

Centering community power and feedback: The Colorado Trust on its new advocacy grantmaking program

The Colorado Trust recently launched a new advocacy grantmaking program¹. In January, NCRP's Lisa Ranghelli interviewed the program's architect, Noelle Dorward, to find out more about the shift in strategy.

The Colorado Trust's mission is to advance the health and well-being of the people of Colorado. In 2018, the foundation ended the year with \$470 million in assets and liabilities and made charitable expenditures totaling \$18.4 million.

NCRP: Please give our readers some background on The Colorado Trust's advocacy grantmaking goals and strategies before this new 2020 approach.

Noelle Dorward: The Colorado Trust considers policy and advocacy work as essential to achieving health equity, and recognizes that many of the inequities that people experience, whether unintended or intended, are a result of and perpetuated by policy decisions.

Since 2014, we've been funding a field-building strategy², where we've supported a cohort of community organizing, direct service and policy advocacy organizations across the state and developed a new field of health equity advocates.

That strategy, called Health Equity Advocacy, has a grantee-driven approach. To build this field, the cohort members determined for themselves:

- The strategies to implement to build the field.
- How to allocate capacity-building resources to support that implementation.
- Which collective policy advocacy activities and issues to work on.

- How to center racial equity in all of their health equity work.
- Shared communications and messaging across all of their different missions, visions and geographies.
- A plan to have statewide convenings, 3 times a year for 3 days, along with place-based activities.

NCRP: Did the grant partners give feedback at different points that fed into what you learned about the strategy and possible future directions?

Noelle: The cohort used real-time learning to make decisions to evolve their field-building work, and we used it to ask questions about how the strategy was going and think about what happens in the future.

The advocacy field-building strategy and the resident-centered community approach were designed and launched at different times.

Over the years, the cohort members and I did note that there seemed to be a silo between the Community Partnerships work and the advocacy grantmaking, and they were right.

We couldn't quite figure out how to bring that together ourselves. For our next advocacy grantmaking strategy, we're seeking more alignment.

I went and visited every single cohort member in January 2019 for 3 reasons. One, to say we're changing direction, and talk with them about what that means and why.

Second, we asked what they want us to take forward from the cohort work in a next advocacy investment.

Third, what should we leave behind? Their experience and insight made their way into the new advocacy funding strategy.

I also talked to other funders in the state to ask: How do you fund advocacy? What do you think is missing? Do you think that the cohort, field building and focus on advocacy and health equity has had impact? The summary of those conversations helped inform the thinking of what to do next.

We co-developed the cohort's 2020 work plan with grantees, and our board supported an additional year of funding.

It's less funds, but they've done incredible work, have momentum, and we want to see that continue and provide a runway to support their ideas about where they think this work can go.

I think every single funder I talked to said no transition has ever gone exactly how they hoped. And it's never enough funding, and it's never enough time. Knowing all this, trying to accomplish something within this context, to be as supportive as possible, was really important.

NCRP: Were there other resources or information in addition to peers and cohort members that informed your process of rethinking the approach?

Noelle: My background is in supporting resident and agency coalitions, community development and community engagement. I've worked alongside organizers, but I'm not an organizer.

That was a big world to explore, as well as the concept of power, which wasn't a central focus of the Health Equity Advocacy field building.

In the Community Partnerships work, their North Star, if you will, is supporting residents in building power. And that is really the major alignment for advocacy grantmaking.

With that clear focus on power, I learned from Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy (EPIP), where I'm on the Colorado steering committee, and from groups like the Chinook Fund, Alliance for Justice, Allied Media Project, Othering and Belonging Institute, and Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity.

The work of these groups supported my thinking through the practice of philanthropy, and equity in philanthropy.

And then for power itself, I'll highlight 2 resources: a Grassroots Policy Project (GPP) paper, *The Three Faces of Power*³, and NCRP's *Power Moves* guide. Both were critical in thinking about the practice of philanthropy and power.

Power Moves provides very clear questions for self-assessment. It can be a transformative experience if people take those thoughtful questions and then implement changes, but it's also personally transformational to critically reflect on how I have experienced our work and the opportunity we have in our next advocacy funding opportunity.

The 3 domains that the guide – I'll explain more on these shortly – lays out so clearly helped me think about it as a journey or an arc of a story.

It was also helpful in not getting bogged down in thoughts like, "I'm not doing enough," or "I'm not doing it the right way," because institutional philanthropy is a long-term change game.

Seeing the amazing thought processes that went behind creating the

guide, and all the different ways that it was informed by different people, helped me have a template that I could trust in helping guide my thinking.

The EPIP Colorado steering committee facilitated a coffee chat about the guide with other people in philanthropy, about where we were in this process and what we thought about it.

Having a guide that I could talk with peers about that was structured, and had clear definitions of power and where they came from, was really instrumental in that thinking.

