

Fixing Democracy, Empowering the Grass Roots

By Madeline Lee

I believe that democracy is broken. I believe it is broken because there is no clear line from the people who have a problem to their representatives, to the people who make decisions, to the policies that result from the decisions that are made. And once policies are made, there is no further political effort to see how they are affecting the people they are meant to help – how the policies are making change.

The engagement of people at the grass roots will require a new understanding of how such groups could utilize the media to advance their interests. It will also demand that such groups learn to advocate on their own behalf. This will be a major challenge for philanthropists, for people concerned about the non-profit world and the health of democracy, and for public officials.

The best way to illustrate these challenges is to tell a success story. In this story a small grass roots organization used modern tools of media, legislation, litigation, research, and policy review to win victories, and managed not to be corrupted or diverted from its mission by the modern tools. I know this story because the New York Foundation provided some of the funding.

To set the stage: the welfare debate heated up in this country – or heated up again – in 1994. Unlike its earlier iterations, this time the debate was carried out largely by white males, largely in the media, and largely using stereotypes. In that same year a small group of welfare recipients calling themselves “Community Voices Heard” was formed. Community Voices Heard (CVH) was a small project within the Hunger Action Network of New York State, a large statewide advocacy organization. Its original goal was simply to train people who were on welfare to speak to the media -- and “to power,” if you will -- about what living on welfare was like, what was wrong, and what might make their lives better. But CVH very quickly left the large policy organization: the first important lesson from this story. They left what is a truly fine organization because they felt their views were not reflected by the mostly white, and mostly male, and mostly policy-oriented staff. (This is in no way to criticize the sponsoring organization.) But in our complicated non-profit landscape, where advocacy is now a separate activity from direct service or from direct organizing, policy analysts and advocates not infrequently end up taking positions at odds with those of the people affected by a policy.

While they began by training ordinary women to speak about the situations they found themselves in, CVH rather quickly became a kind of a media darling. Reporters would seek the organization out because its members were real people from whom they could get good sound bites. But CVH realized it didn't want to become a kind of trained welfare pet. They moved creatively and almost

uniquely – for such organizations -- to use some of the tools they had been taught about how to change the debate, affect the media and, therefore, the way the issues were being framed. They did a study. They did research -- not a normal thing for this group of former welfare recipients, and definitely outside their core area of competency.

They also trained themselves in much more savvy media presentation. This was not just training in public speaking and they went beyond having just a single spokesperson. For example, they learned that they should not answer a question like “What’s it like to live on \$250 a week?” Instead, they learned that they needed to answer the question *they* wanted to be asked. In this way, they could frame the debate in their own terms. They learned how to keep the debate focused on their message: “We want to work. We want jobs, and we want to be paid for them.”

Anyone following the debate about welfare reform in New York at about this time would realize that almost imperceptibly this piece of the debate changed. The debate was originally framed in terms of welfare moms, welfare cheats, welfare queens, and the famous (and fictional) woman using food stamps to buy an orange, getting change, and buying vodka. Little by little, average people began hearing about the Work Experience Program and began to ask different questions. How much were these people being paid? What were the working conditions on the job? What kind of training were they getting?

It was CVH, among other organizations, which began to introduce some of those other elements into the debate.

In their survey, they asked over 500 welfare workers assigned to work off their benefits what it was really like to do this. This marked one of the first times we began hearing about people working in parks in the winter without gloves, without coats, without boots. The official policy was still saying: “This is good for people, they need the work experience, why should society pay them to do nothing?” But the human story of it, the real story, was finally beginning to be heard.

What interests me most about the survey is that they also used it in the way I think polls and surveys should be used, which is not to choose your mission, and not to frame your mission, but to reinforce your mission, to make it possible to talk about your mission in a way that will speak to the people you’re trying to reach.

They also learned from the process of surveying that if they pushed people beyond their initial answers to the questions and asked them to elaborate further, they could have real conversations with them. In this way, they found out that many people have far less conservative attitudes toward welfare than their first answers would suggest. Here’s an example of a conversation:

Q: The city of New York is now saying people should work for their welfare benefits. Do you think that's a good idea?

A: Oh yes, I think it's a very good idea.

Q: Do you think it's important for people to get work experience?

A: Absolutely.

Q: Most people on welfare don't have any work experience. Are we doing a good thing by giving it to them?

A: Oh yes, I think so.

Q: What if I told you that the people on welfare are being paid \$1.80 an hour for what they're doing?

A: Oh...that doesn't seem right.

Q: What if I told you that the people on welfare are replacing people who previously got paid \$10 an hour, or \$12 an hour? That the city is downsizing, laying off union workers, and replacing them with temporary welfare workers?

A: I don't think that's fair.

CVH began to realize that they were actually having substantive conversations with people. They used that work – the relationships built and the survey results -- to put on panels in churches and at universities, and to go out into the community and begin recruiting more members and more support. They developed a campaign.

There was also litigation, through cooperating organizations, challenging key aspects of the city's administration of welfare benefits. There were demonstrations. At the end of this, CVH and other organizations – they are not the only group responsible for this win – succeeded in getting the city of New York to pass a transitional jobs program, which will create 10,000 jobs for people coming off welfare when the 5-year time limit on public assistance is reached.

Whether that will happen is an ongoing drama – and a different story. What I want to point out here is that the story of CVH's work is theoretically the way a responsive system of representative government is supposed to work. CVH effectively combined all the tools that are available to a small grass roots organization.

What could be done to promote more of this kind of work? The sad answer is find more money. There is very little progressive money that supports this kind of

grass roots work. Philanthropy in general is being sidetracked to meeting human needs as government funding at all levels remains flat, or decreases. I believe that a better role for philanthropy would be to keep the government and the systems that ought to be meeting human needs accountable by funding grass roots efforts such as this one.

What are the characteristics that I think are important and hopeful here?

First, it was the people who were affected by the problem speaking for themselves. Second, they learned how to speak clearly in the midst of our media frenzy, but not by framing their message as a sound bite. Third, they had real conversations, pushing people beyond their initial responses to engage more deeply with the issues. Fourth, they built relationships through this process. Finally, they moved beyond talking to real action.