Evaluating Policy Change and Advocacy: The Funder's Perspective

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Over the last five years, several funders, led by The California Endowment, The Atlantic Philanthropies, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, have supported efforts to build the field of advocacy and policy change evaluation. Two trends in particular have driven the need to invest in this field.

The first trend is an increasing awareness and understanding among funders about the importance of policy change and the role of advocacy to achieving their missions. More funders now are embracing policy change as a key way to advance their goals, as evidenced by an increasing number of:

- Funder discussions and collaborations around advocacy
- Funder staff hired with direct experience in advocacy and public policy
- Grants and dollars for advocacy and policy change work
- Publications and conference sessions on public policy, with an increasing degree of sophistication
- Engagements with government at all levels, including the Obama administration.

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The second trend is a greater demand for accountability and measurement to determine effectiveness and impact. Even before the recent economic downturn that severely affected foundations' assets, boards of directors were calling for better ways to measure the impact of their grantmaking. Funders have to make difficult decisions about what to support. The tension between funding services to meet immediate human needs versus investing in advocacy to ultimately help a greater number of people through policy change, demands that funders be able to *demonstrate* that policy-related grantmaking pays off.

These trends have led funders to want to know three things:

- Is the overall strategy to advance policy appropriate, realistic, and generally sound, and will it produce the changes funders seek? Funders need to assess whether their strategies are making progress and if they should stick with them over several years and grantmaking cycles.

- **Is the advocacy work that funders support, particularly the organizations they invest in, high quality and strategic?** Advocacy organizations tend to believe that they know what they are doing and that they are doing it well, and therefore funders should just support them. But funders want to know more than just what advocates are doing, such as how many people attended their briefings or what publications they produced. Funders want to know whether something has *changed* in the policy environment as a result of advocacy efforts, and what their grantees did to make policy success more likely.

- **Will the policy changes funders seek make real and meaningful differences in people's lives?** Funders are seeking better ways to connect their investments in policy and advocacy with a change in impacts for people. This is one of the most difficult challenges for funders, however, because actual impacts often will not be felt for years *after* a policy is adopted, and achieving a policy change can be a long-term endeavor in and of itself. Nevertheless, evaluation built on a sound theory of change can help funders connect the dots between their grants and the long-term impacts they seek.

New evaluation tools, methodologies, and approaches have been developed over the last several years to help answer these questions. Funders are using these tools to design evaluations that are appropriate to grantees, their overall strategies, and the resources available. But as with any new field, there have been several challenges in moving toward an increased emphasis on advocacy evaluation. From a funder's perspective, two in particular stand out:

- Obtaining grantee engagement and buy-in
- Obtaining funder staff engagement and buy-in

A third challenge, although one with which this brief will not deal, is how to effectively engage evaluators on advocacy evaluation. Just as funders and advocates need to develop a deeper understanding of, and become comfortable with, the policy change process and how to evaluate it, so must evaluators be able to structure evaluations that measure appropriate outcomes in realistic timeframes. In addition, evaluators must be able to work collaboratively with grantees and funders.

Several funders with early experience in the field have identified strategies to respond to these challenges. As the field grows and more funders implement advocacy evaluation, funders should anticipate these issues and put into practice strategies that best fit the culture and structure of their organizations to increase the "take up" and ultimately effectiveness of evaluation.

Funders with early experience with advocacy evaluation have found that getting buy-in from grantees and other funder staff can be challenging. But they also have identified strategies to respond to these challenges.

Challenge One: Obtaining Grantee Engagement and Buy-In

To be meaningful, an evaluation has to reflect the perspective of, and be useful to, advocates. Although grantee involvement in evaluation is important across the board, it is essential with advocacy. Several strategies have emerged to help tackle this challenge.

Recognize both grantee and funder interests. A funder's needs are not always aligned with a grantee's. For an evaluation to be effective, it needs to be of value to both parties, and efforts need to be made early in the planning process to bring the two perspectives together.

Understandably, advocates can be skeptical of a funder's intent regarding evaluation. Advocates may feel that the evaluation's primary purpose is holding them to a standard of performance that does not reflect the reality of the policy environment. Moreover, they may want to know how their work fits into the funder's overall strategy given that advocacy and policy change does not occur in a vacuum. Advocates want to know, "What is the *funder's* theory of change in funding this group or that strategy?" Unless these questions are addressed, honest communication and trust will be challenging.

