# Best Practices and Emerging Trends in Advocacy Grantmaking

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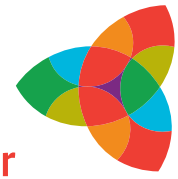

Center for
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## About Tanya Beer and the Center for Evaluation Innovation

*Tanya Beer* is the Associate Director for the Center for Evaluation Innovation. The Center is a nonprofit effort that is pushing evaluation practice in new directions and into new arenas. Founded in 2009 and based in Washington D.C., the Center specializes in areas that are hard to measure and where fresh thinking and new approaches to evaluation are required. This includes, for example, the evaluation of advocacy and policy change, communications, and systems change efforts. The Center partners with others to develop and share new ideas and solutions to evaluation challenges through research, communications, training development, and convening.

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# Best Practices and Emerging Trends in Advocacy Grantmaking

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*Over the past decade, the philanthropic sector has seen a sharp increase in advocacy and policy grantmaking and evaluation. Although the field of advocacy grantmaking is still young relative to programmatic grantmaking, a considerable amount of research and conversation has occurred in recent years around how funders can best design their funding strategies and auxiliary activities (technical assistance, convening, communications, etc.) to support successful advocacy. At the Center for Evaluation Innovation, we track the evolution of advocacy and policy theory and practice in philanthropy, convene national thought leaders to share their lessons and best practices, and research emerging questions about effective advocacy funding and evaluation.*

*Our research has revealed a wide variety of conceptual frames and approaches to advocacy grantmaking. While each has unique implications for grantee selection and management, they are all built on a set of fundamental best practices for advocacy grantmaking. These best practices are aimed at creating the funding conditions under which individual advocacy organizations can perform at their best and can increase their capacity for effective advocacy work over time. This brief offers a summary of the principles of advocacy grantmaking and introduces readers to emerging thinking and approaches among funders of advocacy and policy work.*

## Best Practices in Advocacy Grantmaking

A variety of national organizations, such as Alliance for Justice, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, the Center on Philanthropy & Public Policy at the University of Southern California, the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, and many others have arrived at a general consensus about a core set of advocacy grantmaking and evaluation best practices. The majority of this work has focused on the appropriate design for grants that support the capacity of individual advocacy organizations.

Advocacy organizations face a set of operational conditions that traditional programmatic nonprofit organizations do not. Many of the characteristics of advocacy—such as uncontrollable external influences, shifting strategies and tactics, intense periods of activity, and active opposition—run afoul of traditional grantmaking practices. Grantmaking is often designed to support programs that follow a predictable and stable path of implementation and have outcomes that are relatively easy to anticipate. Conventions such as restricted program support, short grant periods, rigid reporting cycles, and expectations for continuous progress

toward pre-determined outcomes are not only a poor fit for advocacy and policy funding, they often inhibit advocates' ability to make progress. As a result, seven key principles or "best practices" of advocacy grantmaking have crystallized in the literature:

### 1. Provide unrestricted general operating support.

A hallmark of high-performing advocacy organizations is their ability to change tactics and strategies as the situation demands. They must be able to respond quickly to unexpected windows of opportunity and to the tactics and strategies of the opposition. Restricted grants, or grants given to implement a specific set of predetermined activities, limit advocates' ability to adapt to the political or policy environment in a timely way. Unrestricted general operating support allows advocates to pursue the strategies they need, when they need them. This principle changes the way funders and grantees talk and think about "accountability." Rather than grantees being held accountable for executing a program according to their application, funders hold grantees accountable for making smart tactical decisions in response to their changing environment.

### 2. Offer multi-year grants and take the long view.

Rather than grantees being held accountable for executing a program according to their application, funders hold grantees accountable for making smart tactical decisions in response to their changing environment.

