

# Gara LaMarche

## Atlantic President and CEO Talks About Supporting Advocacy, General Support

*In May 2008, The Atlantic Philanthropies released the first of Atlantic Reports that makes the case for foundation support for advocacy initiatives. The series of reports is based on lessons learned from more than two decades worth of grant-making for social change in the U.S. and abroad.*

*NCRP interviewed by e-mail The Atlantic Philanthropies' president and CEO Gara LaMarche about the report, the various tools for supporting advocacy, and the role of multi-year general operating support. Mr. LaMarche joined NCRP's board of directors in May 2008.*



Gara LaMarche

already plowed by the Alliance for Justice and other groups. We believed it was important to give this issue the voice and the imprimatur of a large foundation, and that's why we selected it as the first topic in our new publications series, *Atlantic Reports*.

**NCRP:** The report offers several different options for funders interested in supporting advocacy, including research, mobilization, community organizing, litigation and other strategies. Why was it important to spell out these various tools for grantmakers, and which strategies do you think are most in need of additional investment in the United States?

**NCRP:** Why was it important for The Atlantic Philanthropies to do this report on foundations' support for advocacy, "Why Supporting Advocacy Makes Sense for Foundations"?

**Gara LaMarche:** There are a lot of myths about funding advocacy and, in general, there is a culture of over-cautiousness in philanthropy, which has been a deterrent. We wanted to show that there are many examples, not primarily from Atlantic, about why advocacy grantmaking is important and how it can work to advance almost any foundation's stated goals. I am very pleased with the report, though we realize it breaks very little substantive ground not

**GL:** In the introduction to the report, we emphasize that we are "particularly supportive of advocacy by the people most affected by policies that need to be changed." So we're saying that, not surprisingly, foundations—which almost always are mainstream if not conservative institutions—do not invest often enough in bottom-up strategies for change. In our view, because they involve empowerment and the wisdom of those closest to the ground, these strategies can be the most enduring—or, to use a foundation-y kind of word, sustainable—change.

**NCRP:** In your experience at the Open Society Institute and now with The Atlantic Philanthropies, what chal-

**Responsive Philanthropy** is the quarterly newsletter of the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy

2008, Issue No. 3  
Yearly subscription: \$25  
(free to members)  
ISBN: 1065-0008



### NCRP STAFF

Meredith Brodbeck	Communications/Development Assistant
Julia Craig	Program Assistant
Aaron Dorfman	Executive Director
Kevin Faria	Development Director
Niki Jagpal	Research Director
Melissa Johnson	Field Director
Anna Kristina ("Yna") C. Moore	Communications Director
Lisa Ranghelli	Senior Research Associate

lenges have you encountered with advocacy grantmaking and how have you overcome these challenges?

**GL:** Occasionally, this kind of funding can be controversial, and some trustees are not too wild about that. More often, foundation staff are overprotective of trustees who, I have found in both OSI and Atlantic, can be strong allies if you ask them. More recently, funding of advocacy has encountered, in addition to the usual sources of hesitation, the metrics movement—that is, you have to show that you can measure progress and impact. I find this a bit strange because public policy often has clearer metrics than many other kinds of foundation funding; if you ask the right-wing foundations how they evaluated their work, almost without exception, they will say they didn't think too much about it. They looked in the newspaper or on television and saw many signs of how they were changing society. But I also believe that progressive supporters of advocacy have to engage these very real concerns, and be prepared to talk the language of measurement and accountability. On this issue, the Alliance for Justice has done some good work and Atlantic is in a good position to take leadership, because we are one of the foundations most identified with both meaningful evaluation and with aggressive support for advocacy.

**NCRP:** How do you see the trend going with regard to foundations providing more support for advocacy?

**GL:** More and more are getting into it, and feeling comfortable with it, because they realize that you don't have as much bang for the buck if you don't have an advocacy strategy. I have been extremely heartened by the response to this publication, which has been enormous—many kudos from nonprofits and other foundations, and hundreds of requests for additional copies. That tells me something.

**NCRP:** How has the foundation's decision to spend down by 2020 affected the kinds of issues you support and the kinds of strategies you use to address these issues?

**GL:** To paraphrase Mark Twain, our impending demise concentrates the mind quite powerfully. We are more focused on impact and legacy than a perpetual foundation generally needs to be and, among other things, that means we want the issues and organizations we support to stick around after we're gone. That argues not only for strengthening institutions to engage in policy change, but also working for some of the policy changes themselves. Right now, for us, key areas of U.S. policy reform include comprehensive immigration reform and the restoration of civil liberties in the post-Bush era.

