

# Intersection of Community Organizing and Racial Justice Funding: Limited Data and Limited Dollars

by Rick Cohen

Among the thousands of possible subjects in the Foundation Center's online database of some 2.4 million grants from over 100,000 private foundation, corporate and public charity grantmakers, the terms "community organizing" and "civic engagement" do not appear as subjects or topics around which grants are organized and counted. In light of the litany of foundation-supported and published reports attesting to the importance of community organizing in social change strategies,<sup>1</sup> the absence of "community organizing" and "civic engagement" as official categories used by the Foundation Center is striking.

Foundations appear to increasingly recognize the importance of community organizing and mobilization as a core strategy for achieving social change goals, but actual support for building on-the-ground organizing capacities and networks has not risen to anything approaching commensurate levels. The lack of support specifically slated to racial justice organizing is even more dramatic. This, of course, gives rise to questions about a possible gap between the stated commitments of foundations to community organizing and where they actually invest their funding.

An examination of the Foundation Center's online database between 2009-12 (but mostly reflecting 2009-10) revealed 287 grants for a total of \$26.1 million to U.S. nonprofits with the use of "community organizing" as searchable keywords used in the texts of the recorded descriptions of the grants. Many foundations that engage in community organizing grantmaking might be nonplussed to see themselves omitted from this list, but that is due to how the purpose of their grants is described – not only in the descriptions generated by the Foundation Center, but also in the descriptions they generate and supply in their own materials. (See Chart A for the largest funders of community organizing during this period. See Chart B for a list of the largest grant recipients.)

Overall, the research and trends suggest that foundations by and large recognize the importance of community organizing but still seem wary about matching their grantmaking support for explicit organizing efforts. Compared to overall

grantmaking, community organizing receives a pittance of foundation grants, although some organizing entities may receive other grants not explicitly linked to organizing (with overhead payments that can help sustain organizing efforts, or as general support grants that can be used flexibly for organizing and other program activities).

## Support for Racial Justice Organizing?

Some of the foundations in the identifiable, community organizing world overlap with foundations that describe some of their other grants as addressing issues of "racial equity" or "racial justice." (See Chart C for grants between 2009-12.) Focusing on foundations with large amounts of grantmaking in these fields is not meant to diminish the crucial roles played by smaller grantmakers that are mainstays in funding community organizing and racial justice. Nonetheless, six-figure grant totals for racial justice or community organizing activities do not represent significantly large amounts of support. And because the number of supporting funders and foundations championing the inclusion of a structural racism lens in organizing work is relatively small, the challenge of attracting the vast majority of larger funders into this realm remains difficult.

But there are many more foundations than the large grantmakers, and their overall patterns reveal much about where the foundation sector *writ large* stands as opposed to grantmakers with more connected racial justice orientations. These include smaller foundations (e.g., the Akonadi Foundation, the Solidago Foundation, the Liberty Hill Foundation, the Veatch Program, the Jessie Smith Noyes Foundation) that devote much larger proportions of their grantmaking to civil/human rights advocacy than these million-dollar grantmakers.

Over \$3 million of these grants came from community foundations, which are re-grantmaking institutions themselves. Typically their grants went to smaller, community-based organizations. If there is an agenda for connecting foundations to a structural racism analysis,

some practical effort should be devoted to community foundations since they may be the grantmakers most likely to be supporting grassroots racial justice efforts.

Furthermore, studies of “social justice grantmaking” find the issue of race or racism submerged, making the social action or social justice subject-matter categories of limited use in an analysis of foundations’ racial justice grantmaking. While it is certainly true that some foundation staff use the language of civic engagement and civic participation to avoid potential wariness around the more politicized “organizing” term, the effect is to skew the actual picture of support (and, of course, to mask the value of organizing itself). Does the analysis change if the focus is shifted from community organizing to the broader category of civic engagement? Oddly enough, “civic engagement” also does not rank as a categorical grant subject in the Foundation Center online database. Therefore, we adopted two broad, but definitely narrower, subjects of grantmaking used by the Foundation Center: advocacy for civil and human rights, and voter education.

With national elections approaching, the nation’s most significant barometer of foundation support for civic engagement might be foundation grantmaking addressing voting rights, voter education and registration. Given that recent state policies aimed at suppressing voter registration and voter turnout<sup>2</sup> have already resulted in perhaps a 5-7 percent decline of Latino and African American registered voters between the 2008 and 2010 elections,<sup>3</sup> foundation support for voting rights is almost by definition a statement in support of racial justice. At the very least, it can be viewed as a potential “vote” in favor of racial justice if the grantmaker considered voting rights through a structural racism lens. (See Charts D and E for table of voter education grantmakers and recipients.)

