments to action within and among philanthropic institutions dedicated to alleviating poverty and building prosperity.

## STRATEGIES FOR CHANGE

What do we seek to do to address poverty in our communities? What is our theory of change? Ideas presented here are predicated on a vision: that nonprofit and foundation policy leadership, activities and investments will result in poverty reduction.

One imperative of fulfilling that mission is to ensure that there is increased community capacity to advance public policy solutions that reduce poverty. Public policy work needs to be integrated with strategies for building organizational and individual leadership capacity. It must impact systems change in targeted program areas and asset building, and address racial and class biases.

Public policy is the set of decisions made at all levels of government about how we will care for one another, our communities and the land. Strong public policy work requires capacity building for, and implementation of, good planning, research, education outreach and organizing.

Ongoing advocacy involves a cycle of activity that embraces legislative advocacy and democracy work. To change power dynamics in communities, states and regions, people need to participate in the life of the community to shape policy through participation in voting and political life.

Any foundation working for change needs to ask these questions on an ongoing basis:

- Where can this foundation add value to policy work in progress?
- How can the foundation's investments expand local and regional infrastructure for public policy?
- What is the irrefutable data, the research and analysis, needed for policy change? What does the foundation have that it can extend into the broader dialogue? What else is needed? How and by whom can it best be developed at the local level?
- How can a foundation build a reliance on authentic community ideation and action in policy advocacy and democracy building activity?
- What are the strategic ways to leverage resources and influence for policy work?
- What works, what doesn't, and how can the foundation continuously respond to emerging approaches that have an impact?
- What is the strategic role for the foundation in advancing democracy-building activities that are essential to shifting the power dynamic at all levels of government?

Reflection on these and other questions should ensure that public policy work integrated with other strategies will be opportunistic (in the best sense of the word) and lead to sustained changes in advocacy capacity, policy development and changes in political will.

## STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP ROLES FOR FOUNDATIONS

Many foundations have robust histories of poverty-reduction work. There is much to share and to build on from past efforts, but now there is also an extraordinary opportunity to examine where each dedicated foundation can lead in advancing advocacy and adding value to existing national, regional and local initiatives.

The nonprofit and philanthropic sectors are giving increasing attention to public policy and are struggling to accelerate work in this field. Studies show that the main inhibitors to public policy engagement are government regulation, lack of awareness of the importance of policy, or fears of raising issues that might threaten public funding. Gary Bass, David Arons, Kay Guinane and Matthew Carter, in "Seen but Not Heard: Strengthening Nonprofit Advocacy," detail the barriers and incentives to nonprofit advocacy and lobbying. Jeffrey Berry and David Arons, in "A Voice for Nonprofits," underscore the importance of recognizing that nonprofits are an essential information source, a resource for elected and appointed officials, and a needed voice representing the constituencies they serve. They assert, and many in the sector have come to accept, that the optimum relationship of an interest group with government is to jointly produce public policy.

Some foundations and nonprofits are recognizing that they can overcome barriers and be change agents in multiple areas of public policy and democracy advancing activities that advance mission. They are responding to the call for more involvement in public policy. David Arons iterates areas of activity available to foundations and nonprofits as editor of "Power in Policy: A Funder's Guide to Advocacy and Civic Participation."

To expand its role in advancing public policy as one element of change, a foundation's trustees and staff should consider critical roles that leverage the foundation's talent, experience and resources. The following section presents four primary areas in which a foundation may play a leadership role in advancing public policy.

## FOUNDATION ROLE #1: NATIONAL PARTNER

No one needs to do this work alone. Foundations collaborate on many fronts to support advocacy and pool ideas and resources to support policy research, analysis, organizing and advocacy. Some existing collaboratives are shaping the public policy landscape and share a focus on economic justice, asset building and poverty reduction. The opportunity for leveraging resources to make real change through shared efforts is enormous.

