



**THE
COLORADO
TRUST**

ACHIEVING ACCESS TO HEALTH FOR ALL COLORADANS

May 2012

STRATEGIC *Learning*

The Colorado Trust's Advocacy Funding Strategy:

*Lessons Learned for
Funders of Advocacy
Efforts & Evaluations*

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The Colorado Trust

The Colorado Trust is a grantmaking foundation dedicated to achieving access to health for all Coloradans. www.coloradotrust.org

Innovation Network

Innovation Network is a nonprofit evaluation, research and consulting firm. They provide knowledge and expertise to help nonprofits and funders learn from their work to improve their results. www.innonet.org

» LETTER FROM THE AUTHORS

To help realize The Colorado Trust’s bold vision – achieving access to health for all Coloradans – advocacy is imperative.

But funding an advocacy strategy was new ground for The Colorado Trust in 2007 when we presented this idea to our board. After decades of funding successful program implementations, embarking on this journey was a risk. And while The Trust has a long history of funding evaluations of grantmaking strategies, we felt it was even more important this time to include a robust evaluation component.

As it turned out, the design of this evaluation strategy was a risk, as well. Rather than a report at the end that would answer the question “did it work?”, we engaged Innovation Network to help us create an evaluation that would truly help us learn. Not just learn, but learn strategically – that is, in a way that would provide timely and useful information in order for us to adapt our funding strategy “in the moment.” Additionally, we wanted this for our grantees, believing that only by learning what works and what doesn’t as they implemented their grants, and having the flexibility to make changes along the way, would the grantees be successful in their advocacy work.

The challenges of conducting effective advocacy are matched by the challenges of implementing an effective advocacy funding strategy and evaluation. At the same time as The Trust wanted an open learning process for grantees and foundation staff, we wanted to understand the policy and advocacy outcomes achieved through the funding strategy. These two evaluation goals – learning and accountability – were at times conflicting. The Trust gleaned numerous lessons from this effort – lessons we share in this report. Our hope is that other funders of advocacy efforts can learn from the challenges we faced and how we addressed them, as well as our thoughts on what we might do differently in the future. It is only through learning and sharing openly with others that can we hope to achieve a strong field of advocates ready to address the compelling and challenging issues of our time.

An example of how different this evaluation was for The Trust is reflected in the writing of this evaluation report. Rather than a report written solely by the evaluator with The Trust as the audience, this report is co-authored with the foundation lead staff member on this evaluation. We believe that by jointly writing this report, we can provide greater insights viewed from two lenses: that of the funder and that of the independent evaluator. We sincerely hope the lessons will be of use to funders in the years ahead.

Sincerely,



Nancy Csuti

Director of Research, Evaluation & Strategic Learning, The Colorado Trust



Ehren Reed

Executive Director, Innovation Network

“Advocacy creates the conditions for the attainment of The Trust’s vision.”

~ Colorado Trust grantee

» SETTING THE CONTEXT, ESTABLISHING THE FRAMEWORK

After more than 20 years of funding strategies dedicated to improving the health and well-being of the people of Colorado, in the fall of 2007 The Colorado Trust staff underwent a process to review and improve the theory of change that guided the foundation's grantmaking. Despite ranking as one of the country's healthiest states, in 2007 Colorado was in the lower third of states in rates of insurance coverage and ranked 45th in the number of children insured.¹ The numbers of health professionals were projected to be inadequate to meet the fast growing needs of the state. Access to health and health care were rapidly becoming out of the reach for many Coloradans.² In this environmental context, a focus on improving access to health for all Coloradans was identified by staff and board as the outcome Trust grantmaking would strive to affect moving forward.

A theory of change defines all building blocks required to bring about a given long-term goal. This set of connected building blocks – interchangeably referred to as outcomes, results, accomplishments, or preconditions – is depicted on a map known as a pathway of change/change framework, which is a graphic representation of the change process.

