



WORDS TO GIVE BY

Leading Voices in
Advocacy Funding



and respect begins a dialogue with the older generation and often can lead to their interest in what the younger generation is thinking and caring about. The giving of each generation is a window into their respective worlds and in understanding their respective giving, they will understand each other better.

Q: Were your trustees concerned about funding advocacy?

A: Well, we range across a political spectrum on this board, from right to left. And, to get anywhere with our funding, we have to take it out of this political framework and say, “It’s not left, it’s not right.” It’s saying, “This is what’s going on in this community. These are the resources we have. How do we start to make a difference in people’s lives?” Ultimately, we all want to do that, although we may come at it with a different philosophy. ■■



Sherece West is the former CEO of the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation. Currently, she is President of the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation.

The Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation is a grantmaking public charity established in 2005 in the aftermath of hurricanes Katrina and Rita using donations from around the world. The foundation supports nonprofit organizations engaged in economic development, housing, civic engagement, and policy and advocacy.

Q: Why do nonprofit groups need to do advocacy on behalf of their constituents in post-Katrina Louisiana?

A: Advocacy on behalf of our constituents is essential to ensure that public funds, which will dwarf the amount of private resources in scope and amount, are used effectively and applied towards the needs of displaced residents and communities that historically have had access to the fewest resources.

Governor Blanco launched The Road Home program through which eligible homeowners affected by Hurricane Rita or Katrina may receive up to \$150,000 in compensation for losses suffered. In addition, The Road Home will loan funds to restore and construct thousands of rental properties.

There are policy concerns associated with The Road Home that nonprofit advocacy must address. For example, the nonprofit Louisiana Housing Alliance is pushing the Louisiana Housing Finance Authority to make the most hurricane-devastated areas of the state the priority for Low-Income Housing Tax Credits allotted to Louisiana. There was no priority for communities most in need of reinvestment like New Orleans. Some additional policy concerns include: (1) cultural insensitivity by requiring applicants to be fingerprinted; (2) ensuring that all displaced citizens of Louisiana

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have the right to return; (3) providing services and support to displaced citizens with little to no money or resources to return; and (4) providing services and support to help those homeowners that would be considered “hard cases.”

Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation (LDRF) is particularly interested in ensuring the involvement of those who traditionally have had little voice or are in danger of losing their voice in the public decision making process. That is why supporting groups that do advocacy is important to our foundation.

Louisiana needs to strengthen its nonprofit infrastructure for effectively influencing public policy decisions at the state and local level. And now is the time to build that capacity. In this instance, capacity building is not a vague or abstract concept. The groups need capacity to collect data for policy research, analysis, and advocacy; develop effective communication strategies to educate and influence the public on certain issues; organize and mobilize constituents; attract high level staff; hire consultants; purchase software, state of the art technology, and more.

Q: *Is there a need for more money from foundations for advocacy?*

A: There’s absolutely a need for more money from foundations for advocacy. As previously discussed, nonprofits need money to respond to and initiate policies, programs, and legislation that will impact hurricane-affected areas of the state and the future of displaced citizens. Money from foundations for advocacy can help with ensuring equity and inclusion in the recovery and reform processes.

Consider that advocacy represents the “voice” that is most affected but missing from the process and you will understand why foundation money is needed for: advocacy strategies that communicate the need and attract money for mental health services desperately needed in the state; creating a school system that provides quality education to our young people; promoting equitable development; and I could go on.

Here’s our opportunity in philanthropy to promote equity and inclusion through supporting policy and advocacy work — and to work together to do it.

Q: Steve Gunderson, Council on Foundations President, has suggested that foundations might set up a pool of money that will be immediately available for dispersal following future disasters. How would you advise Mr. Gunderson or any funder to treat advocacy in post-disaster spending?

A: If we have the wherewithal, we should fund the advocacy in parallel with services because the advocacy comes into play immediately when a storm hits — advocating and pushing for state and federal resources to help curtail the disaster and to provide immediate relief. Maybe if there had been a strong nonprofit advocacy agenda here, FEMA and the Red Cross may not have committed the many mistakes that they did.

Q: You're working in a post and, one could say, a current emergency situation. How are you evaluating your advocacy grants?

A: We know that supporting public policy advocacy is working. For example, ACORN won approval from the New Orleans City Council in June to designate the Lower Ninth Ward as a hardship case, which allowed residents to successfully petition for a later gutting deadline (if you don't put your home on a list to be gutted, you risk your home being demolished and your prop-

erty seized). Gaining the time extension was a valuable outcome. There are many examples where LDRF and others support policy and advocacy that are positively influencing the recovery process to date.

And when advocates lose, that's fine too. You can't apply bean counting and other traditional evaluation methods to this type of work. So we have to design what is appropriate. And oftentimes if the environment is inhibiting, there are other ways to measure progress. The progress could be determined by advocacy capacity built; by how far the advocates were able to get a bill or regulation; and by how far they were able to build public awareness around the message — because if you keep doing the advocacy work, eventually it'll catch on and change will come. ■■

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