- **Affiliation with the national State Fiscal Analysis Initiative (SFAI)** should be a high priority for large state, regional or national foundations. This initiative began in 1993 and has been a collaborative effort to strengthen the capacity of nonpartisan, independent state-level nonprofit organizations to do fiscal policy analysis, support advocacy and inform advocates and decision-makers about the impacts of tax and budget proposals. Funders include the Ford Foundation, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Open Society Institute, the Stoneman Family Foundation, the Public Welfare Foundation, and the John L. and James S. Knight Foundation. They support a network of organizations in 29 states, the District of Columbia, and several emerging states. The work is directed at rigorous research and analysis that lead to an understanding of the impacts of proposed policies on low and moderate income people and communities that face disparities and disadvantages. SFAI groups “broaden the debate on budget and tax policy through public education and encouragement of civic engagement on these issues” ([www.statefiscal.org](http://www.statefiscal.org)). SFAI is coordinated by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Foundations, together, may ensure that work is done in all states to make fiscal policy analysis available. This information is essential to organizations working to address the needs of people experiencing poverty. Core changes in fiscal policy are required to make prosperity possible.

- **Economic Analysis and Research Network (EARN)** is “a network of state and regional multi-issue research, policy, and advocacy organizations. The network currently includes 55 organizations in 40 states. EARN’s mission is to improve the lives of Americans through state and local policy, and change the nature of the national policy debate – state by state” ([www.earncentral.org](http://www.earncentral.org)). The Economic Policy Institute coordinates the network, which accomplishes its efforts through coordinated campaigns, technical assistance, conferences and meetings, collaborative research and analysis and more. EARN policy priorities address poverty reduction and systems change; they include minimum wage laws, living wage standards, economic development strategies, earned income tax credits at the state and federal level, “State of Working State” reports and immigration reforms. Foundations should enable lead organizations from key parts of each state to participate.
- **Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network (NVEN)** is a relatively new network of state-level infrastructure organizations coordinating efforts to engage nonprofits in electoral activity, including voter registration, voter education and voter mobilization, as well as election protection, election systems reform, and a range of democracy-building activities. Foundations can expand the reach of the network to organizations that will participate at the state or local level. Materials and toolkits guide this process so that it is locally designed and implemented. Convenings and peer exchanges strengthen the network affiliates’ work.
- **The Midwest Democracy Network (MDN)** model initiative is being developed and supported by the Joyce Foundation in the five-state area that it serves. Democracy work, especially reforms that support participation in voting and fairness in political systems (election systems, census, redistricting and campaign finance reform) is important to systemic changes in the distribution of

power in this society. This is an important component of policy work, especially as states approach the 2010 census and redistricting. National organizations exist that support the Joyce Foundation's efforts and that could reach a broader range of states. These include the Brennan Center for Justice, Justice at Stake, and the Moritz School of Law at Ohio State University. Foundations could identify and invite local and regional institutions akin to these to support nonprofits at the regional level, adapting the Joyce model to other regions.

## FOUNDATION ROLE #2: CONVENER AND NETWORK BUILDER

While foundations may add value to advocacy research and strategy development already in place and may expand and experiment with those models, they also have ripe opportunities to launch new advocacy efforts. The role of convener enables a foundation to lead local, state, or regionwide efforts by allowing funders, infrastructure organizations and community-based nonprofits to share ideas and opportunities, and to build collective power.

To meet public policy goals, foundations that seek to lead in public policy advocacy aimed at poverty reduction should consider focusing the role of convener on three target groups:

- **Convene and organize a network of funders in their target area.** Create a stronger network of private and community foundations to advance advocacy as a poverty-reduction strategy. This is an important role at a time when economic realities are increasing demands for funding for direct services. Many foundations need to understand models and strategies for solving problems at the core, with systems changes, and without trying to fill in for government program and service cutbacks and growing systemic problems. Some foundations are more timid about advocacy than they need to be. Lead foundations could support efforts to educate foundations' staff and trustees about the advantages of fully engaging in permissible policy activities. Many will do more if they understand that they are part of a bigger movement throughout the country.
- **Connect to infrastructure resources in the region and nationally.** Consistent with the idea that change is more likely when people perceive that they are part of a larger movement, a foundation can promote connections among its grantees and to state and national infrastructure organizations sharing similar goals. Some examples of key organizations in the field that support local and regional initiatives:
  - *Seventh Generation Fund*: This indigenous people's nonprofit organization strengthens Native communities in many ways, including advocacy support. Work includes resource management issues of import to many states and that have broad implications for economic security and sustainability.
  - *Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy* (IATP) does research, education and advocacy to support rural communities and ecosystems. Many organizations within the region could benefit from the information and advocacy campaigns that IATP conducts. Their work on federal farm bills and on trade policies has direct implications for the region.
  - *Demos*, under the leadership of Miles Rappaport, describes itself as "a network for ideas and action." Much of the work of this organization provides insights and opportunities for groups to work together on poverty reduction and democracy issues. Recent publications include "Economic (In) Security: the Experience of the African-American and Latino Middle Classes," "Inequality Matters" and "Unequal Access: Neglecting the National Voter Registration Act 1995–2007."