Built around the pathway of change, a theory of change describes the types of interventions (a single program or a comprehensive community initiative) that bring about the outcomes depicted in the pathway of a change map. Each outcome in the pathway of change is tied to an intervention, revealing the often complex web of activity that is required to bring about change.³

To achieve this goal, The Trust realized that involving the participation of a broad base of supporters across the state was critical.⁴ Given that realization, The Trust theorized that the most effective use of its grantmaking would involve creating the right conditions for policy solutions to emerge, laying the groundwork for future legislative successes. At the same time, The Trust recognized the advocacy community, while strong and well-developed in the Denver metro area, was not so in rural and frontier regions of the state. Consequently, building the capacity of all health advocacy organizations across the state to participate in the policy process became an explicit component of The Trust's new theory of change. Specifically, the theory of change identified the following preconditions necessary for access to health to be realized.

THE TRUST'S PRECONDITIONS RELATED TO ADVOCACY:

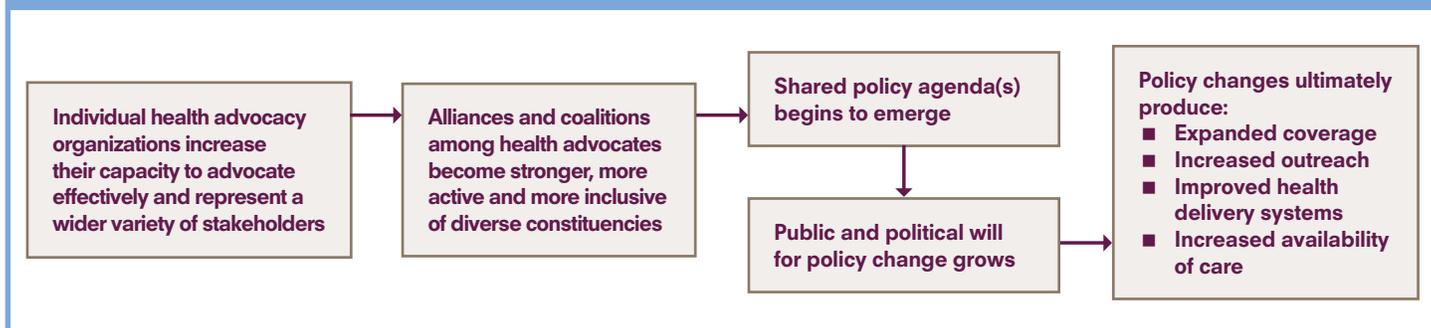
- Public awareness and the base of support for increased access are strong.
- There is a strong health advocacy community and consumer voice in Colorado.
- Alliances for increased access to health are strengthened, active, inclusive and aligned around a shared policy goal.
- Policy options for increased access to health are researched, developed and implemented.

BENCHMARKS WERE IDENTIFIED BY WHICH THE TRUST WOULD MEASURE SUCCESS FOR THIS WORK. INCLUDED IN THESE BENCHMARKS WERE:

- Health advocacy organizations develop greater and more nuanced understanding of the policy process.
- Organizations involved with health advocacy show improved ability to respond strategically to shifts in the environment.
- The capacity of organizations to communicate and promote health advocacy messages to diverse audiences increases.
- The management and stability of health advocacy organizations improves.
- Representation of consumer voices and of racial, ethnic and rural communities in health advocacy increase.

According to this theory of change, the foundation for future policy success could be established through supporting the capacity and effectiveness of individual advocacy organizations, as well as through the connections between those organizations. This component of the theory of change is illustrated in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1. THE COLORADO TRUST'S FRAMEWORK FOR CHANGE THROUGH ADVOCACY FUNDING



The first round of advocacy grantmaking began in December 2007 when the board approved a \$2.4 million grantmaking strategy to support, strengthen and convene advocacy organizations. Nine organizations representing a variety of constituents and advocacy capacity were invited to apply for three years of negotiated general operating support. Organizations were invited to apply because they filled a specific niche within the health advocacy community, brought specific skills or capacities, or represented a specific population where past advocacy efforts had been weak. In addition, how the advocacy organizations would move The Colorado Trust on the measures described above was taken into consideration.⁴ Grants ranged from \$150,000 to \$700,000 for the three-year period from 2008 to 2011.

