

How National Foundations Can Support State-Level Policy and Civic Engagement: A Q&A With Geri Mannion

By Yna C. Moore



YM: *You've worked at Carnegie Corporation of New York for almost 28 years. In what ways has the foundation, and your role within it, changed?*

GM: I was a young program associate when I began at Carnegie. I am now a director. I have learned a lot, from both mistakes and successes. Let me comment first on the philanthropic sector and then on Carnegie. A major change that I see is the number and wealth of foundations in the United States. When I began at Carnegie (after working for many years at Rockefeller Foundation and as a consultant to Ford), there were relatively few major philanthropic institutions: Carnegie, Rockefeller and Ford Foundations on the East Coast; Hewlett and Packard Foundations in the West; and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation was just starting to make itself known nationally. These foundations were relatively unknown. There was no internet or social media.

Today, the number of foundations – not only at the national and international levels, but also regionally in states and cities – is mind-boggling. And the power and influence of the funding – from the Gates Foundation to the Buffets to the tech money in Silicon Valley – can overwhelm the efforts of foundations with smaller portfolios, which are often more risk-taking and innovative, although much more under the radar.

The growth in endowments and investments in programs that address a wide number of issues from income

inequality to climate change to criminal justice to economic development is great. On the negative side, I see too many foundations in constant strategic review, investing with expectations of quick success, spending millions on evaluation and not necessarily learning from it. And, the constant CEO revolving door in philanthropy leaves chaos in its path, often leading to staff turnover, a loss of institutional knowledge and changes in program investments.

With respect to Carnegie, I have been fortunate that our foundation has stayed fairly steady on the issues it cares about for several decades. I have worked for only two presidents at Carnegie, including about 18 years with Vartan Gregorian. It's been constant support for education reform and peace and security; an investment in Africa for nearly a century (since 1925), and support for nonpartisan voter registration, voting rights and education (since the late 1970s). On immigration – one of the issues that I focus on – Carnegie has a long history, beginning with our founder, Andrew Carnegie, who supported immigrant integration in the early 20th Century. This issue remains a priority with our current investments, which started in 2001.

YM: *With things virtually locked at the Federal level, states are the places where policy change is happening. What are the most effective ways to move money from national foundations to the state and local levels?*

GM: For both efficiency and strategic purposes, the Carnegie has invested in two donor collaboratives that allow us to work with a wide range of donors from national, regional and state foundations, and to fund at the state level. Both are housed at NEO Philanthropy: these are the Four Freedoms Fund, which is focused on immigrant integration, and the State Infrastructure Fund, focused on voting rights and nonpartisan voter engagement. We have a relatively small program staff at Carnegie; I would not be able to make the best investment decisions at the state level without the added expertise that the funds provide.

YM: *In what ways are the Four Freedoms Fund and State Infrastructure Fund ideal for national funders to get involved in state-level work?*

GM: As most experienced grantmakers know, the last thing states need are donors who “helicopter” in and throw money at issues without consulting local organizations and local funders. By using collaborative funds with experienced staff members, national donors can get very good information on what's happening in the states and where funds should be invested. New donors also need to talk to funders on the ground, and most importantly, they should be careful that when and, if they do invest in the state, that they do not mess up the work in progress! As the saying goes, “First do no harm.”

Through the Four Freedoms Fund, for example, we have a long history of

funding the same groups over time. We also provide capacity-building support in communications, fundraising, etc. for the grantees. With excellent staff, we have carefully scoped out new states for investment. It is not always perfect: we have had some donors who might not want to continue in some states, or they want to focus on new state organizations. We always make sure we are responsible in our decision-making, and that our grantees are warned way in advance if there is going to be a change in direction. If we end support, we always give at least a year of warning so that we are not so disruptive.

One important factor needs to be stated with respect to donor collaboratives: we do not have a reserve fund; these are not foundations. We need to raise the annual budget each year. Therefore, sometimes the funding levels are not consistent, depending on the year and what the donors can contribute. Also, for the same reason, we are not usually able to provide multi-year grants.

YM: *What do you think is the biggest challenge facing the U.S. during this election year, and what does this mean for foundations working on the ground to address critical community issues?*

GM: The biggest challenge this year is the irresponsible political rhetoric toward immigrants, refugees and Muslims. Rhetoric has consequences and can be psychologically and physically harmful. Numerous incidents have been reported of hateful speech and behavior aimed at these communities, despite the fact that many of the victims are American citizens. This could have a long-term impact.

Another factor is that our election systems are arcane despite the 2000 elections when we saw that voting machines needed to be upgraded. While there has been a lot of investment and

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some progress, the U.S. still has a very low voter turnout rate, especially in local elections. There should be structural changes that ensure that all eligible students are registered to vote when they graduate high school. We should reinvest in civics education, not only in schools, but also through community organizations of the larger public. Elections, regardless of the office, should be on the same dates as federal elections. And, even better, over a weekend! Finally, this election year shows us all that campaigns should be shorter and publicly financed. We might take a good look at the British model: free television time for candidates and a campaign period of six months or shorter.

YM: *You're known for your work in fostering both nonprofit capacity and civic engagement. Why is nonprofit capacity building especially important for civic engagement efforts?*

GM: Well, it depends on what you mean about nonprofit capacity building? If you mean providing long-term, general support, yes. That is the best way to make a nonprofit work well. At the same time, we also need to make sure that nonprofits are provided appropriate levels of indirect support: that they have adequate communications and other internal capacities, and that they understand the legal rules of the road for nonprofits and private foundations (which is why I love the Alliance for Justice!). On the negative side, I do think there are too many nonprofits working in the same space. Instead of foundations building large nonprofits working on issues, we have a cottage industry of organizations all trying to raise small budgets. I am not sure that's the most effective way of getting things done or moving major policy changes.

YM: *For national foundations that want to get involved in state-level funding, what's the first step?*

GM: Talk to those experienced at the state level! Nonprofits, policymakers, funders and academics; talk to national foundations working in those states already. Talk to the news media working in a state as well as critics. We need to be working with not just progressive allies; we need to work across the ideological spectrum, especially at the state level.

Get as much information as you can, and then, the funder should be prepared to invest for five to 10 years. It's the long-term investment that pays off. ■

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