

Public Welfare Foundation

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Photo by David Y. Lee for the Public Welfare Foundation.

NCRP: How do you think about your role as a national foundation doing social justice work and committed to influencing public policy?

PWF: Our mission is to advance justice and opportunity for people in need, honoring our core values of racial equity, economic well-being and fundamental fairness for all. We have three programs – Workers’ Rights, Criminal Justice and Juvenile Justice – along with a special initiative on civil legal aid that aims to help low-income people gain access to the civil justice system. We focus on making a difference through policy change and system reform.

We have chosen some difficult areas of social justice that, despite great importance, do not always get attention from policymakers or support from funders. But we try to act as a catalyst and call attention to select issues in each program area after consulting with various experts and grantees. We use clusters of grants and targeted, multi-year reform strategies to move toward concrete outcomes. We recognize that social justice reform has no straight path to progress. But our goal is to support work that builds toward transformative change over the long term.

In each program area, we deploy a multistate strategy to develop advocacy infrastructure, typically assisted by national groups. Target states can serve as models for other states, and, with intentional strategies, reforms in those states can be leveraged to bring an issue to the “tipping point” nationally.

NCRP: What are the top challenges you face as PWF and its grantees try to make

with technical assistance and allow for coordination among grantees. They can also attract other funders by providing a central location to pool dollars to support multiple state efforts.

Finally, we are always attentive to how reform efforts we support can have an impact and address the major challenge of systemic racial inequities.

NCRP: What key lessons can you share with other grantmakers who are interested in starting or boosting their support for policy advocacy and civic engagement?

PWF: A primary lesson is for funders to stay the course. Social change takes time, and grantees need sustained power to move forward. Accordingly, two-thirds of our grants are multi-year general or program support. Such support is vital for grantee effectiveness because it encourages long-range planning, helps close hard-to-fill budget gaps and fosters organizational stability. It reduces unnecessary administrative burdens on grantees (and us) and, more importantly, conveys a sense of trust in their ability to manage their own affairs.

Additionally, we avoid evaluating grantees based on burdensome and unrealistic outcome metrics. There are many different ways to assess progress that are better suited to the reality of complex social change efforts.

Finally, there is no silver bullet. We have seen the best results when grantees can assess a need and then deploy multiple strategies, e.g., legislative and policy advocacy, community organizing, communications, litigation and more. ■