The nine grantees were:

1. **The Bell Policy Center**
2. **The Colorado Children's Campaign**
3. **Colorado Fiscal Policy Institute** (a project of the Colorado Center on Law and Policy)
 - The first three grantees listed are well-established advocacy organizations that form the Looking Forward Collaborative for the purpose of doing research, coalition building and public education on the impacts of Colorado's fiscal policies. These organizations work together to advocate for changes to the fiscal constraints in the Colorado constitution to increase revenue for health and other quality-of-life investments.
4. **Bighorn Leadership Development Program**
 - A Denver-based leadership and health policy training program affiliated with Colorado State University, interested in expanding its reach to rural community leaders.
5. **Colorado Area Health Education Centers**
 - Six established centers, but new to advocacy work, that conducted listening sessions and educational forums across the state.
6. **Colorado Consumer Health Initiative**
 - A nine-year-old consumer membership organization focused on increasing awareness and providing education to health consumers.
7. **Colorado Multi-ethnic/Cultural Consortium**
 - A start-up organization representing ethnically and geographically diverse health consumers, including faith communities, on physical, oral, mental and behavioral health.
8. **Colorado Rural Health Center**
 - An organization supporting the health needs of rural Coloradans through research, education, communications, and advocacy aimed at state policy and health leaders.
9. **The Southern Colorado Collaborative**
 - A new coalition of organizations helping south and southeastern Colorado communities identify their health needs and advocate for improved access to health.

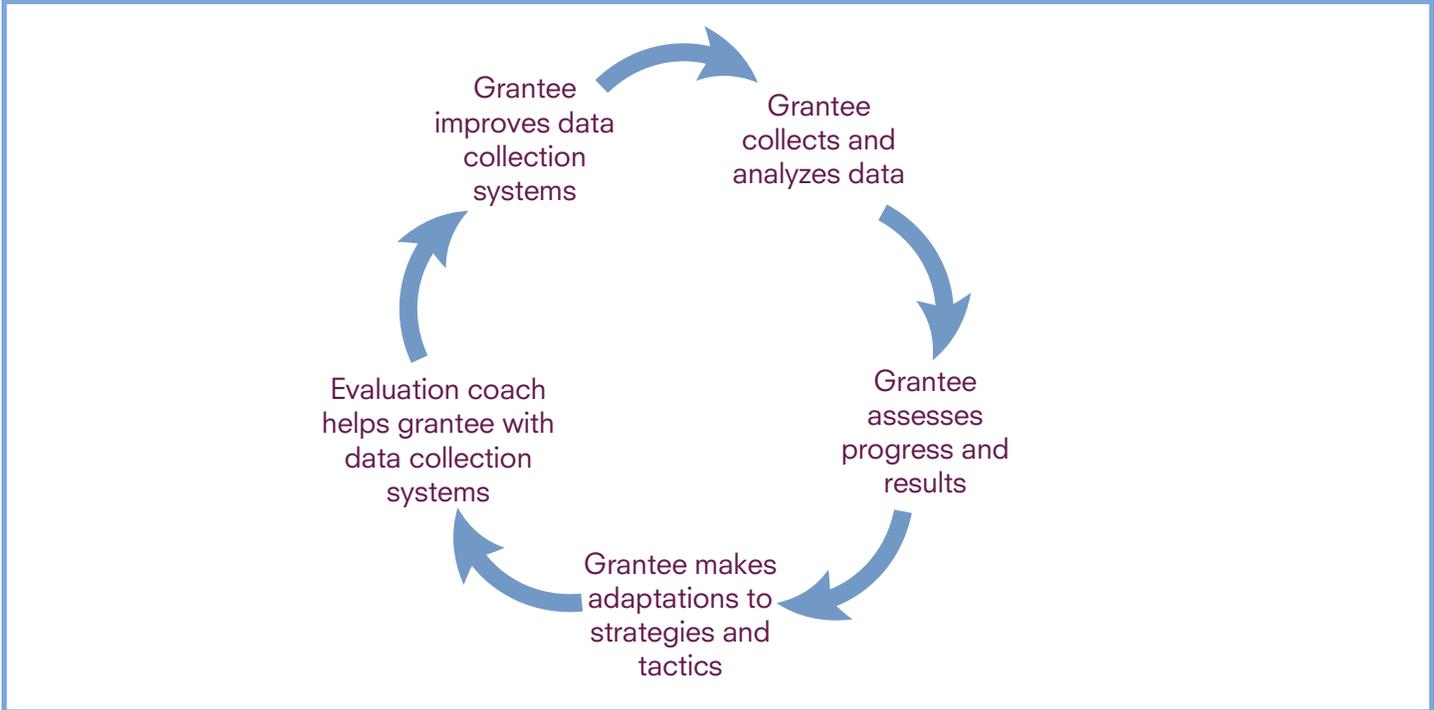
The Trust has a long history of providing non-monetary support to grantees. Generous funding in the areas of technical assistance, networking opportunities, convening grantees around specific topics,