While policy victories can sometimes seem quick because they occur in sudden windows of opportunity, they often require years of groundwork and several attempts and failures. For example, advocates may make a strategic decision to encourage the introduction of legislation even when they know it will not pass. This can help them to plan future strategies because it reveals the opposition's objections, shows what kinds of messages resonate with decision makers, and gives advocates an idea of where to target their work during the legislative session. It can take several years—or even decades—for advocates to build the necessary momentum and pressure to make significant policy progress. Short grantmaking cycles can prevent advocates from investing in necessary long-term strategies, and from maintaining momentum from year to year. Finally, survey research shows that advocacy grantees associate multi-year grants (either general operating or restricted) with capacity building. Conversely, advocates associate one-year programmatic grants with "cooptation" by foundations because funding restrictions and the constant threat that funding will not be renewed from year to year forces advocates to bend their agendas and tactics to the foundation's preferences.[1]

### 3. Fund at higher dollar amounts to build capacity.

Our experience with hundreds of advocacy organizations and funders across the country reveals that advocacy organizations are chronically underfunded, particularly in relationship to opposition that is often highly resourced. Private sector interests sometimes partner with nonprofit advocates and can lend sizable support to an advocacy effort. But much more commonly, nonprofit advocacy organizations are fighting for causes that have no natural private sector allies or that have active private sector adversaries with deep pockets. Ad-

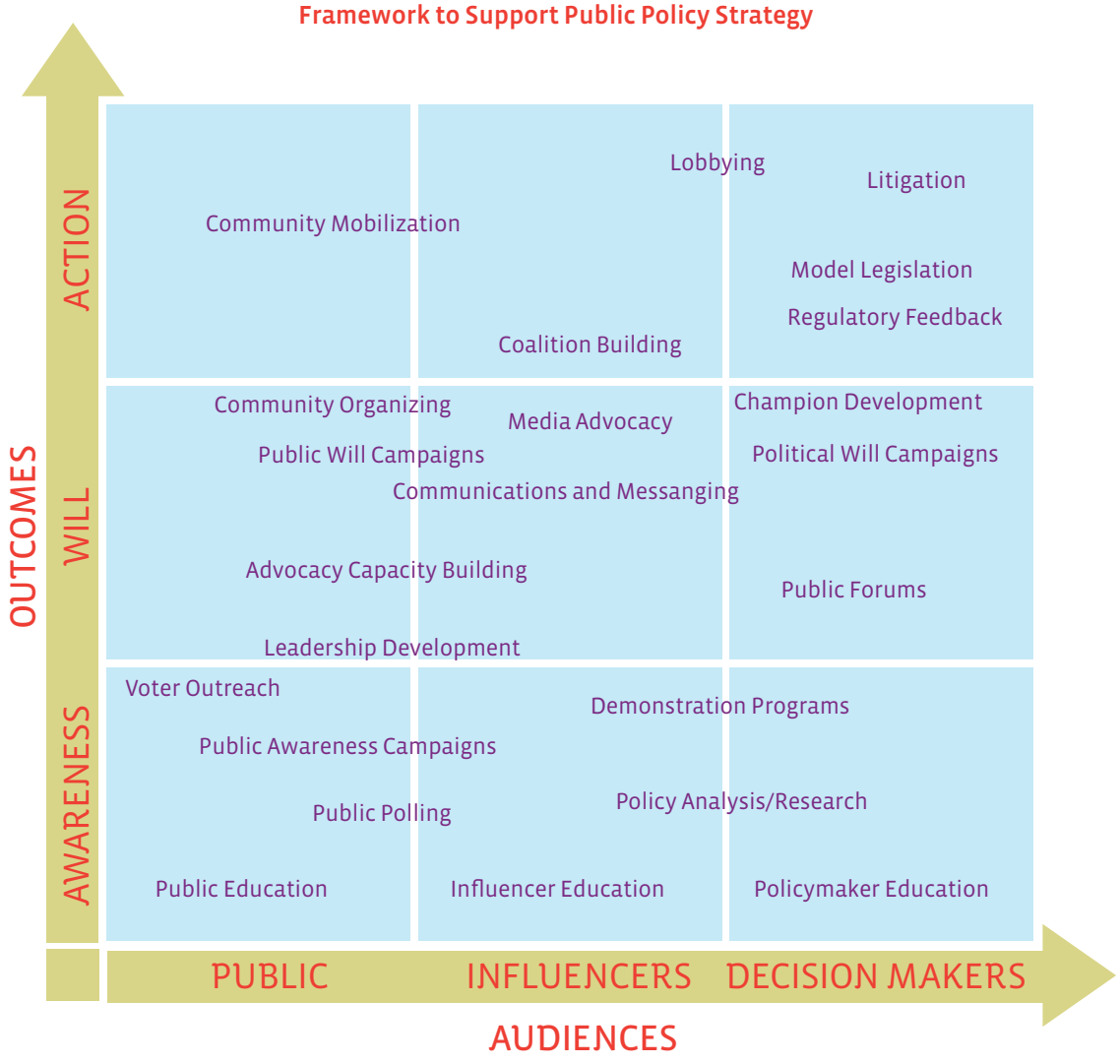
1 Delfin F.G., Tang S.Y. (2008) Foundation Impact on environmental nongovernmental organizations. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 37(4), 603.

