

## Community Organizing

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By David R. Jones

President and CEO, Community Service Society of New York

The newly elected Public Advocate of New York City, Bill de Blasio, just announced that his office is going to train local groups and individuals to do their own community organizing in order to get government to be more responsive. At first blush, it seems a little odd to me that a government office would be training individuals and groups to organize to get government to pay attention to their legitimate concerns -- but, on reflection, he's obviously on the right track.

In a city where the incumbent mayor just spent a hundred million dollars of his own money to get reelected and lobbyists earn in the tens of millions, to be an individual or a community group with no money and no political clout attempting to get your viewpoint heard is virtually impossible unless you organize. Only 20 years ago that wasn't always the case. Nonprofit groups advocating for the poor, the disabled, and for schools were the bulwark of advocacy in New York City, supported in many instances by foundations like Ford. In addition, labor unions were also front and center in providing personnel and funding for advocacy work.

Fast forward to the present, and the number and scope of community organizing efforts have diminished dramatically. What happened and what should be done about it is still an open question. Even the community organizing that persists is under a relentless attack. The Acorn debacle, which was at least in part self-inflicted, has significantly curtailed that group's effectiveness at least for the short term.

What happened? I won't get into the problem with labor in this blog, but I do want to look at the nonprofit sector, which I know somewhat better. The nonprofits in past decades played a significant part in assisting community-based advocacy. They were even able to do so while receiving substantial amounts of government dollars.

In New York, that underwent a radical shift when the city elected its first Republican mayor in decades, Rudy Giuliani. Before that, the conventional wisdom was that, in a one-party town where the Democratic Party dominated everything, attacks on the nonprofit advocates for the poor were politically impossible because the Democratic primaries, not

the general elections, were the whole ball game. The working poor, black and Latino voters were the bedrock of the party support, so retaliation against vigorous community organizing just wasn't thought to be advisable.

I still remember the look of total disbelief when, as Executive Director of the New York City Youth Bureau (now the Department of Youth Services), I suggested to a very vocal advocacy group that their financial record keeping would force us to do a full audit and suspension of their city contract.

Mayor Giuliani changed all that. Suddenly, groups that even spoke up mildly were stripped of funding, in some cases nearly overnight. Particularly vulnerable were groups serving the black and Latino communities that had been supported by the Dinkins administration. That kind of regular political retaliation by City Hall stopped with the Bloomberg administration, but the chilling effect on advocacy and community organizing persists.

The other thing that changed was the commitment of large foundations to community organizing, particularly for poor black and brown New York. In a recent monograph by CSS Senior Policy Fellow Rick Cohen, "Dimensions of Racial Equity in Foundation Grantmaking," (Community Service Society, May 2009), the national trend away from advocacy and community organizing is obvious. Larger foundations like Ford and Gates do have efforts on behalf of poor people, but they often focus on non-controversial direct services and national, not local, efforts.

So de Blasio's program comes at a particularly opportune time. But I would suggest that he has to make the case to the enormous number of foundations in the city that they have to push beyond their board and staff comfort zones to provide critically needed resources to legitimate community organizations, so that a fear of losing some or all their government funding for raising their voices doesn't dominate everything they do.

With income inequality higher in New York City than anywhere else in the country, and unemployment levels for black, brown, and Asian New Yorkers likely to remain at unheard of levels for years to come, if these foundations are serious about social change and commitment, they should put up and join the public advocate's effort.

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