

To the Point

Community-Focused Philanthropy

by Louis J. Beccaria, Ph.D.

So, you say you want to practice a philanthropy style that enables you to tackle important local issues, has a sense of mission and urgency, has some reasonable prospect of making a difference, and has practical impact on a smaller, defined geographical area. Well, I have a suggestion. It's called Community Philanthropy.

Philanthropy has always been about helping people and organizations in their communities. What is unique about community philanthropy is that it is packaged in a different way.

Community philanthropy is a strategy, and it has several distinguishing characteristics. First, it is focused on a defined geographical area. The area has a sense of geo-political continuity about it; has pressing issues which need to be addressed; and is of such manageable size as to offer the promise of concrete results in return for philanthropy's social investment in it.

Second, this strategy has a sense of mission and urgency about it. It may be aimed at broad community health improvement or social and economic revitalization in one or two small rural areas or urban neighborhoods. In the case of Coatesville and Phoenixville in Chester County, the chosen target may be a whole small city or borough which has fallen on hard times and needs a new beginning. In this light the strategy may involve addressing such critical issues as health care access, quality education, youth-at-risk, and housing deficiencies, housing access, and public safety – all at the same time and in the name of long-over-

due improvements to the quality of life of the targeted area.

Third, it is distinguished by the motivation of realizing concrete, positive results that directly and tangibly impact people's daily lives. Generally, smaller geographical areas lend themselves to dealing with people's needs and issues in a more workable way. When size is manageable, the cooperation required among separate constituencies to solve an issue is a bit easier. The major community players know one another and generally trust each other more. There is a sense that "we are all in this together." Consequently, the prospects for issue resolution, service enhancement, and funder success, while not guaranteed, tend to be greater.

Fourth, such a strategy provides a foundation funder, for example, the opportunity to employ all of its resources – not just its money – in addressing the community issues at hand. The resources are the time, talent, influence, connections, creative ideas, political clout, and expertise of the board which can be brought to bear on the community's needs/issues. In this sense, the foundation becomes more than a unidimensional funder. Its approach becomes multidimensional using these added resources, and by playing such additional roles, at times, of broker, partner, advocate, or catalyst. Translate you say!

The community philanthropy practitioner may use his/her influence as a broker in promoting collaborations among disparate business, civic, educational, health care, social service, and cultural

groups. Often such groups need an impartial entity to bring them together to create a community solution they could not achieve working separately. Practitioners of community philanthropy sometimes act as advocates or ambassadors for the chosen community. For example, such "missionary" work can be employed to promote the community and cultivate the interest of other funders, venture capitalists, business people, and government officials regarding the community's assets and its positive future outlook.

Being a catalyst can take the form of highlighting a community issue that no one else has seen fit to publicly address such as smoking cessation among teens or questionable environmental conditions. Likewise, the funder/catalyst can take the pro-active step of marshaling resources and initiating a service delivery program long-needed to satisfy a local health or human service access concern. The possibilities are limitless.

Lastly, community philanthropy, besides being a unique strategic style, also can be a satisfying venture with considerable psychological income benefit for the funder. If your recipe for rewarding philanthropy includes a dash of focus on important issues in a manageable-sized locale; a measure of opportunity for making a difference; a pinch of practical impact; and a generous portion of total funder immersion in the philanthropic process, then I recommend community-focused philanthropy be on your menu.

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