and evaluation are established foundation grantmaking best practices⁵ and The Trust has long been a leader in such funding. As part of the advocacy funding strategy, in addition to negotiated general operating support, The Trust paired each grantee with an evaluation coach. These coaches, who brought with them experience in evaluation capacity building and an understanding of Colorado’s health policy environment, were tasked with providing one-on-one coaching and evaluation assistance to their grantee(s) over the three-year life of the grant. This pairing was designed to build grantees’ capacity to collect and use data to inform their decisionmaking and, as a result, lead to more effective advocacy. Literature has shown that the capacity to collect and use the right data at the right time is an indicator of a successful advocacy organization.⁶ Such use of evaluation – for informing decisionmaking in real-time – is called strategic learning.

For the purposes of this funding effort, strategic learning was defined as the use of data and insights from a variety of information-gathering approaches – including evaluation – to inform decisionmaking about strategy.⁷

“Embedding” the evaluation coaches within the grantee organizations was intended to strengthen the strategic learning loop and result in more effective advocates. This idea of providing evaluation assistance to grantees to inform learning, while resource intensive, was an emerging trend in advocacy evaluation when this project was created. The Trust wanted to learn from this unique approach, and this commitment to incorporating learning into grantee work with the intention to inform action is illustrated in Figure 2:

FIGURE 2. THE STRATEGIC LEARNING LOOP OF GRANTEE-EVALUATOR INTERACTION



By focusing the technical assistance on building evaluation capacity at the grantee level, The Trust made clear that the purpose of these efforts was to generate knowledge that could be used by the individual grantees on a real-time basis to inform their advocacy strategies. This strategic learning approach draws upon the experience and advice of other funders and evaluators working to assess the impact of advocacy. The Atlantic Philanthropies, The California Endowment, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and some leading advocacy evaluation firms collaborated to identify guiding principles for evaluating advocacy efforts.⁸

The seven principles are:

1. Expand the perception of policy work beyond state and federal legislative arenas.
2. Build an evaluation framework around a theory about how a group’s activities are expected to lead to its long-term outcomes.

3. Focus monitoring and impact assessment for most grantees and initiatives on the steps that lay the groundwork and contribute to the policy change being sought.
4. Include outcomes that involve building grantee capacity to become more effective advocates.
5. Focus on the foundation's and grantees' contributions, not attribution.
6. Emphasize organizational learning as the overarching goal of evaluation for both the grantee and the foundation.
7. Build grantee capacity to conduct self-evaluation.

At the core of The Trust's approach was the belief that continuous learning and adapting as a result of the learning is critical to effective advocacy and that – in order to increase the effectiveness of their work – advocacy groups must be in a position to collect and understand how to use data for decisionmaking. The rationale behind this approach is echoed by recent explorations into effective advocacy evaluation. In their 2011 article *The Elusive Craft of Evaluating Advocacy*, Steven Teles and Mark Schmitt suggest that “successful advocacy efforts are characterized not by their ability to proceed along a predefined track, but by their capacity to adapt to changing circumstances.” Therefore, a judgment of effectiveness does not involve sound “strategy as much as strategic capacity: the ability to read the shifting environment of politics for subtle signals of change, to understand the opposition, and to adapt deftly.”⁹

Despite this commitment to investing in evaluation for strategic learning and improvement, The Trust still wanted to understand the impact of the investment and whether progress was made toward long-term outcomes. Innovation Network, a Washington, DC nonprofit evaluation firm with substantial experience evaluating advocacy, was selected to manage this evaluation effort. Additionally, Innovation Network served as a liaison between the evaluation coaches and The Trust. Innovation Network was charged with examining questions related to grantees contribution to The Trust's vision; specifically, to examine the impact grantees were having collectively on the preconditions outlined by The Trust (see page 4). This dual role of evaluation for learning and evaluation for understanding impact proved to be an ongoing challenge throughout the project and will be discussed later in this report.