The list of grants shows voter education support increasing for organizations working with Latinos and Asian Americans, in particular. These efforts include local organizations such as the Denver-based Latina Initiative and the San Francisco-based Chinese American Voters Education Committee. Importantly, grantmakers that do not report their grants on their 990s or supply grant lists to the Foundation Center, and grantmakers such as the Democracy Alliance that give to 501(c)(4) social welfare organizations, are not reflected on this list. Nonetheless, while grantmaking for voter education and voter registration targeted to racial and ethnic groups may be on the rise, it is surpassed by more general voter education rights’ work, and programs

*While ... some foundation staff use the language of civic engagement and civic participation to avoid potential wariness around the more politicized “organizing” term, the effect is to skew the actual picture of support ...*

targeted to groups such as women and young people without reference to their racial or ethnic identities.

The overlapping dimensions of community organizing, civic engagement, civil rights, and voter education programs and grantmaking are intuitively obvious. The challenge for advocates of racial and ethnic justice is to deploy a structural racism lens so that the targeting of grantmaking and program development occurs in a way to help remediate the persistent racial injustices in public governance.

**Rick Cohen** is the national correspondent of Nonprofit Quarterly magazine. Prior to joining NPQ, he was the executive director of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy, a national nonprofit philanthropic watchdog organization. He is a former member of the PRE Advisory Board.  
[www.nonprofitquarterly.org](http://www.nonprofitquarterly.org)



<sup>1</sup> Examples include the Nellie Mae Educational Foundation’s “The Strengths & Challenges of Community Organizing as an Education Reform Strategy,” 2011; the French American Charitable Trust’s “Giving More, Making Change: A Journey in Progressive Grant Making,” 2011; the California Endowment’s “Making Change: How Social Movements Work and How to Support Them,” 2009; the Ford Foundation’s GrantCraft report “Funding Community Organizing: Social Change Through Civic Participation,” 2009; and the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s “Sustaining Neighborhood Change: The Power of Resident Leadership, Social Networks, and Community Mobilization,” 2008, just to name a few.

<sup>2</sup> Keyes, Scott, Ian Millhiser, Tobin Van Osten, and Abraham White. “Voter Suppression 101: How Conservatives Are Conspiring to Disenfranchise Millions of Americans.” AmericanProgress.org. Center for American Progress, April 2012. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <[http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2012/04/pdf/voter\\_suppression.pdf](http://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2012/04/pdf/voter_suppression.pdf)>

<sup>3</sup> Thompson, Krissah. “Voter registration down among Hispanics, blacks.” WashingtonPost.com. The Washington Post Company, 04 May 2012. Web. 29 Aug. 2012. <[http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/voter-registration-down-among-hispanics-blacks/2012/05/04/gIQAQqEY1T\\_print.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/voter-registration-down-among-hispanics-blacks/2012/05/04/gIQAQqEY1T_print.html)>

# Intersection of Community Organizing and Racial Justice Funding

## Chart A

### Top Foundation Grantmakers Making Grants Described as Community Organizing Grants, circa 2009-12

California Endowment (\$5,392,295)  
Ford Foundation (\$4,904,000)  
C.S. Mott Foundation (\$3,079,000)  
Marguerite Casey Foundation (\$2,032,500)  
New York Foundation (\$1,158,620)  
Foundation to Promote Open Society (\$800,000)  
David and Lucile Packard Foundation (\$670,000)  
Annie E. Casey Foundation (\$610,000)  
Surdna Foundation (\$597,500)  
Minneapolis Foundation (\$560,000)  
Nathan Cummings Foundation (\$415,000)  
W.K. Kellogg Foundation (\$398,804)  
San Francisco Foundation (\$354,000)  
State Street Foundation (\$350,000)

## Chart B

### Major Recipients of Grants Described as Community Organizing Grants, circa 2009-12

Center for Community Change (\$1,660,000)  
PICO National Network (\$1,126,260)  
Kentucky Coalition (\$1,085,000)  
Washington Interfaith Network (\$600,000)  
Community Catalyst (\$350,000)  
Direct Action Research Training Center (\$290,000)  
Mixteco-Indigena Community Organizing Project, Oxnard, Calif. (\$278,640)  
Padres Unidos, Denver, Colo. (\$275,000)  
Courage Center in Minneapolis (\$250,000)  
Inland Congregations United for Change, San Bernardino, Calif. (\$218,854)  
People and Congregations Together for Stockton (\$211,000)  
Children's Defense Fund (\$200,000)