— *Building Movement Project*, led by Frances Kunreuther at Demos, advances advocacy in the social service nonprofit sector. Service agencies are often shy about advocacy engagement. The Building Movement Project employs a “social service, social change” model that could be used to train and embolden nonprofits, especially those organizations that often have the most contact with people and communities who are underrepresented in the policy dialogue.

This is only a sampling of infrastructure groups, along with those noted in the section above on national networks that could benefit from, and help to advance, a foundation’s or collective’s research, strategies and advocacy for poverty alleviation.

- **Convene regional, state and local policy advocates** for the purposes of peer exchange, shared access to informational resources and collaborative efforts. Such a gathering must begin with a clear and targeted purpose. Leading nonprofit organizations need an ongoing dialogue about poverty-reduction research (irrefutable data!), strategies that work and models for organizing and advocating on key issues. Convening groups in a state or region who lead efforts and provide support to others is a meaningful strategy if it has a clear purpose, adequate funding, and sustained and talented facilitation. Genuine peer exchange is rarely possible. A foundation could foster such peer learning in meaningful ways. Larger convenings do inspire and inform advocacy and an ongoing dialogue (online options are good) and follow-up are important to translating inspiration to planning and action.

### FOUNDATION ROLE #3: FUNDER

Foundations can support advocacy with grants, with training support and with development of advocacy tools.

- **Grants.** Increased funding for advocacy not only advances this strategy, which is essential to poverty reduction, but it also protects other investments that a foundation makes in grantees. Support for community building, economic opportunity, resource management and leadership development will not have sustained value if the policy context at the local, state and national level fails to support or actually undermines those efforts. Foundations determined to support long-term systems change can target policy grants, adding advocacy support to most grants that they make. General operating support enables nonprofit organizations to engage in advocacy and to build knowledge and skills.
- **Training.** Public policy training needs to focus on organizational capacity building, issue development and advocacy skills. Policy support may include:
  - *Multiyear grants* to organizations that have developed training curricula and are engaging those organizations at the local, state or national level that work on poverty-reduction policy.
  - *Expand the reach of advocacy skill training funding* to groups that provide content and skill training based on particular issues and places. For example, coalitions that are building a base of support for issues such as job training for entrepreneurial efforts, livable wages, anti-discrimination laws, and community-based child care options should be supported in training the organizations and individuals who join their effort. They may have the ability to do that internally. They may need targeted and specifically tailored training for people working on their issue. Training should be provided by organizations or individuals who are in close proximity to ensure that ongoing consultation and support is available and that local insights are shared.

— *Support state-based and regional training and strategy institutes/workshops* at which grantees can gain from the research, experience and insights of leaders; develop their own plans; exchange ideas peer-to-peer; and develop their work in a concentrated time and place that is fully dedicated to this effort.

- **Evaluation.** Fund further development of advocacy assessment tools. Advocacy capacity assessments are still in the embryonic state and need to be designed and tested in a reality-based way. A foundation working with grantees to develop meaningful qualitative and quantitative measures of issue advancement and capacity building will be contributing to a wider field of knowledge.

#### FOUNDATION ROLE #4: RESOURCE CENTER

Good policy work requires a reliance on good research and documentation of models. Irrefutable data and compelling stories are tools for effective advocacy. Some large foundations have extraordinary strength in this area. Where a foundation has the capacity to function as a center of knowledge, it should work to maximize its resources and investments in research and analysis by getting knowledge in the hands of organizers and advocates. New communication strategies are needed to expand the reach of the research.