An important lesson from early evaluation experiences is that it is critical to establish an open line of communication with grantees *from the beginning*. A successful evaluation must be meaningful for both the funder and the grantee and it must meet each of their needs and goals. Ideally, both should feel a sense of ownership.

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Pilot evaluation with respected "early adopters." To forge an open, effective relationship with advocates and build momentum for the evaluation, some funders have found it helpful to pilot an evaluation with a few grantees that are willing to engage in the evaluation process and are considered leaders among their peers. Interest and demand for evaluation among other advocates increases when these "early adopters" gain experience and share it.

Use communication guidelines regarding evaluation. Recognizing the importance of establishing open lines of communication, several foundations drafted a guidance document to help funders communicate effectively with grantees about evaluation. These guidelines (included at the end of this brief) emphasize the importance of clarifying expectations about a range of issues before the evaluation begins. Ideally, these issues should be discussed before advocacy grants are made to ensure that both funders and grantees understand what the goals are and what will be evaluated. The document also emphasizes the importance of evaluation as a tool for both grantee and funder learning so evaluation informs the advocacy strategy in real time, identifying potential adjustments along with what worked and what did not.

Invest in building evaluation capacity. Building capacity for evaluation and establishing a culture of learning among advocates are two goals that funders have focused on, beyond using evaluation to determine if the advocacy effort itself was successful. The evaluation process can help advocates be more reflective and analytic and therefore think more strategically. Assuming grantees see the value of evaluation, building their capacity to do it is critical.

If funders do not use external evaluators, such as for small grants or grants to small organizations, funders should be prepared to provide capacity building support or technical assistance. Even if evaluation tools exist to help them, most advocates need some assistance in implementing them and in developing an "evaluative" way of thinking.

Challenge Two: Funder staff (Program Officer) Engagement and Buy-In

Within funder organizations, the development, design and implementation of evaluations are typically led by staff with expertise in evaluation. Many funders even have separate evaluation departments. Often, this results in the evaluation being separated from program development and grantmaking activities in order to preserve a degree of distance and objectivity.

For advocacy evaluation, however, this model can be counterproductive. Because of the interrelationship between advocacy strategy development and evaluation, program officers need to understand and be involved in decisions regarding how evaluation will be used and carried out. Evaluation can't remain the purview of evaluation staff alone.

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Evaluation staff at several foundations have acknowledged the challenge in obtaining program staff involvement in the evaluation process. These strategies have been identified to gain greater foundation-wide buy-in.

Get buy in from the top. A clear statement by the CEO, program directors, and vice presidents about the value of evaluation and the funder's philosophy about how evaluation will be used is key to engaging program staff. Several funders who believe the primary purpose of evaluation is to promote learning within their organizations (rather than using it just for accountability) have said that this approach facilitates open communication within foundations.

In addition, particularly for family and community foundations, the board should be engaged to assess their level of support and comfort with the evaluation process and approach. Because policy change takes time, boards should be encouraged to set realistic expectations about what can be achieved within certain timeframes.

Help staff learn about advocacy evaluation and integrate it into their policy-related grantmaking. Training must ground program officers in a firm understanding of the policy change process and the specific strategies they are employing.

Get comfortable with interim outcomes. Because the timeframe generally involved in policy-related work is not conducive to demonstrating a conclusive result within a single one, two or, even, three-year grant cycle, being able to measure progress along the way is critical. With clearly identified policy goals, strategies, and milestones that signal if you are on the right track, evaluation can be a mechanism to assess whether the strategy is working along the way, and not just after the fact.

That said, funders must become more comfortable with interim outcomes, including capacity building, especially because after a policy change occurs, advocacy efforts must be sustained through the regulatory and implementation phases in order to get to the long-term impacts funders seek.

Use a staged approach to help funders gain experience and experiment with this type of evaluation. It can be useful to identify like-minded and interested program officers who want to work with evaluation staff on developing and implementing an evaluation. They then become leaders with their program colleagues in helping to advance the approach.

Strive for a more integrated approach. Ideally, funders can have a structure and culture that supports policy, evaluation, and program staff working together. This team approach can bring greater rigor and clarity to the grantmaking process and strategy as well as ensure that the evaluation fits with the grant or initiative. For example, one foundation took an interdisciplinary approach, with the directors of evaluation and public policy jointly leading the internal effort to ensure the advocacy evaluations they funded reflected both evaluation expertise and an understanding of the policy environment and advocacy strategies.

Conclusions

Being able to rigorously evaluate advocacy and policy change efforts is important to funders for several reasons. Evaluation can help funders understand the complexity of the policy change process and establish realistic expectations of what a grantee or an initiative can accomplish and in what timeframe.

