

REVIEWS



Strengthening Democracy, Increasing Opportunities: Impacts of Advocacy, Organizing, and Civic Engagement in New Mexico

Lisa Ronghelli
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In this time of economic hardship, many people rightly believe that charities should especially help the homeless, hungry, sick, young, and old that are usually “left behind” and suffer even more in a recession.

This report by the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP) shows that funding for some of the nonprofit groups that organize and advocate in New Mexico has a very large financial benefit for those needy people and funders that expect such benefits. The report states: “For every dollar invested in the 14 groups for advocacy and organizing (\$16.6 million total), the groups garnered more than \$157 in benefits for New Mexico communities” (more than \$2.6 billion).

Furthermore, the report states that the benefits were even larger than calculated, because there were other nonquantifiable benefits. Cleaner water and air, for example, is a substantial benefit with no monetary benefit calculated.

Among the benefits that were calculated:

- Living wages enacted in Santa Fe and Albuquerque and Bernalillo County increased minimum wages by at least \$250 million for 71,000 low-wage workers. The Santa Fe minimum wage is indexed and will rise in the future.
- Worker tax credits that annually total \$43 million for 200,000 low-income tax filers and \$15 million in additional unemployment benefits.
- Anti-predatory lending laws that reduced such loans by 39 percent, saving 43,203 borrowers \$131 million in points and fees.

- Affordable Housing Trust Fund that the state legislature created and appropriated \$15 million, which leveraged an estimated \$168 million that benefits more than 2,000 households.

- Child care subsidies that rose by \$13.5 million between 2003 and 2008 to provide higher pay for qualified providers serving 22,000 children.

- Services to the homeless more than doubled in 2003 and subsequent years, adding a total of \$2.5 million in funding.

- Repayment of \$13.1 million in Albuquerque foregone tax revenues from Industrial Revenue Bonds issued with Phillips Semiconductor when the plant closed.

- Water rights training to 25,000 members of acequias (rural water associations) and capital funding, amounting to a total of \$16.4 million.

- Children’s health insurance funding increase of \$800 million and expanded eligibility for 25,000 children and adults.

Those benefits were calculated as the result of studying 14 New Mexico nonprofit organizations over five years (2003–2007). The organizations met the following criteria: being in existence for at least five years; commitment to and capacity for organizing and advocacy; maintaining at least one full-time staffperson doing advocacy and organizing throughout the five-year time-frame; focusing on lower-income people, people of color or other marginalized groups; working on local or state levels; and having the capacity to provide data for the NCRP research.

The fourteen organizations that participated:

- Albuquerque Interfaith
- Community Action New Mexico
- Colonias Development Council
- Enlace Comunitario/El Centro de Igualdad y Derechos (the latter is becoming an independent organization)
- New Mexico Acequia Association
- New Mexico ACORN
- New Mexico Coalition to End Homelessness
- New Mexico Environmental Law Center
- New Mexico Voices for Children
- Sacred Alliance for Grassroots Equality (SAGE) Council
- Santa Fe Living Wage Network
- Somos Un Pueblo Unido
- SouthWest Organizing Project (SWOP)
- Tewa Women United

The data was obtained directly from the organizations and from independent sources. An NCRP researcher interviewed senior staff from the organizations and each organization completed an 8-page questionnaire that asked for data on quantitative impacts of policy changes and numbers of people benefiting; qualitative impacts of constituents benefiting; civic engagement indicators, such as voters registered and volunteers recruited; interim progress and capacity-

building indicators, such as skill development and access to the policy process; and amounts and types of funding received during the five-year period. NCRP verified the quantitative impacts by consulting with policymakers, state agency officials, researchers and other experts, and by examining source materials, including newspaper articles and state budget documents. Annual Internal Revenue Service 990 tax returns also were examined to verify financial information. The civic and voter engagement data was not independently verified. But the report states: “given the level of accuracy of the other data that were verified, NCRP is confident that the groups’ estimates are reasonable.”

While crediting the 14 organizations for their effective work in dozens of campaigns, the report also notes that “it is important to remember that many factors contribute to successful policy outcomes, including the willingness of elected officials to partner with the nonprofit sector.” Additionally, the report notes that there remains much work to be done in New Mexico to address continued high poverty rates, lack of health insurance (second highest rate in the nation), low children’s health and well being, second highest high school dropout rate in the nation, environmental contamination from past and future natural resource extraction activities, among other problems. Further, New Mexico has a small philanthropic sector — less than 0.2 percent of total national foundation assets. Consequently, an estimated 75 percent of philanthropic giving comes from out-of-state funders.

Appendixes provide more detailed information about the 14 organizations, details of the quantitative impacts including the organizations involved (sometimes more than the specific groups being studied) and description of the benefits, and qualitative impacts of numbers of people involved in other efforts. More details about some of the campaigns is included, along with definitions used for advocacy, organizing, civic engagement, and “marginalized communities.”

NCRP selected New Mexico for the first of a series of reports (North Carolina and Minnesota are the subjects of reports later this year) for several reasons. Many organizations are advocating and organizing for change on various issues also important in other regions, including education, environmental justice, health care access, immigration rights, indigenous rights, low-wage worker issues, and poverty; local and national foundations provide funding; diverse constituencies and active organizations exist in urban and rural areas; the New Mexico Association of Grantmakers was a willing and supportive partner.

According to the report:

As grantmakers explore how they can leverage their limited resources to best achieve their mission in a complex environment, New Mexico is a learn-

ing laboratory on problem-solving that offers the rest of the country powerful examples of what can be achieved through ongoing, sustained investments in advocacy, organizing, and civic engagement.

The report concludes that “foundation support is critical to sustaining advocacy and organizing efforts.” Funding from independent and community foundations provided a median of 75 percent of the total operating budgets of the 14 organizations, and corporate and corporate foundation support was negligible. However, only six groups received multiyear funding. The report encourages such multiyear funding so that organizations have financial stability and can plan for the future. The report notes: “As the impacts included in this report demonstrate, advocacy and organizing campaigns often take several years to achieve success, and organizations that have reliable and flexible support are better able to allocate their resources, engage in long-term and high-impact work, and respond to unexpected opportunities that arise while conducting their work. Importantly, multiyear grants often ease the administrative burden for grantees and funders, allowing both parties to make more strategic use of their time and, by symmetry, increase their impact.” Further, such grants “can enhance the already impressive work of these organizations, and of the many other effective advocacy and organizing groups making sustainable improvements in New Mexico’s communities.”

The report, like much of NCRP’s work, is primarily aimed at foundations. But the study also provides useful insights for individual donors and nonprofit organizations. For individual donors, it provides some additional ways of evaluating the work of some nonprofits and could encourage more support for effective advocacy and organizing.

For nonprofits, the report shows the importance of being able to provide some quantifiable results of their work, including financial benefits and numbers of people affected. Frequently, nonprofits have focussed more on identifying the problems being addressed and the process of public involvement (meetings, newsletters, and public information). The report’s methodology can be used as a mechanism to provide quantifiable results as well as helping to better describe the qualitative and capacity-building results.

The report also notes that many organizations (including SRIC) are often involved in successful campaigns, which supports the importance of groups pooling resources and constituencies to compound their effectiveness.

— DON HANCOCK

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