#### POLICIES FOR POVERTY REDUCTION

Thus far the focus here has been on strategies for supporting policy change. Foundations have a key role in building a powerful infrastructure for nonprofit advocacy. Following are some ideas about issues that could be addressed to alleviate poverty. These are presented as a sampling of possibilities. Foundations will contribute the most when they support the design of locally based agendas for reform and when they are willing to support changes that tackle the underlying and prevailing causes of poverty.

Unique imperatives will drive policy priorities in each community and region. In general, however, a foundation should work with grantees and allied organizations to focus on principles that drive policy priorities. Policy priorities should be determined by the community. Some universally valuable ideas include:

- **Leverage.** Lasting change requires the development of policies that leverage increased activity in poverty reductions that have a multiplier effect. An example of this is the work of the 1989 Poverty Commission in Minnesota. Rather than offering fragments of short-term reform options, that Commission identified major changes that have shaped poverty-reduction programs for almost two decades.

One of the policy recommendations was to establish MinnesotaCare, a state-supported health care insurance program for those who were not eligible for Medicare/Medicaid and who could not afford market rate insurance. That program continues to be a core means for providing health care to the uninsured. While it falls short of the comprehensive, quality program needed for those still underinsured or uninsured, it has been a driver of discussion about improved health care systems for two decades. It has addressed a problem that is fundamental to prosperity: health coverage and accessible care.

- **Comprehensive government action.** Foundations and grantees need to advocate for local, state and federal governments to think and act comprehensively about their role in poverty reduction. This will be a radical change in most locales. Administrative as well as legislative changes are needed, many of which can be accomplished through executive order and administrative practice. The problem: All too often, governments focus only on discreet programs that they and others provide, such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), food stamps, unemployment insurance and housing supports. To really alleviate poverty, governments should incorporate poverty-reduction strategies into all arenas of responsibility, including:

— *Reforming government practices, both internal and external.* Along with creating sound policy that contributes to poverty reduction, government also needs to have in place equally sound practice in its own functioning that is in line with poverty-reduction strategies. These practices are both internal (i.e. government hiring practices) as well as external (i.e. government contracting for services). The areas in which government needs to examine its own practices in relation to these issues include:

### Internal

- > **Hiring practices:** Government is the largest employer in some local economies. Government needs a mandate to post jobs where those entering the workforce can be made aware of opportunities. Postings should be in all languages appropriate to the region. Government should ensure that workers are able to receive on-the-job training that prepares them to succeed at jobs and advance along a career ladder. More employees are needed who are multilingual and culturally competent, and government needs to open hiring practices and adapt job qualifications to better reflect real skills needed in the government workforce. The need for improved hiring practices is reflected in the struggles experienced by the Census Bureau managers attempting to hire a diverse workforce, one reflective of local communities, for the 2010 count. Qualifications should ensure that people are not left out of government employment for reasons that have no relevance to the job that needs to be done.
- > **Commissions and appointments:** Inclusivity should be a set standard and government decision-makers who appoint participants to public bodies should be held accountable when economic and ethnic representation on advisory and decision-making bodies is too limited or non-existent. These task forces, commissions and other such entities provide emerging leaders with opportunities to enter political life. Openness is essential. People who have experienced poverty or discrimination need to be positioned to inform a wide range of governmental policies and initiatives.
- > **Transparency and accountability in government:** Governments need to enforce practices that are true to the intent to increase and sustain economic, ethnic, racial, ability and gender diversity in the workforce. Practices need to be documented and publicly available.
- > **Cultural competence:** Governments should expand access to government information, job opportunities and programs by recruiting, hiring and training people who are based in communities and who can ensure that information and opportunities are known in culturally appropriate ways. Government workplaces should accommodate culturally based needs for language, food and religious practices.

## External

- > **Procurement:** Governments are customers. Policies should require purchases from locally based, sometimes minority-led businesses and suppliers that pay livable wages.
  - > **Privatization:** When government turns its responsibilities over to technical and professional service providers and contracts for services (sometimes “turn-key operations”), it should make a priority of contracting with small businesses that are locally based, employ people new to the workforce, include minorities and pay livable wages.
  - > **Regulation:** Governments that fund and regulate the private sector can mandate imperatives for hiring small and local contractors, using local suppliers and paying livable wages. Anti-discrimination policies should be enforced aggressively.
- **Reforming public sector perceptions of poverty.** As long as policy shapers and the public see safety net and human service programs as the solution to poverty, little will change. Government has a role in redefining poverty and acknowledging that it is the entire community’s issue and responsibility. Foundations can play a role in assisting and urging governments to redefine poverty. Some actions a foundation might take include:

