

ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

A **TOOLKIT** for Funder Groups
Working on Public Policy

PolicyWorks
FOR Philanthropy

A Project of the Forum of Regional
Associations of Grantmakers

 **FORUM**
OF REGIONAL
ASSOCIATIONS
OF GRANTMAKERS



How can funders work together to have an impact on public policy?

PolicyWorks for Philanthropy has been asking this question as part of an effort to help affinity groups¹ use policy engagement as a strategy to achieve shared program goals.

The most common answer we've heard: you need to ask the right questions. Public policy work is hard. Collaborative work is hard. Add the two together and you get a complex enterprise. There have been no magic formulas or can't-miss strategies. Determining why and how to take on policy work requires steady inquiry, analysis, strategy, openness, and horsepower. But the results can be significant.

We've taken what we've learned so far and turned it into this draft toolkit that can help affinity groups engaging in policy work determine how well they're set up for success.

¹ Any organized group of funders affiliated with a regional association.



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CREDITS

This PolicyWorks draft toolkit is based on consultation with the following staff of regional associations of grantmakers: Adam Donaldson and Elisabeth Hyleck of Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers; Rob Collier of Council of Michigan Foundations; David Biemesderfer of Florida Philanthropic Network; Bob Tracy of Minnesota Council on Foundations; Michael Hamill Remaley of Philanthropy New York; and Claudia Herrold of Philanthropy Ohio. It was drafted by Mark Sedway of The Giving Practice under the guidance of Erin Skene-Pratt of PolicyWorks for Philanthropy and the PolicyWorks Steering Committee.

SECTION 1: HELP WITH ASSESSMENT

Use this section to learn some keys to success and assess your affinity group against them

Seven Success Factors

Leaders of regional associations whose affinity groups have had success in public policy work point to these seven factors as essential.

Affinity groups that succeed in public policy work...

1. Are driven by **people** who enjoy that work, are able to articulate why public policy is important to the affinity group's mission, are ready to devote the time and energy to make it happen, and trust each other.
2. Make the **commitment** to go from learning to action, have consensus about what that action is, and approach it mindful of potential benefits and risks, looking for small wins, with a test-and-learn mindset.
3. Identify visible, galvanizing external **opportunities** to achieve the group's mission through public policy work and organize around those opportunities.
4. Tap the group's human, social, intellectual, financial and political capital, allowing for different **roles** and levels of participation among individual members.
5. Consider the range of **strategies** that funders can use to influence the public policy process to achieve their mission and leverage their collective power.
6. Ask **questions** as a group to find the right scope and strategies for their particular circumstances, opportunities, and goals.
7. Receive sufficient **support** from their regional association in the form of policies, procedures, communications, expertise, and staff and consultant help.

Affinity Group Self-Assessment

Based on the seven factors, affinity groups can customize and use the following tool to assess how well they're set up for success. Ultimately, the "right" factor is a subjective judgment made by group members, depending on their goals, expectations, and circumstances.

Step 1: Review the summary of the seven success factors on previous page

Step 2: Assess the group on each factor on the 5-point scale

Step 3: Rank the seven accordingly, from strongest to weakest

Step 4: Discuss with members of the group: What are the implications? How can we improve?

Rank	WE HAVE...	<i>Not there</i>			<i>We're there!</i>	
		1	2	3	4	5
	The right people					
	The right commitment					
	The right opportunities					
	The right roles					
	The right strategies					
	The right questions					
	The right support					

SECTION 2: HELP WITH PLANNING

Use this section to plan how you're going to do policy work

Steps in Doing and Supporting the Work

Based on our inquiry so far, we've identified essential steps for affinity groups to think about as they plan how they're going to public policy work.



Affinity groups that do this work successfully tend to follow four steps and use distinct parts of themselves in doing so:

1. They *commit to action*, putting their hearts into the work in terms of their commitment, energy, and collaboration.
2. They *scan for opportunities*, keeping their eyes wide open to new moments and realities.
3. They *develop strategies*, using their heads to come up with the most powerful and cost-effective approaches.
4. They *test and refine*, with a hands-on bias for action, an experimental approach, and a learning mindset.

On the pages that follow are checklists you can use to have structured reflection about your past experience, current work, and future strategies. Each checklist will have suggested *questions* to ask and *signs of success* to look for as you go.



