

# Responsive Philanthropy

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*Person with disability using accessible public transportation.*



## Philanthropy's Blind Spot: The Disability Rights Movement

I have two disabilities: I am blind and I am blunt. In my role as a disability rights organizer, it is perhaps the latter that is of greater importance. Today I would like to engage members of the philanthropic community in an examination of disability phobia, which is defined as discrimination or prejudice against people with disabilities.

Along with other forms of intolerance, disability phobia is insidious and deeply ingrained in American culture. Like most Americans, grantmakers don't often think about it. As a result, they don't treat us – all 50 million Americans – as citizens and individuals.

From my perspective, foundations that fund civil rights and underrepresented communities have a decision to make: They can deny their disability phobia and not fund the disability rights movement. Or they can ask themselves if they are disability phobic, confront their biases, fund the movement and reshape the future of the American electorate.

By Jim Dickson

Because by overlooking the disability rights movement, foundations that seek to fight poverty, create a more equitable society and support disenfranchised communities are missing a golden opportunity for social change.

Surely, there is a segment of the philanthropic community that grants funds in support of people with disabilities. In 2008, for example, 2.6 percent of total grant dollars went to disability organizations. Regrettably, the bulk of these funds go to either fixing or caring for us. With the notable exception of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, very little goes to protecting our civil rights and (continued on page 13)



challenging grantmakers  
to strengthen communities

# The Disability Rights Movement *(continued from page 1)*

ultimately integrating us into mainstream American life.

As Catherine Hyde Townsend commented in a *Diversity and Philanthropy* interview titled, *Empowering People with Disabilities through New Grantmaking Strategies*, “We don’t need to fix people with disabilities. The problem is the social and physical barriers that people with disabilities face – from how someone gets into a building to how they are treated in the workplace.” Townsend illuminates a fundamental problem with disability grantmaking: it often seeks to change people with disabilities rather than addressing and helping to eliminate the systemic forces that marginalize those with disabilities.

A primary social barrier to the advancement of people with disabilities is socio-economic status. Poverty is the disability community’s invisible twin. According to the Disability Funders Network, people with disabilities are nearly twice as likely as people without disabilities to have an annual household income of \$15,000 or less. Until foundations provide the disability rights movement the resources to organize – in other words, to increase our civic engagement – the cycle of poverty will continue. True diversity in our nation cannot be achieved until funders that have a passion for justice support the integrated civic engagement of those with disabilities.

I don’t for a minute think that disability is a minus. In fact, there is a silver lining in that we are viewed as the nation’s deserving poor (no one likes to say “No” to a cripple). Of course, all poor and marginalized Americans deserve attention from foundations. Yet, why are people with disabilities not considered, from a funder’s perspective, to be among the poor, underrepresented and disenfranchised?

Perhaps it is because we can and do pass legislation in an amazingly short time. However, enforcing these laws is another story. For example, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) took only two and half years to pass. The most far reaching civil rights law to date, it placed mandates on state and local government, businesses and telecommunications, and protects the rights of people with disabilities with regards to employment. Yet, over a decade, the courts systematically reduced the scope and effectiveness of the ADA. In response, over the course of eleven months we passed the ADA Amendments Act, which overturned the courts assault on our civil rights.



PHOTO COURTESY OF:

*A person with disability calling other disabled persons to get involved in the civic process. Courtesy of: American Association of People with Disabilities*

Over the past nineteen years, two major pieces of election reform legislation, the National Voter Registration Act (Motor Voter) and the Help America Vote Act (HAVA) have become laws. The Motor Voter Act, in particular, was a major victory for the disability rights movement, as it was our actions that broke the filibuster and allowed for passage of the Act. Minnesota Senator David Durenberger (whose own state already had Motor Voter) initially opposed the national legislation. The disability community met with the Senator and his staff many times with, despairingly, no success in changing his vote. So, on a Friday afternoon in April 1993, we informed the Senator’s Minnesota headquarters that the following Monday we were going to hold a press conference in front of his Minneapolis office to announce that the Senator was opposed to people with disabilities registering and voting. The first person at the press conference was the Senator’s Chief of Staff, with a statement announcing Senator Durenberger’s decision to change his vote. Consequently, Motor Voter made it to the floor and passed.

After the 2000 Florida election crisis, most pundits and advocates thought that HAVA could not be passed if it included mandates. Mandates were simply a political non-starter. The dis-

[Disability grantmaking] often seeks to change people with disabilities rather than addressing and helping to eliminate the systemic forces that marginalize those with disabilities.

ability rights community, through bitter experience, knows that without mandates and deadlines, accessibility will not improve. We insisted that accessibility be a mandate, have a deadline and be funded. We won that fight. HAVA not only mandated one accessible voting machine in every polling place, but also appropriated \$850 million to buy them.

Today, we continue the fight for our fundamental civil rights. This fight cannot be won with ineffective models of service and giving. Our battles for access to transportation, equal and affordable healthcare, fair-wage jobs and accessible and inclusive housing are central to independence, and are not won with direct service and charity giving.

Standing upon the firm foundation of our political, social and economic victories since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, America's disability community has moved well beyond

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the direct service model. Today's disabled citizen yearns for and seeks the opportunity to live the American dream. More than 50 million Americans are a

force that cannot be stopped from shaping our own destiny, but funders must stand with us and provide the essential funding. Grantmakers are among the partners we need to finally bring our nation's largest minority into the 21st Century. ■

*Jim Dickson is a board member of the Needmor Fund in Toledo, Ohio, and the Aid Association for the Blind of the District of Columbia.*

## Notes

1. Foundation Center, *Foundation Giving Trends 2010*.
2. Catherine Townsend, "Empowering People With Disabilities Through New Grant Making Strategies," *Voices & Opinions*, [http://www.diversityinphilanthropy.com/voices/exec\\_com/catherine-hyde-townsend/](http://www.diversityinphilanthropy.com/voices/exec_com/catherine-hyde-townsend/).
3. Disability Funders Network, "Disability Stats and Facts," <http://www.disabilityfunders.org/disability-stats-and-facts>.

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