## Reinvigorate the dialogue about poverty, its causes and its impact on government’s role in society.

- > **Make universal education and job opportunity a priority.** Continue and expand support for research that makes a compelling case for the economic need for a trained and educated workforce as essential to economic stability and growth. Research shows that low-income people with limited access to appropriate education and services are essential to economic growth and need to be included in education and training programs that allow them to thrive as fully as possible in the workforce.
- > **Work with grantees and other funders to expand the development of messages targeted at candidates, elected officials and government employees.** These messages should draw attention to the potential for strengthening communities’ economic and physical well-being by decreasing disparities. Work of the SFAI network and others emphasizes that people experience poverty despite the fact that they work, that an entire economy prospers when individuals prosper, and that many states in the region face structural workforce shortages. There is evidence to support these concepts and they need wide promotion.
- > **Tackle racism and class divisions.** Existing paradigms of understanding poverty do not honestly or comprehensively address issues of race, class, ethnicity and gender biases. Racism, discrimination and class divisions manifest themselves in disparities in housing, education, wages, security and opportunity. Institutionalized racism, an increased emphasis on individualism in the political culture, and the isolation of people experiencing poverty work against changes in government program design and actions. The new, reinvigorated dialogue on poverty needs to openly and honestly confront the structural nature of poverty and its manifestations.

Foundations need to identify and support initiatives that lead to higher levels of awareness about who experiences poverty and why. Small but important efforts to support include cultural competency training, enforcement of anti-discrimination laws, and programs that strive for better understandings of racism and class bias. Over time, stronger (and restored) human rights and civil rights policies and their enforcement matter, and foundations should lead the way in supporting these as they emerge. The commitment to promoting justice is fundamental to poverty reduction.

**Require state governments to monitor poverty levels and reduction.** Foundations can work with other entities to establish evaluative measures that point toward poverty reduction. Two opportunities are:

- > **Support comprehensive tax incidence studies with policy language that suggests that fair taxation across all income groups is sound policy.**
- > **Support annual assessments of income disparities in the area served and target support to strategies that narrow those disparities.**

These research-based studies compel elected officials and opinion shapers to examine poverty on a regular basis with data that pinpoints realities.

**Promote specific programmatic policies that are likely to reduce poverty.** Approaches suggested above identify ways in which foundations and their grantees can promote policies and practices that require government to change its internal role in poverty reduction. Even more important is the identification of poverty-reduction policies that will leverage real change. Policies that provide access to resources, training and education; work that pays; and integrated supports (health, transportation, day care and housing) build long-standing assets. Strategies that develop building wealth and sustaining resources are key. Here are some issues that have a multiplier effect, that have the potential to cause other changes that cumulatively reduce poverty:

- > **Support work on programs that provide direct resources to low-income people.**

*Getting cash in the hands of people experiencing poverty is a short- and long-term strategy for moving out of poverty.* One of the best examples of a successful policy is the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). Foundations should engage grantees in supporting and protecting local equivalents of the EITC.

*Other efforts to ensure that low-income people have funds include offsets to carbon taxes or “cap and trade” programs currently gaining favor.* These include offsets to increased user fees or taxes. These should take the form of cash payments to low-income people who bear an unfair share of the burden of such programs.

*Consider financial literacy, financial counseling and taxpayer assistance programs that serve low-income people to be priority poverty-reduction programs.*

- > **Seek a comprehensive public policy approach to address poverty.** For too many years, individual programs have struggled in competition with one another for public resources. We

have tried to reduce poverty with strategies that focus on only one aspect of what entrenches people in poverty. Instead, initiatives need to reform current approaches and build integrated systems. A good model for comprehensive reform is the early model of the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP). The original MFIP design emerged to identify strategies for poverty reduction that would leverage change and have a multiplier effect. MFIP, a first response to welfare reform and TANF, incorporated needs for education, health care, child care, transportation and housing into a single program that individualized support to meet each individual's circumstances and aspirations. The initial model was soon diminished by a combination of factors but it is this comprehensive, integrated approach that is needed to create a renewed and revised approach to TANF programs and siloed program funding in each state and county.