## Chart C

### Top Foundations with Racial Justice or Racial Equity in Grant Descriptions circa 2009-12

Ford Foundation (\$12,447,158)  
W.K. Kellogg Foundation (\$11,048,000)  
Atlantic Philanthropies (\$3,200,000)  
Arcus Foundation (\$1,165,000)  
Annie E. Casey Foundation (\$1,027,554)  
Foundation to Promote Open Society (\$1,025,000)  
Marguerite Casey Foundation (\$550,000)  
Public Welfare Foundation (\$415,000)  
Open Society Institute (\$400,000)  
C.S. Mott Foundation (\$395,000)  
Surdna Foundation (\$315,000)  
Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation (\$284,400)  
Proteus Fund (\$275,000)  
California Endowment (\$265,900)  
Minneapolis Foundation (\$260,000)

## Chart D

### Top Voter Education Grantmakers 2007-10

#### Top Voter Education Grantmakers 2007

Carnegie Corporation \$4,216,800  
James Irvine Foundation \$3,060,000  
Ford Foundation \$2,620,800  
Open Society Institute \$2,545,000  
Pew \$1,341,000  
Educational Foundation of America \$846,000  
Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation \$784,600

#### Top Voter Education Grantmakers 2008

NoVo Foundation \$5,000,000 (Single grant to the New World Foundation for New Majority Fund)  
Ford Foundation \$4,205,000  
Open Society Institute \$3,710,808  
Carnegie Corporation \$3,075,000  
Cedar Tree Foundation \$2,350,000  
Bauman Family Foundation \$1,940,000  
Educational Foundation of America \$1,085,000

### **Top Voter Education Grantmakers 2009**

James Irvine Foundation \$3,741,000  
Foundation to Promote Open Society \$2,500,000  
Open Society Institute \$1,124,880  
Carnegie Corporation \$1,115,000  
Tides Foundation \$1,113,757  
Joyce Foundation \$1,085,000  
Ford Foundation \$850,000

### **Top Voter Education Grantmakers 2010**

Ford Foundation \$6,734,094  
Vanguard Charitable Endowment \$6,154,729  
Carnegie Corporation \$3,050,000  
Foundation to Promote Open Society \$3,009,951  
James Irvine Foundation \$1,370,000  
Joyce Foundation \$1,310,000  
W.K. Kellogg Foundation \$1,035,069

### **Chart E**

#### **Top Recipients of Voter Education Grants 2007-10**

##### **Top recipients 2007**

Center for Community Change \$1,275,000  
Kentucky Coalition \$1,100,000  
Project Vote \$1,073,500  
Women's Voices Women Vote \$1,023,332  
DC Vote \$776,500  
George Washington University \$753,900  
SPARC \$746,350  
Brennan Center \$660,000  
Strategic Concepts \$650,000  
California Voter Foundation \$641,000  
North Carolina Center for Voter Education \$615,000  
Citizenship Education Fund \$610,000

##### **Top recipients 2008**

New World Foundation \$5,000,000 (for New Majority Fund)  
Project Vote \$2,070,000  
Women's Voices Women Vote \$1,685,000 (plus \$420,000 for action fund)  
Brennan Center \$915,000  
Praxis Project \$900,000

Center for Community Change \$850,000  
State Voices \$833,000  
Progressive Technology Project \$825,000  
League of Young Voters Education Fund \$703,000  
League of Women Voters Education Fund \$696,163  
Rock the Vote \$655,500  
DC Vote \$639,500

##### **Top recipients 2009**

State Voices \$1,300,000  
Asian Pacific Legal Center of Southern California \$880,000  
University of California \$735,000  
Democracy USA \$725,000  
League of Women Voters of California \$676,500  
League of Young Voters Education Fund \$636,000  
Progressive Technology Project \$600,000  
DC Vote \$573,750  
Women's Voices Women Vote \$550,000  
Project Vote \$522,446  
Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights \$521,000  
Pew \$500,000

##### **Top recipients 2010**

Women's Voices Women Vote \$3,775,000  
Rock the Vote \$2,070,000  
State Voices \$1,893,000  
Center for Community Change \$1,300,000  
National Coalition on Black Civic Participation \$1,288,380  
Americans for Campaign Reform \$1,000,000  
League of Young Voters Education Fund \$940,795  
PowerPAC \$940,000  
Voto Latino \$745,000  
League of Women Voters Education Fund \$680,729  
Brennan Center \$600,000  
Southwest Voter Registration and Education Project \$520,000