Innovation Network began their work on this evaluation in September 2008. Over the next three years, Innovation Network was charged with two tasks:

1. Lead and manage a team of evaluation coaches to provide evaluation technical assistance to grantees for strategic learning purposes; and
2. Assess the progress made, across grantees, toward the outcomes identified in The Trust's theory of change.

How these two very different tasks unfolded, the outcomes achieved and the lessons learned along the way are the focus of this report.

» ACHIEVEMENTS OF ADVOCACY GRANTEEES

Development of Theories of Change

Once the evaluation coaches were in place, their first task was to work with grantees on creating a theory of change for their work. A theory of change helps an organization articulate the goals they are striving to achieve as well as the activities they are undertaking, and most importantly, why they believe the activities they are doing will lead to the intended change. This process can be challenging for some organizations, in particular for those that have been working toward a single goal for years but have never stopped to talk about why they believe what they are doing will make a difference. Getting to the “why” can be a challenging process, but one that all organizations can benefit from.

The evaluation coaches worked with grantees over a six -month period to develop their theories of change. With guidance from their coaches, grantees selected outcomes they hoped to achieve. To help in this process, grantees were provided with a list of common outcomes research had shown were associated with effective advocacy efforts:¹⁰

- **Organizational capacity:** The ability of an organization or coalition to lead, adapt, manage and technically implement an advocacy strategy.
- **Partnerships or alliances:** Mutually beneficial relationships with other organizations or individuals who support or participate in an advocacy strategy.
- **Collaboration and alignment:** Individuals or groups coordinating their work and acting together.
- **New advocates:** Previously unengaged individuals who take action in support of an issue or position.
- **New champions:** High-profile individuals who adopt an issue and publicly advocate for it.
- **Media coverage:** Quantity and/or quality of coverage generated in print, broadcast, or electronic media.
- **Issue reframing:** Changes in how an issue is presented, discussed, or perceived.
- **Awareness:** Recognition that a problem exists or familiarity with a policy proposal.
- **Saliency:** Increased importance assigned to an issue or a policy proposal.
- **Attitudes or beliefs:** Changed feelings or affect about an issue or policy proposal.
- **Growth of constituency or base of support:** Increase in the number of individuals who can be counted on for sustained advocacy or action on an issue.

Grantees' efforts toward completing a theory of change to guide their work – and the periodic review of that theory of change to ensure they were on target – were a significant accomplishment of this funding strategy. Organizations whose work is guided by a theory of change are more strategic and more likely to achieve their intended outcomes. A theory of change provided grantees a clear roadmap for where their organization was going, and provided the foundation from which the evaluation coaches could then build their work with grantees in the months following.

Increased Capacity for Strategic Learning

As a result of The Trust's support, participating grantees incorporated new tools, processes, and systems for data collection and formalized reflection. Not surprisingly, grantees understood and adapted to strategic learning to varying degrees. One grantee reported that they saw a great deal of increased capacity as a result of their partnership with their coach. A staff member reported: "I'm not sure we've ever had any kind of evaluation like this. Something that has been this deliberate and supported, and also incorporated at the beginning...that ongoing feedback loop."

According to this grantee, the three most valuable evaluation tools developed with the assistance of their local evaluation coach were an activities tracker to monitor staff activities and web analytics, a survey of their membership, and annual facilitated debriefing sessions with their leadership and policy and advocacy staff to discuss the previous year's activities and to determine appropriate revisions to the subsequent year's plan. One grantee's policy analysts noted: "The grant helped us set up internal processes for measuring outcomes and successes...and helps us feel confident about what we're doing, because we're able to measure the outcomes and impact." To help ensure the sustainability of their work, the evaluation coach also developed an evaluation toolkit for the grantee which explained the purpose of each tool, how and when to implement it, how to use the results and tips for adapting it over time.

