

Community Advisory Committees: An Important Structural Provision for Conversion Foundations

Introduction

The public must be able to exercise its voice regarding how conversion assets are used when they shift to the philanthropic community. The public's ownership interest should be reflected in all aspects of the conversion foundation including its governance, structure, and mission. By adequately providing for community involvement and public accountability, the full potential of these new health foundations can be realized.

In conversion foundations, the public stands in the place of the individual or corporate donor. This unique aspect requires a high degree of engagement with and accountability to the community the foundation serves. The recommendations in this paper build on current and emerging best practices in the field of philanthropy. The recommendations rest on widely accepted philanthropic approaches and methods and suggest adaptations responsive to the special origins and character of conversion foundations.

Meaningful interaction with the community is essential for effective grant making in any field. Consultation with diverse elements of the community, particularly representatives of populations the foundation seeks to benefit, is essential to determine targeted grant making strategies that address community needs. This is especially true of health philanthropy due to the complex interaction of public health systems, environmental factors and the social determinants of health. Communities, particularly underserved and at risk populations, must be partners in efforts to improve their own health. Thus a strong community base is essential for conversion foundations.

Foundations increasingly design, test, and evaluate ways to involve affected individuals, intended partners, members of communities and beneficiary groups in the work of philanthropy. Community capacity assessments, impact surveys, focus groups and other community guidance techniques shape effective program policy and grant making agendas. These processes, and the use of ad hoc and standing advisory groups, extend the reach of foundation managers and staff, open the foundation to diverse input and experience, improve the effectiveness of outreach and support the formation of partnerships and coalitions to address the foundations' goals.

Because the "ownership" of conversion foundation assets encompasses the community at large, its public responsibilities are broad. These philanthropies must the highest standards for public accountability and responsiveness. Community advisory committees are an effective means to connect the conversion foundation with the public it serves.

A stronger role for community advisory committees

Advisory groups and other practices for engaging the general public and target populations are an element of sound foundation practice in many settings. However these methods are most commonly

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used at the program operations level. Typically, advisory groups are convened at the initiative of foundation staff or management. When such structures are formalized in the governance documents of a foundation, they are permanent and do not depend for their authority on decisions of a particular board or executive.

To formalize the public advisory role in a conversion foundation, the by-laws should establish a permanent body representative of community interests. A community advisory committee should serve two purposes:

1. Nominations - to ensure community representation on the board of directors that adequately represents and reflects the diversity of needs of the broader community, and
2. Accountability - to assess and advise the board of directors on how effectively the foundation interacts with members of its community, particularly those who are underserved and others intended to benefit from the foundation's activities.

To these minimum and essential responsibilities a conversion foundation may elect to request additional input from its community advisory committee, or to involve it in direct programmatic functions.

The nominating function

The community advisory committee should function as a permanent nominating committee to the foundation board. Foundation by-laws should require that the board, as a whole, be representative of the diversity of the foundation's service area. Individually and collectively, directors should at least meet qualifications recommended by the Council on Foundations and additional board member qualifications may be established in the bylaws. In performing the critical role of creating a candidate "pool", the community advisory committee ensures that the board's member qualification and diversity goals are met. The foundation board makes the final selection of directors from that pool. A community advisory committee in this capacity does not limit the foundation board's authority, but assures a degree of openness and broader input into its leadership development.

Community accountability function

The second function of the community advisory committee is to advise the board of directors on the adequacy of community engagement in planning, operations, grant making and assessment activities of the foundation.

The community advisory committee is not intended to be the primary means of engaging the community. Rather it serves as a formal and informed resource body to review and assess the

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effectiveness of the foundation's outreach efforts and community participation strategies. The committee offers a channel for members of the community to comment without risk to their standing as grantees or potential grantees. It ensures that public interaction, involvement and accountability are the focus of attention at the governing board level and that the foundation makes regular efforts to assess and improve its performance in this area.

Perpetuating the community advisory committee

Once the initial community advisory committee is established there are a number of alternatives to perpetuate committee membership

1. the foundation board can identify and select new community advisory committee members;
2. the community advisory committee can be self-perpetuating, with the members authorized to nominate and select new members as vacancies occur
3. a widely publicized call for nominations can be issued with either the board or the committee making final selections from among a pool of candidates.

However a community advisory committee is formed, the foundation must provide it with adequate staffing or resource support. In order to fulfill its functions effectively, to serve the governing board and to be a guardian of the public interest in the foundation, the community advisory committee should have sufficient resources to conduct its meetings, outreach, research and review activities.

Conclusion

The philanthropic sector as a whole is looking at new ways to ensure that foundations are accountable to the communities they serve. A community advisory committee with nominating authority that also holds the governing board responsible for effective community outreach and responsiveness can enable conversion foundations to be appropriate stewards of the public benefit assets they hold.