By understanding what progress means in the context of policy change and what ultimate impacts can be achieved, funders increase their comfort level with advocacy and gain confidence that they can track progress and obtain a return on their investment. The evaluation process will then help more funders to understand the value of investing in policy change efforts and how to invest in them in a way that is meaningful and realistic.

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Evaluation can also help funders assess which advocacy groups to fund by providing tools that speak to effectiveness and skill. These tools can give funders greater confidence in potential or existing advocacy grantees. This increased confidence may in turn increase funder willingness to provide advocates with general support funding, as many advocates have been urging.[1]

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, evaluation is an important tool to help both funders and their grantees assess the soundness and progress of their overall policy change strategies. Especially as funders and advocates respond to the economic crisis, evaluation can help organizations prioritize their tactics and build staff knowledge and skills, which will improve their advocacy capacity over the long run.

Over the last several years, numerous publications and resources have been developed to help funders, as well as advocates and evaluators, design and implement policy-related evaluations. Funders, especially those who are new the field, should consider these recommendations, which will help promote clarity, communication, and preparation, before undertaking policy-related grantmaking and evaluation.

1. Develop internal partnerships or collaborative working relationships between program, policy, and evaluation staff when implementing policy and advocacy evaluations, and recognize that it will take time for staff to understand and embrace it.

1 General support gives grantees maximum flexibility to being able to respond to the policy change environment, but has few objectives and deliverables for a funder to monitor.

2. Provide training opportunities for staff on evaluation tools and methodologies, as well as on how to engage with grantees about evaluation.

3. Clarify the funder's view about policy change, its philosophy for engaging in evaluation, and what it expects from evaluation.

4. Seek agreement with grantees regarding views for how policy change occurs and the overall strategy for achieving your policy goals.

5. Dialogue early and often with grantees about progress with both the strategy and evaluation.

About the Author

Barbara Masters brings twenty-five years of health policy and advocacy experience to her role as principal of MastersPolicy Consulting. Barbara has worked in policy and advocacy at the local, state, and federal levels, including more than seven years in philanthropy as Director of Public Policy at The California Endowment, six years on Capitol Hill, and four years in local government. Contact Barbara at barbara@masterspolicy.com.

About the Center for Evaluation Innovation

The Center for Evaluation Innovation is pushing evaluation practice in new directions and into new arenas. The Center specializes in areas that are hard to measure and where fresh thinking and new approaches are required. This includes, for example, advocacy and policy change, communications, and systems change efforts. The Center works with other organizations to develop and then share new ideas and solutions to evaluation challenges through research, communications, training development, and convening. Find the Center at www.evaluationinnovation.org.

About *Advocacy Evaluation Advances*

In January 2009, 120 advocates, evaluators and funders gathered at The California Endowment's Center for Healthy Communities for two days of thought-provoking presentations and discussions on recent advocacy evaluation advances. The convening, sponsored by The California Endowment with support from The Atlantic Philanthropies and Annie E. Casey Foundation, focused on real-life experiences with advocacy evaluation and what has been learned from testing different tools and approaches in this emerging field over the last several years. It also focused on challenges that still must be addressed, and identified priorities for the field moving forward. The examples featured in this brief were presented and discussed during the convening. To access other convening and presenter resources, including many mentioned in this brief, visit the *Advocacy Evaluation Advances* web page at www.calendow.org/article.aspx?id=3774.

This brief draws on themes discussed during a plenary session at *Advocacy Evaluation Advances* that included Astrid Hendricks (The California Endowment), Jackie Williams Kaye (The Atlantic Philanthropies), Tom Kelly (Annie E. Casey Foundation) and Susan Fairchild (Social Venture Partners). The session was moderated by the author, Barbara Masters (formerly of The California Endowment).

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The California Endowment

Attatchment

Ten Tips for Funders on Communicating with Grantees about Advocacy and Policy Change Evaluation[1]

Advocacy is a dynamic and flexible process that can make evaluation challenging. As a result, advocacy and public policy grantees can be apprehensive about evaluation. Funder communications about evaluation can help ease grantee concerns and go a long way toward encouraging grantees to embrace evaluation and its potential benefits.