Participating grantees also changed their perspectives on the purpose and value of evaluation. One grantee reported that through this effort they came to realize that "evaluation can be a positive experience and [can] lead to...substantive change." Adding, that they now understand that "it is important to review and evaluate how a project/program developed – what worked and what might be changed next time." This grantee also noted that as a result of their work with their local evaluation coach, they now "better understand the value and importance of collecting information pertaining to how and why [their] priorities and processes are determined and then implemented."

Another grantee noted that while they have not yet fully solved their evaluation needs, "the process has increased our valuing of the information we are collecting and reporting, because we are much closer to learning what we need to."

GRANTEES DESCRIBE THE VALUE OF EVALUATION COACHING:

“One of the most valuable aspects of this project has been the opportunity (and responsibility) for staff and board, collectively and individually, to spend time learning and thinking about evaluation – and with technical assistance to provide the framework and answer questions...I also can’t overstate the usefulness of having an expert, objective, friendly sounding-board to try ideas out on.”

“[Our] evaluation coach played an important role in developing our policy and advocacy work in a meaningful, effective manner. The evaluation coach assisted [us] in continually monitoring progress in reaching our intended goals, while also providing structured opportunities for honest assessment and dialogue among staff.”

“[We] found our evaluation coach to be extremely helpful in integrating an evaluation component into our everyday work. [We are] a data-driven organization that regularly collects and analyzes a wide range of data about our work and the issues we work on. However, our embedded evaluator helped us to ensure that we were reflecting on our goals, desired outcomes, strategies and tactics in light of the theory of change we had developed, and if we were veering or shifting off course that we did so purposefully.”

Increased Organizational Capacity

A successful advocacy effort requires that the advocates involved have the capacity to effectively carry out their proposed activities. Therefore, an assessment of organizational capacity is particularly important in an advocacy evaluation. Research defines the four core capacities of effective advocates as follows:¹¹

1. **Leadership:** The ability of organizational leaders to create and sustain a vision, to inspire, prioritize, make decisions, provide direction and innovate in an effort to achieve the organizational mission.
2. **Adaptive:** The ability of a nonprofit organization to monitor, assess and respond to internal and external changes (e.g., networking/collaborating, assessing organizational effectiveness, evaluating programs, and services and planning).
3. **Management:** The ability of a nonprofit to ensure the effective and efficient use of organizational resources.
4. **Technical:** The ability of a nonprofit to implement all of the key organizational and programmatic functions (e.g., finance, budgeting, fundraising, technology, marketing and communications).

As part of Innovation Network’s macro-level data collection for the advocacy funding strategy, two rounds of advocacy capacity assessments were conducted with participating grantees: the first between August 2009 and February 2010, and the second between August 2010 and March 2011. This customized assessment tool was made up of 20 statements likely to be true for a strong advocacy organization. For each statement, stakeholders were asked to respond how “true” that statement was for their organization. The response categories for each statement were: “True, and functioning well”; “True, but needs strengthening”; “Not true, but in development”; “Not true, but under consideration”; and “Not true, and not appropriate.” Guided by their coaches, key stakeholders (including Executive Directors, other senior staff, board members and others) from each participating grantee were asked to complete the assessment for their organization. Results of these capacity assessments were shared with grantees and helped inform the evaluation coaches’ activities.

Results of the advocacy capacity assessment showed capacity increases by all grantees individually, and collectively the assessments showed increases in 19 of 20 metrics. The two capacities that showed the greatest increases were:

- Our organization uses evaluation to communicate with funders and to inform our strategies; and
- Our organization uses several types of media (e.g., print, TV and radio broadcasts, internet, social media, etc.) in our advocacy efforts.

It’s likely that their relationships with their evaluation coaches contributed to increases in the first of these capacities, while the second is likely related to the changes in how we as a society engage with

media that have taken place in recent years. Today, most organizations use Twitter and Facebook to reach out to constituents and stakeholders; those tools were far less utilized five or six years ago.

Looking collectively across grantees, the only capacity that failed to show an increase was:

- Our organization is willing to take risks even when success is not guaranteed.

For this capacity, it is possible that the current economic downturn is partly to blame. Organizations with more economic security might be more likely to take risks than ones that are forced to spend their resources more judiciously. However, advocacy efforts inherently involve a certain amount of risk.¹² Funders who support advocacy need to develop a level of comfort with risk, and should support and encourage calculated risk-taking on the part of their grantees.