And that actually happened before we started this transition, so it had already been in the back of my mind as we moved forward.

The GPP paper describes 3 faces of power: organizing people and resources, building policy infrastructure and shifting popular narrative.

When we started talking with The Trust's Community Partnerships staff about what they were experiencing in the state with community members, and the myriad ways they had talked about power over the last few years, staff began to see a need for a stron-

ger connection to policy change work, because they were working with new groups of residents who had been shut out of decision-making processes.

Resident teams participating in the Community Partnerships work were getting to this point of saying, "This isn't a programmatic issue. We need to advocate for change." GPP's high-level framework felt in alignment with how we were already thinking.

It's been a process of discovery, thinking through these concepts, and the 3 domains of power from *Power Moves* and *The Three Faces of Power* all are resonating.

That has been really helpful, and it's aligned with how we were already thinking. Certainly, the difference was we hadn't centered power, and we're looking for better ways of understanding power.

NCRP: From all that, you developed a very comprehensive 18-page set of goals, strategies and grant guidelines. What does this new approach look like?

Noelle: In some ways, it's similar. We were on a good path with a lot of things



The Health Equity Advocacy Cohort planned a "social justice superhero party" to celebrate the past 5 years of incredible work. Pictured left to right, back row: Lea Steed, Silas Musick, Carol Hedges, Caitlin Schneider; front row: Wren (official MC of the evening!), Esther Turcios. Photo used with permission.

LESSONS FROM THE COLORADO TRUST'S TRANSITION PROCESS

1. It's important to think about this work as a long arc of a story, rather than a 5-year chunk, in which we are learning and evolving as we move along.
2. Relationship building is critical – how we show up is what determines whether people will believe us and want to work with us, regardless of anything we write or say elsewhere about what we intend for a grant strategy.
3. I can't stress enough the importance of transparency in funder-grantee relationships. That's a key value we want to live into, and I want to be really clear about that.
4. Having multiple opportunities for feedback has been really essential. Maybe people will still feel more comfortable saying things to our external evaluators that they won't say to me – and that's okay, that's fine. That is the ever-present power dynamic.
5. Lean into power dynamics a lot and just explicitly confront them. It's about being comfortable standing in that tension. As the ones with the power, we need to say it out loud, course-correct when needed and receive critique, then think about what to do with that and be accountable.

we were doing. The differences are around: 1. an explicit focus on organizing, and 2. supporting organizations building a community organizing and policy infrastructure that is responsive to community needs, without us dictating what that infrastructure needs to look like across the state.

What we've heard through different conversations, as well as a recent community organizing scan we completed, is that there's simply not enough support in Colorado for grassroots work.

So there's a big focus on both building and bridging power in this funding opportunity. By bridging, we mean bringing people together to learn from and leverage each other's capacities, networks and power in service to community-defined issues.

In addition, we think that a community-driven policy infrastructure is the best way to achieve the most equitable outcomes that will help folks live their best lives and have the healthiest communities.

It's long-term work: a 4.5-year general operating grant; capacity-building resources directed by the funded organizations; a relationship-based grant-making approach; a "rapid response" fund for immediate, urgent advocacy needs; and a comprehensive evaluation and learning plan that supports what those organizations need, not evaluating each individual organization on programmatic goals and objectives.

Rather, we're evaluating at the strategy to see to what extent an organizing and policy infrastructure is strengthened or exists as a result of this work.

And as a convener and thought partner in this work, we want to continue to support grantee network and relationship building.

That is why the field-building work has been successful – people were willing to build relationships with each other across their differences and geographies.

The reason for the 18-page grant information document is because we

have been legitimately critiqued that we have not been clear about our expectations, and we wanted to provide as much information as possible up front so people could ask questions before applying.

We firmly believe that general operating support is necessary in funding advocacy, and yet we also still hope to see some specific outcomes as a result of this work.

We wanted to be as transparent as possible from the outset about what the questions are going to be, both in the letter of intent and the application, what the process and timeline will be, as well as outline the relationship we hope to have with grantees.

There already is a deep history of organizing and movement building in Colorado, and I hope that we're adding value by being a good thought partner and strengthening what exists or people want to exist.

There are so many people in philanthropy working really hard at transforming their institutions to be more equitable and community-driven.

I see it through the networks I'm part of and the eagerness of folks wanting to learn, grow and change their institutions. I hope that we all continue down that path and work hard to transform ourselves in service to the folks who really make our missions possible. ■

Notes

1. To learn more, visit <https://www.coloradotrust.org/strategy/building-and-bridging-power>
2. To learn more, visit <https://www.coloradotrust.org/strategy/health-equity-advocacy>
3. Richard Healey and Sandra Hinson, *The Three Faces of Power*, Grassroots Policy Project, May 2018, https://grassrootspolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/GPP_34FacesOfPower.pdf