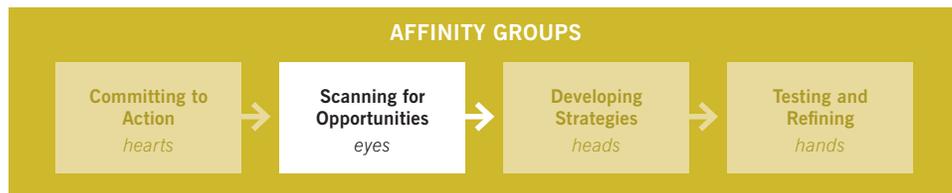
Checklist 1: Committing

QUESTIONS

1. What is the program mission of our affinity group and what is the **potential role** of public policy in achieving it?
2. What **policy principles and goals** will guide our work?
3. What **policy positions** do we want to take?
4. What is **sufficient consensus** on our positions and actions? How can we get there? What if we can't all sign on?
5. What is the **level of commitment** among participants and are they ready to stick with the work over time? What are the tradeoffs of a **pay-to-play** requirement and what would the financial commitment be?
6. What are the **various roles** that need filling and who will fill them? Do we have people willing to drive the process forward? What are different levels of possible participation?
7. What are our **concerns** about risks and obstacles and how should we address them?

Signs of Success

- We each know what we want to do and why we're participating.
- We have a written Mission or Statement of Purpose naming the challenges we seek to address.
- We have sufficient consensus about what we want to do and why.
- We have consistent attendance, and those who attend have decision-making authority for their organizations.
- We have principles and goals that are general enough to respond to a range of policy opportunities that might emerge but specific enough to know a good opportunity when we see it.
- We feel we have a stance as a group that is sufficiently strong to have an impact but is still politically and ideologically independent enough to feel comfortable to all.
- We all have an attitude about the collaboration that is closer to "Let's do this together" than "I'm going to do this, anyone want to join me?"
- We recognize that participants can have different roles and levels of participation and that there might be a core few who drive the process.
- We can talk about tough issues—around politics, money, etc.—as a group, vs. after the meeting.
- We have a sense of the time commitment required, and that commitment is seen as manageable.



Checklist 2: Scanning

QUESTIONS

1. What are the **big opportunities**—e.g., political transitions, legislation, events, etc.—coming down the road that we might organize toward and galvanize others around?
2. Are there ways that public policy can make our group's program goals happen **faster or bigger** (i.e. at scale)?
3. What is happening in the **political landscape** generally that may have an impact on our work?
4. Who else is interested in the issues we are and how can we **partner** with them?
5. What can we learn about **related efforts** done by other funders? Whom should we talk to and what do we want to know?
6. What are each of our **organizations doing** related to public policy and where are there connections?

Signs of Success

- We have focused on opportunities that have their own momentum and public attention and are able to galvanize energy and action.
- We are ready to take advantage of emerging opportunities by being fast and nimble.
- Government agencies or nonprofit partners know to call us about opportunities.
- Within our affinity group, we have a sense of who makes grants to advocacy organizations and who has policy experience or relationships.
- We understand the political realities and are ready to adapt to them.
- Our strategies are specific to the current political climate and what we know about the needs of decision makers.
- We have the connections and knowledge we feel we need to be effective in the policy arena.



Checklist 3: Strategizing

QUESTIONS

1. What **program outcomes** are we trying to achieve?
What does success look like? How will we measure it?
2. What **influence outcomes** are we trying to achieve?
Are we trying to influence funding, priorities, legislation, perceptions, knowledge, etc.?
3. What **decision makers and agencies/organizations** do we need to reach to achieve our outcomes and how will we reach them? Do we have relationships with any? Are there issue advocates with whom we can partner?
4. What **information** do we have and **voice** can we bring that might be valuable to those decision makers?
5. How are government **decisions made** and **resources allocated** in our area of interest? What are the implications for our effort?
6. What **policy activities** do we want to support and/or engage in? (Possible activities include research, grassroots organizing, networking, policy development, issue education, lobbying, coalition-building, etc.)
7. What **funding** do we need, from whom, how will we mobilize it, and what levels of commitment can we expect?

Signs of Success

- We have decided on policy activities that leverage our unique value and voice in the public policy process.
- People on the inside of the public policy process have shown support for or even invited our involvement.
- We have thought through all potential activities and haven't dismissed any based on past experience or automatic assumptions.
- We have decided on activities based on collaborative learning and decisionmaking.
- We have the information we need to add value to policymakers and feel confident in doing so.



Checklist 4: Testing and Refining

QUESTIONS

1. What **hypotheses** about our strategies and role are we testing through this work, and what are we learning?
2. How will we keep our activities **on track**?
3. How will we **communicate** to key stakeholders about what we're doing and provide them the opportunity to join us?
4. How can we find ways to **attract** people and resources interested in our work whom we don't know about?

Signs of Success

- We have set up periodic moments to reflect on how we're doing.
- We have not over-prepared as a way to avoid taking action.
- We have asked outside partners or experts to provide us feedback.
- We have made mid-course corrections based on our progress and learning.
- We have taken on activities, people, or resources we didn't know about when we started.