Timely reforms are needed to the following systems:

*Tax policy should be a focus.* Some offsets to low-income people who may or may not pay taxes are noted above, but the essential issue of progressivity in tax codes needs attention. As long as low- and moderate-income people pay a disproportionate amount of their income in taxes, the ability to move out of poverty is difficult.

*Resource management and land use planning are issues that leverage many changes in systems.* Resources are the assets of a community. How they are sustained and used properly may define whether or not a community is relegated to long-term poverty or enjoys economic stability. Land use decisions have an impact on how and where business and industry can thrive, whether or not workers can easily get to jobs, whether or not decent housing stock is available throughout a community, and whether or not communities form entities with political clout.

*Justice system reforms are essential to reducing poverty.* Everything from choices between who is profiled and who is arrested, who is actually judged by peers, who is incarcerated and where and for how long, and what support is offered to those in prison and reentering society underscores the impact of racism and poverty on disparities. This is an issue area in which practices and policies have profound impacts on long-term, deeply entrenched poverty and the creation of almost insurmountable barriers to asset building and economic mobility.

*Health care policy, as the recent political dialogue underscores, is a leveraging issue.* Reform in health care, which is a high employment industry that anchors the assets of some communities, has multiple impacts on poverty reduction. If all people have adequate access to affordable (sometimes free) quality care, they are better able to prepare for and engage in work. Communities are more secure when health care is comprehensive and includes mental health and addiction coverage. In addition, employers who now bear the burden of health care costs could expand their businesses and hiring, and may be able to improve wages. More livable wage and better jobs can be created in a growing health sector.

## PROMOTING CIVIC STRENGTHENING ACTIVITIES

People experiencing poverty need to be involved in public dialogues about community leadership, genuine representation and community needs. It is useful to recognize that participation is a term that has not always led to power. As Sherry Arnstein wrote in 1969 in “A Ladder of Civic Participation,” many government-sponsored ideas about participation are really just offerings of “therapy” or forms of “manipulation.” Some public sector efforts have involved people by allowing them to inform or consult in processes that are often about tokenism and not genuine participation. Real citizen power is realized when people and communities work in partnership with the public sector and ultimately hold power in public life.

- **Join with other foundations in advancing civic engagement.** One example of this is The Funders Committee for Civic Participation, which is committed to “enhancing democratic involvement in all dimensions of civic life, including elections, governance, media, and civil society, with a particular emphasis on disenfranchised and disempowered communities” ([www.funderscommittee.org](http://www.funderscommittee.org)). The FCCP is an affinity group of the Council on Foundations.
- **Convene a regional consortium of funders and nonprofits to expand voter participation and to develop and support reform of civic structures.** Some foundations are positioned to play an important role in nonprofit, nonpartisan election activities and policies that drive structural reforms to ensure that democracy works for everyone.
- **Participatory behavior is essential in the coming years.**

— **Census:** The 2010 census will determine the level of representation that each state in the region has in the next decade. People experiencing poverty and immigrant communities are almost always undercounted, and a widespread campaign is needed to educate residents of the region about the importance of their participation in the census.

— **Elections:** The 2010 elections will determine who is represented at the state, local and national levels. Communities that have high voter turnout are more likely to have their needs addressed and gain public resources than others. Organizations that work with the Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network have developed tools that could be adapted for use throughout the nation, and help to meet dual goals: expanding the capacity of the nonprofit sector to support civic activities on an ongoing basis, and increase the votes and voices of people traditionally underrepresented in elections.

Structural reforms are needed in the ways in which elections and other democratic practices are carried out. The Brennan Center for Justice is an excellent resource for understanding and setting policy priorities in this issue area. For example, judicial elections demand reforms to ensure that the third branch of government is independent. Justice at Stake is a nonpartisan partnership of over 45 nonprofits, judicial and legal organizations working for fair and impartial courts. A foundation could affiliate with that partnership, which is already addressing judicial independence in some – but not most – of the states in the region and needs local, state-based partners. In many regions, issues of tribal sovereignty and the tribal justice systems, as well as the intersection of tribal and state or local jurisdictions, deserves continued attention.