ditionally, many funders still hesitate to support advocacy at all, or are under actual or perceived constraints as to what they can fund, leaving advocacy organizations with a smaller pool of funding opportunities.

4. Look for interim outcomes that signal progress rather than holding grantees accountable for a policy "win."
Given the complexity of the policy environment and the array of factors in that environment that grantees cannot control, it is inappropriate to judge a grantee's success—or the foundation's success—entirely on whether a desired policy change occurred within the grant period. Foundations and nonprofits that are new to advocacy and policy tend to have unrealistic expectations.

The matrix below, developed by Julia Coffman with support from the Irvine Foundation, illustrates the broad categories of outcomes (increase in awareness, will or action) that are likely to appear among different target audiences (public, influencers or decision makers) as a result of the different advocacy strategies or tactics charted on the matrix. Asking grantees to articulate and track realistic interim outcomes will keep both grantees and foundations aware of the full scope of work that needs to happen among a whole variety of players to achieve a policy "win."

**Framework to Support Public Policy Strategy**



### 5. Create flexible reporting requirements and timelines.

Periods of intense action around key decision-making moments (elections, legislative sessions, litigation, etc.) can make it difficult for advocacy organizations to comply with reporting deadlines that are designed for the foundation's convenience. Negotiating reporting deadlines that fall during slower periods can help advocates stay focused on their work when they most need to be.

## Principles for Advocacy Grantmaking

1. Provide unrestricted general operating support.
2. Offer multi-year grants and take the long view.
3. Fund at higher dollar amounts to build capacity.
4. Look for interim outcomes that signal progress.
5. Create flexible reporting requirements and time lines.
6. Do not apply traditional program evaluation models to advocacy work.
7. Design grantmaking and auxiliary supports that build advocacy capacity.

Advocates also report that it is challenging for them to use conventional programmatic grant application and progress report formats. Grant applications and progress report forms should be tailored to match the unique work of advocacy. For example, asking grantees to detail a full year's worth of specific activities in a grant application sends a message that the foundation does not expect tactical moves in response to the environment. Asking grantees to include a count of the population served (a common field in many progress report forms) does not fit the kind of outcomes advocates can expect to produce. Instead, applications and progress reports should capture details about grantees' political analysis, which audience they target, what tactical shifts they make and why, and what unexpected obstacles demand their attention.

### 6. Do not apply traditional program evaluation models to advocacy work.

Traditional program evaluation is usually designed to identify and refine a program (formative evaluation) and then judge the merit or worth of it (summative evaluation), often with the idea that the key program "ingredients" could be repeated to produce the same results in a different context. But advocacy is not a formulaic set of activities that would produce similar outcomes if repeated in a new time or place. Nor does advocacy have a clear "baseline" and a fixed set of outcomes that should change in a predictable way. Consider, for example, that a positive outcome in advocacy may sometimes be preventing a damaging policy change from happening, or maintaining the status quo. Consequently, advocacy requires a unique evaluation approach. As best practices and new approaches to advocacy grantmaking have evolved, so, too, have the design and methods of advocacy evaluation. While the nuances of this distinct field are too many to detail here, dozens of excellent resources exist on the evaluation of advocacy.[2]

### 7. Design grantmaking and auxiliary supports that build advocacy capacity.

Several organizations have conducted studies to identify the core capacities of advocacy organizations, and a variety of tools have been developed to measure capacity in individual advocacy organizations.[3] In addition to basic capacities required of all nonprofit organizations (such as good governance, financial sustainability,

2 For clearinghouse of advocacy evaluation resources, go to the Point K Learning Center, hosted by Innovation Network at www.innonet.org [free registration required].