These "tips" are intended to help funders consider what to communicate to advocacy and policy grantees about evaluation. While most guidelines apply to evaluation generally, they are discussed here specifically in the context of advocacy and policy change efforts. Not all may be applicable to your effort; focus on those most consistent with your approach to evaluation

1. Clarify what you value and want to know about your investments. Funders value different things in their advocacy and policy change grantmaking. Some value policy change regardless of how it happens; others care about the achievement of certain steps and outcomes along the way. For example, some funders want to see the involvement of voices affected by the policies being debated. Others emphasize collaboration among advocacy groups. Still others value advocates' use of evaluation and data to inform their ongoing work. Communicate what you value, as it helps grantees and evaluators know what issues and outcomes you care about and want feedback on. Also, share your policy strategy and intent. There are different theories of policy change[2], as well, and you should make sure that you and your grantees are on the same page.

2. Explain your expectations about how grantees should use the evaluation. Communicate why evaluation is important and the ways in which it can be used. In general, evaluation use increases when grantees can apply it to their planning and strategies. This is particularly true with advocacy and policy change efforts, where strategy constantly is evolving and being considered. Support evaluation approaches that inform grantees' policy change strategies *as they unfold* and emphasize your expectation that grantees use evaluation to make informed choices and adjust their strategies as necessary.

3. Share how *you* will use the evaluation. Every advocacy effort and policy goal is different and each funder approaches its grantmaking and evaluation work differently. Although the primary purpose of the evaluation should be to learn from the overall effort as well as to inform your or your grantees' strategy during the course of the grant, be clear if your intention is also to evaluate the effectiveness of the grantee's work. Distinguish between whether you want to know if grantees' strategies are sound versus whether they *implemented* the strategy well.

1 Stachowiak, S. (2009). *Six theories about how policy change happens*. Seattle, WA: Organizational Research Services. www.organizationalresearch.com

2 These "tips" were developed for an Advanced Practice Institute on *Evaluating Advocacy Grantmaking* at the Council on Foundations 2007 Annual Conference. The session was sponsored by The California Endowment, The Atlantic Philanthropies, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. More than 30 funders attended the session and informed these guidelines.

4. Convey your understanding that advocacy and evaluation strategies may evolve. Grantee advocacy strategies can shift over time in response to changing political factors. Communicate support for such shifts when they make strategic sense, and acknowledge that the evaluation's focus or methods also may need to shift accordingly. At the same time, express a desire to know about advocacy or evaluation changes when they happen.

5. Advise grantees to be realistic in what they expect and promise. Grantees sometimes overpromise. Because policy change may take many years to achieve, caution grantees that their outcome expectations should be realistic and aligned with the grant's timeframe. Warn them not to promise multiyear outcomes with single-year grants. Emphasize that the policy end goal is not the only outcome of interest.

6. Emphasize that evaluation is a partnership effort. Advocacy evaluations benefit when they are participatory and feature advocates, funders, and evaluators (when external evaluators are involved) working together on the evaluation from start to finish. Stress that evaluations should consider the interests, views, values, and capacities of both advocates and funders in the evaluation's design and implementation.

7. Acknowledge different grantee evaluation capacity levels. Many advocacy and policy grantees are small organizations and are new to evaluation. Also, some advocacy and policy grantees include non-traditional advocates such as neighborhood service providers. Consequently, many grantees start with a low capacity for tracking their advocacy work. Communicate that you are not necessarily looking for grantees to have strong evaluation capacity upfront, but instead are looking for a commitment to evaluation and an ability to articulate the questions grantees would like answered. If that commitment exists, express a willingness to work with grantees on developing the evaluation capacity that helps them answer those questions.

8. Identify from the beginning what is an acceptable level of methodological rigor. Evaluation designs with the highest level of rigor—experiments or quasi-experiments that use control or comparison groups or situations—tend not to make much sense in dynamic policy environments. Define rigor as achieving clarity and consensus about the evaluation's outcomes, methodology, and indicators, and ensuring that the evaluation produces objective, credible, and defensible findings (e.g., using triangulation of methods or evidence).

9. Address the attribution versus contribution question. Advocacy work is typically collaborative and complex. Definitively isolating whether a certain policy outcome would not have happened without a grantee's efforts is difficult to impossible in this context. Signal that you are not looking for grantees to prove attribution or claim full credit for policy outcomes. Rather, advise grantees to use data to establish a *credible and plausible* case that their work contributed to policy outcomes.

10. Attend to potential ethical issues regarding evaluation dissemination and exposure. Some advocates may resist having their evaluation results disseminated or their stories told because it reveals too much about their strategies. Don't assume that grantees always will want to share their evaluation results, even when they have been successful. To the extent possible, clarify upfront what can be shared publicly, or agree to seek grantee consent before sharing evaluation results.