Looking to the model work begun by the Joyce Foundation in the Midwest Democracy Network, cited above, a foundation could convene groups at any jurisdictional level to determine where

strategic infrastructure development and project support could ensure that low-income people have the opportunity to play a role in the decisions that affect their lives and that interact with systems that are accessible and fair.

- **Support leadership for civil society.** National and regional programs exist to support individuals who seek leadership in local, state and national elected offices. A foundation that supports civic engagement can support increased activity in the wide array of ways in which people move into positions of power: participation in civic organizations, work on government commissions and task forces, and seeking elected office. National training programs, offered by groups including Wellstone Action, the White House Project and others, need to reach into communities where education, skill building and mentoring are effective means of supporting people moving into formal positions of power. Broader representation of traditionally underrepresented people, most of whom are not frequent voters or elected officials, is a critical path to shifting the balance of power and building a base of support for policies that reduce poverty.

## INFRASTRUCTURE: BUILDING NONPROFIT CAPACITY AND POWER TO EFFECT CHANGE

The ideas presented throughout assume the importance of using multiple strategies to build and sustain long-term capacity for policy engagement. What follows is a summary of possibilities for building capacity for advocacy so that collective power leads to long-term change. Foundations should support grantees' work in:

- Understanding political structures and power analysis (beyond basic civics).
- Planning and internalizing public policy in nonprofit work and poverty-reduction initiatives.
- Policy research and analysis to gain the intelligence needed for sound policy goals.
- Communications capacity, including technology and skills for e-advocacy and organizing, major league message development capacity, and earned media skills.
- Leadership development, including mentoring and training models.
- Organizing capacity: base building, coalitions, issue campaigns.
- Policy advocacy skills.

As a foundation determines how to select among many priorities for investing in policy advocacy as one core strategy for poverty reduction, some basic questions that should govern the dialogue are:

- Who should be included in the decision-making about policy priorities?
- What can be accomplished by the public sector? Based on that determination, which public policy strategies leverage the most change in reducing poverty?
- Which roles leverage the individual foundation's talent and funds to advance policy work as broadly and effectively as possible: partner, convener, leader, funder, information and/or training resource?
- What knowledge and skills are needed at the community level to ensure that public policy work will be integrated into poverty-reduction work and sustained over the long term?
- What are the most effective ways to build enduring capacity for community-based organizations to engage in policy and electoral work?

In 2009, nonprofits and foundations may be at a tipping point, recognizing that public policy is not only permissible activity, but also key to achieving societal change. Foundations are positioned to seize the opportunity and lead the way.

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## BIOGRAPHY

**Marcia Avner** is public policy director with the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits (MCN), a statewide association of nonprofits with more than 1,900 member organizations. Her work includes advocacy and civic engagement training and education, as well as lobbying on election reform and other issues that are important to nonprofits and the people they serve. MCN is dedicated to building the capacity of the nonprofit sector and individual organizations to engage in strategic public policy work and civic participation. MCN informs, connects and strengthens individual nonprofits and the sector, in order to work toward a more just society.

Avner teaches at the Center on Advocacy and Political Leadership at the University of Minnesota-Duluth. Her academic work includes teaching advocacy courses in the Master of Arts in Nonprofit Management program at Hamline University in St. Paul. Her work includes national advocacy and organizing institutes and seminars for nonprofit centers, academic centers and Wellstone Action.

Avner has authored *The Lobbying and Advocacy Handbook for Nonprofit Organizations: Shaping Public Policy at the State and Local Level* (2002) and *The Board Member's Guide to Lobbying and Advocacy* (2004), published by Fieldstone Alliance.

Prior to her work with MCN, Avner served as communications director for U.S. Senator Paul Wellstone, deputy mayor of St. Paul, executive director of The Minnesota Project, assistant commissioner of energy for the State of Minnesota, and legislative director with the Minnesota Public Interest Research Group.

Avner has a bachelor's degree from Carnegie Mellon University and a master's degree from the University of Arkansas.

Avner serves on numerous community and nonprofit boards, including the national Center for Lobbying in the Public Interest, Wellstone Action! and the Wellstone Action Fund. She is chair of the board of directors of the Nonprofit Information Networking Association, which publishes *The Nonprofit Quarterly*.