3 See, for example, research and tools by Alliance for Justice (ww.afj.org) and TCC Group (www.tccgrp.com).

appropriate staffing, etc.), experts generally agree on a set of core capacities unique to advocacy organizations, such as strength in political analysis and the policy process, strategic communications, alliance and partnership building, resource flexibility, and strategic positioning. Long-time advocacy funders consistently recommend helping grantees diagnose their capacity needs and offering resources—from money to technical assistance to peer learning opportunities—to build these capacities. Finally, individual advocacy organizations often need training and coaching related to specific advocacy strategies such as media advocacy, grassroots organizing, leadership development, lobbying, regulatory advocacy, and litigation.

These core principles are now taking firm hold among funders regardless of whether their grantmaking aims to achieve a specific policy change or to build the capacity of individual advocacy organizations. While funders who are new to advocacy often begin by applying their existing programmatic grantmaking habits to advocacy, our experience is that they tend to move toward these best practices as they become more attuned to the nuances of policy work.

## Emerging Frameworks for Advocacy Grantmaking

Now that best practices are established for supporting individual advocacy organizations, funders have begun to grapple with the fundamentally relational nature of advocacy work. In direct service work, an individual organization often can be judged by its ability to deliver on its own objectives, regardless of how well other organizations in the same field do their jobs. But as funders increasingly recognize that policy progress requires a whole variety of actors approaching similar goals with different strategies, they are beginning to think more deeply about how to support the right cohort of actors. New theoretical frames are pushing funders to look past single organizations, which are funders' traditional "unit of analysis." Each of these frames or approaches requires funders to think carefully about the appropriate composition of a grant portfolio (i.e., which nonprofits should receive funding), the nature of the work that program officers do to manage advocacy grantmaking, and what kind of outcomes to look for as signals of success.

**Policy Target Approach.** Introduced by Julia Coffman in 2008 with support from the Irvine Foundation, a "policy target" approach means that grantmaking and auxiliary activities are designed to achieve the passage, successful implementation, or maintenance of a specific policy goal.[4] The policy target approach positions the foundation as a leader that marshals and shapes the efforts of particular actors in the sector to advance a specific policy agenda. It requires clear thinking about the specific policy goals a foundation wants to achieve, the political barriers to achieving those goals, and the advocacy strategies most likely to overcome those barriers. Grantees should be selected based on their capacity to "deliver" on the policy goal, how influential they are with key audiences, or how important their participation is to the quality and shape of the policy and its implementation. Program officers working from this approach need deep content expertise, as they often play the role of "chief strategist" for the cohort of grantees.

**Network Approach.** The Monitor Institute, with support from several foundations and Grantmakers for Effective Organizations, has launched a line of work around how funders can cultivate networks to increase

4 For a detailed overview and a sequence of steps and issues to consider when taking this approach, see: Coffman J. (2008). *Foundations and public policy grantmaking*. San Francisco: The James Irvine Foundation.

coordination and collective action. Bringing a network perspective to grantmaking helps trigger "positive social benefits in five key ways: weaving social ties, accessing new and diverse perspectives, openly building and sharing knowledge, creating infrastructure for widespread engagement and coordinating resources and action."[5]

While this literature does not explicitly address advocacy, it is a natural fit for the relational work of policy change. In short, network experts recommend that funders proactively and intentionally create opportunities for "weaving" a network, nurture and fund leaders with the dedicated purpose of network building, and support the inclusion of new members in the network. The network approach requires funders to identify and support grantees who are key nodes of the network or who should be part of the network. Grantee selection may also be based on the characteristics of individual leaders rather than organizations. This frame is particularly useful for funders working in areas where connectivity between players is a challenge, but can be difficult where the "raw material" for robust networks—such as enough organizations or organizations with enough capacity to actively participate in networks—is in short supply.

The network frame for advocacy is particularly useful for funders working in areas where connectivity between players is a challenge, but can be difficult where the "raw material" for robust networks is in short supply.