**NCRP:** One of the primary reasons that many foundations are not keen on providing multiyear and core operating support—two approaches that you mentioned in the report as key tools in supporting nonprof-

We are more focused on impact and legacy than a perpetual foundation generally needs to be and, among other things, that means we want the issues and organizations we support to stick around after we're gone.

it advocacy—is the issue of immediate measurable impact. Given The Atlantic Philanthropies' extensive experience with these types of support, how would you address this concern and possibly change their minds about the need for and desirability of these kinds of grantmaking?

**GL:** Many foundations grasp very well why they need to strengthen and sustain key institutions to do their job not just now, but a century from now, whether it's a museum, a hospital, a symphony orchestra or a university. Why should social change and social justice organizations be viewed any differently? The ACLU, and many of its key donors, for example, understand this, which is why that organization has been ready and available to meet the civil liberties challenges of the times, from the Red Scares of the 1920s to the attacks on immigrants nearly 100 years later. We can't anticipate what will be the challenges facing racial justice, or environmental, or lesbian and gay, or youth

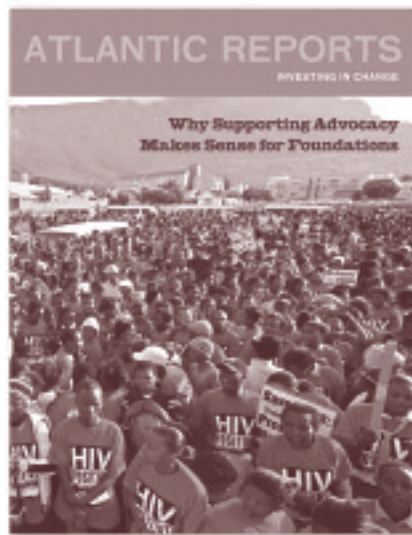
organizations 30 years from now, but we can try to identify the most effective organizations with a track record and a plan for the future and give them the support and the tools they need to endure and thrive.

**NCRP:** How does The Atlantic Philanthropies know that its grant-making is making a difference? What does your evaluation process look like?

**GL:** We're one of a relatively small number of foundations with an in-house staff and budget devoted to what we call "Strategic Learning and Evaluation." In essence, we strive to make evaluation holistic, putting the program officer at the center of the process and also adding the benefits of a team from our finance, communications, SLAE and other teams. This interdisciplinary approach to grantmaking is distinctive—I can say this without indulging in self-regard because it was created before I got here—and worth studying and replicating. Many things go into our learning process, of which what we usually call "evaluation" is but one part.

At Atlantic, there are three main ways we go about this. First, with a number of Atlantic's direct service grantees, we work with the grantee to combine an internal evaluation system focused on quality with an external evaluation focused on effectiveness. A second evaluation approach is to use an "embedded" outside evaluator—someone trusted by the grantee and the funder who stays with the initiative over a period of time and provides regular periodic reports that can affect the course of the work in real time. Case studies are a third form of evaluation, and are particularly useful in advocacy campaigns.

These three approaches do not constitute an exhaustive list, but we believe they give us an insightful look into the work we support and the grantees we fund. It's also important to note that evaluation and learning have a special resonance for Atlantic, in no small part because we are a "spend down" foundation. We believe it is part of our mission to share learning.



*Why Supporting Advocacy Makes Sense for Foundations (May 2008)*

**NCRP:** It's 2020, and Atlantic is closing its doors for good. How do you envision the "state of the world" to be as a result of the billions of dollars that Atlantic has spent in support of efforts to improve the lives of disadvantaged and vulnerable adults and children, health care and human rights?

**GL:** I have an allergy to grandiose questions, so I don't want to encourage them by answering in the terms that you have posed. Over time, you will see the withering away of the foundation, and if in its place there is a critical mass of stronger organizations in the countries in which we work—

because, though we have focused here on the U.S., most of our funding is directed outside the U.S., to civil society groups in South Africa, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Vietnam and elsewhere—I'll feel we've done some good.

**NCRP:** You recently joined the board of NCRP. Why did you decide to give your time to this organization?

**GL:** Philanthropy exercises a lot of power, and like all power, that power needs to be watched and checked. We don't have a bottom line like businesses, constituents like politicians, or even, for the most part, a critical and engaged press like many sectors of society. Combined with the fact that those in the best position to have informed and critical opinions—grantees and grantseekers—tend not to express those opinions directly to those whose support they seek, we need other forums for scrutiny of philanthropic investments and initiatives. NCRP does so with a credible research base and a social justice orientation. Wherever I have been in my career, I have tried to support NCRP financially; when I was asked to serve on the board, I decided it was right to put my money where my mouth is— or maybe that is the other way around! ☺