**Social Movements Approach.** There is a thirty-year history of academic work on social movements, and sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists have researched extensively the role of foundations in social movements.[6] Additionally, several practice-oriented publications aimed at the philanthropic sector have offered "how-to" advice for social movement funders.[7]

Social movements aim to alter existing power dynamics by influencing the public discourse and public policy. According to Masters and Osborn (2010, p.13), movements with transformational goals are "large scale, multi-racial, multi-dimensional, multi-sector, and multi-issue. A movement is not the same as a single-issue organizing or policy campaign. Seen through a movement lens, policy change is a means to a broader social change goal; it is not the goal itself." Foundations who view their advocacy grantmaking as movement building focus on building advocacy infrastructure, organizing a base of constituents, rallying players around a common vision, and building alliances between actors and with other movements. As with other advocacy grantmaking, the movement building frame calls on funders to commit over the long haul, look for intermediate outcomes, and allow for uncertainty and emergence. However, social movement grantmaking does not necessarily improve the nearer-term likelihood that specific policy progress will occur.

5 Scearce, D. (2011). *Catalyzing networks for social change: A funder's guide*. The Monitor Institute and Grantmakers for Effective Organizations.

6 For an extensive bibliography of related work, see Bartley T. (2007). How foundations shape social movements: The construction of an organizational field and the rise of forest certification. *Social Problems, 54*(3), 229-255.

7 See Masters, B., & Osborn, T. (2010). Social movements and philanthropy: How foundations can support movement building. *The Foundation Review*, 2(2), 12-27. Also see a whole series of case studies by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy on foundations' role in the building of the conservative movement. (available at www.ncrp.org)

**Advocacy Niche Approach.** Although this frame is not named as such elsewhere in the literature, it is a "catch all" category for funders who support a particular niche (or strategy skill set) of the advocacy infrastructure (e.g., policy analysis and research, leadership, coalition building). This approach requires funders to assess the field's strengths and gaps and then zoom in on one gap in the field that the foundation is well suited to support over the long term. A strong example of the advocacy niche approach has been the Annie E. Casey Foundation's well-known KIDS COUNT initiative, which has supported organizations to collect and report credible data on the condition of children. It has linked this "research and data" niche to the rest of the advocacy field by training grantees how to interface with other advocates to promote the use of data-based advocacy and communication strategies. While many of the KIDS COUNT grantees also engage in other advocacy strategies, such as grassroots organizing or model policy development, the KIDS COUNT grants have primarily supported the data and communications portion of grantees' work.[8]

When building a portfolio for an advocacy niche approach, funders need to consider building the capacity of individual organizations within the niche and increasing the connection between those organizations and the rest of the field. Special attention to the connectivity between the niche organizations and the broader field can result in field-wide benefits, as grantees become a resource to other advocates.

The field-building approach to advocacy and policy grantmaking aims to create and maintain a high capacity ecosystem of advocacy organizations that are well equipped to respond to the complex political environment and to shape a policy agenda over the long term.

**Field Building Approach.** Rather than shaping grantmaking to achieve a specific policy goal, many funders are seeking to change the capacity and patterns of interaction among a field of advocacy organizations over the long term. This field-building approach to advocacy and policy grantmaking aims to create and maintain a high capacity ecosystem of advocacy organizations that are well equipped to respond to the complex political environment and to shape a policy agenda over the long term. Rather than shaping their grantmaking to achieve a specific policy goal, the field-building approach positions the funder as a long-term resource base, capacity builder, and connector for an ecosystem of advocates.

While this frame is less developed in the literature, our research shows that a funder who adopts this approach must change their primary selection criterion for advocacy grantees from whether an organization and its proposal are strong on its own, to whether the grantee serves the right function in relation to the rest of the advocacy cohort. Program staff should consider how potential grantees interact with and counterbalance one another, and how the differences between them are complementary.

8 It is important to note that in recent years, the Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT strategy has been evolving to include a broader array of advocacy strategies, with the Foundation and its grantees also working toward specific policy targets. In its current form, it may no longer be considered a "niche approach."

## Conclusion

The overarching question guiding funders' choices among approaches to advocacy funding appears to be: What kind of foundation do we want to be? A lead strategist? A long-term capacity builder and connector? An expert and integral "pillar" serving a particular function in the field? Some foundations have the staffing and financial capacity—as well as the disposition—to play all three of these roles. Others are a better fit with one role. One role is not necessarily better than other. The important point is that a foundation be cognizant of which role(s) it is playing, the tradeoffs between approaches, and how its choices affect grantees as well as other funders. Once an approach has been chosen, the funder should thoughtfully and transparently structure its portfolio, its auxiliary supports, and its evaluation in a way that best fits that approach.