Progress Toward Desired Outcomes

The long-term outcomes described in an advocate's theory of change (i.e., policy reform, system changes) often fall outside of the scope of a typical grant or evaluation. Additionally, the complexity of the context in which such outcomes emerge makes it difficult to attribute successes to the actions of any one advocate (or even any one coalition of organizations). Therefore, the assessment of progress toward – rather than the achievement of – desired long-term outcomes is an integral part of any advocacy evaluation.

That said, during the three-year timeframe of this funding strategy, several desired policy objectives were achieved. Most critically, three tax-cutting ballot initiatives were all declined by Colorado's voters. Additionally, the Colorado Senate passed a bill modifying the historic tax and expenditure limit known as Arveschoug-Bird, which had capped spending increases to the state's general fund at 6%. Legislation passed by the Colorado House included a bill providing incentives for health care professionals to practice in rural Colorado, and another expanding the scope of Colorado's Primary Care Office. While grantees did not participate in lobbying of any kind as part of this funding, they provided education and information to their stakeholders regarding these efforts.

While it would be impossible to attribute any of those successes to this funding strategy alone, there was significant qualitative and quantitative evidence that the grantees' advocacy and outreach were making an impact. Collectively, grantees educated thousands of Coloradans across the state, formed new and leveraged existing partnerships with business, government and other nonprofit leaders, and generated significant exposure from both new and traditional media.

EXAMPLES OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS RELATED TO EDUCATION AND INFORMATION:

Colorado Rural Health Center:

- 81% of rural respondents reported that they were more knowledgeable about rural health policy issues that affect their community as a result of CRHC's advocacy work;
- More than 50% of rural members reported that they were more knowledgeable about how to get involved in state-level advocacy; and
- More than 30% of rural members reported contacting a legislator after reading an alert.

Colorado Fiscal Policy Institute:

- 96% of partners felt their understanding of fiscal issues had improved over the last several years.

» LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE THE TRUST'S ADVOCACY FUNDING STRATEGY

I. It is critical to find evaluation coaches with the proper skill-set to do this work.

Professional evaluators come to the field with extensive education and training. Conducting traditional evaluations (including experimental and quasi-experimental designs) requires years of training and practice in the field. But that training and practice does not necessarily impart the skills necessary to be a successful advocacy evaluation coach.

Understanding how to use data for learning and improvement in real-time is a critical skill for advocacy evaluation coaches. The best advocacy evaluation coaches need to be both good advocacy evaluators **and** good evaluation coaches. These are two different skill-sets, requiring two different kinds of expertise.

Effective coaching requires the ability to build and maintain a strong relationship with the grantee. The impartiality and distance traditional evaluators strive for in their work can be in sharp contrast to the trusting relationship needed for this type of work. Effective coaches also need to be good facilitators, mediators, negotiators and listeners. Advocacy evaluators also need to be flexible and willing to consider outcomes in a different light than they may have in graduate school. They must be comfortable with complex, hard-to-measure, “squishy” results.

The advocacy evaluation coaching model used in this funding strategy was a strategic learning model. The skills necessary to effectively facilitate strategic learning can be put into two categories – technical skills and adaptive skills. It is the ability to draw on both skill sets that makes the best evaluation coach. Skills required in these two categories include:¹³

Technical skills:

- Communication, framing and translation
- Participatory sense-making and facilitation
- Political analysis
- Speedy data synthesis
- Understanding of what constitutes strategy
- Evaluation capacity-building

Adaptive skills:

- Flexible and risk tolerant
- Curious and creative
- Comfort with ambiguity, uncertainty and adaptation
- Comfort with constructivist approaches
- Capacity to understand unspoken organizational dynamics
- Able to sense and manage the balance between:
 - Evaluator and strategist
 - Not enough and too much feedback
 - Reflection and action

In this project, evaluators who spent time at the beginning of their work building relationships with the grantee and learning about their work had a solid foundation from which to facilitate effective strategic learning. Real-time learning on the part of grantees requires a strong degree of honesty and willingness to hear hard truths; the degree to which the evaluator was able to build a strong relationship greatly reinforced how successful they were in working with their grantee.

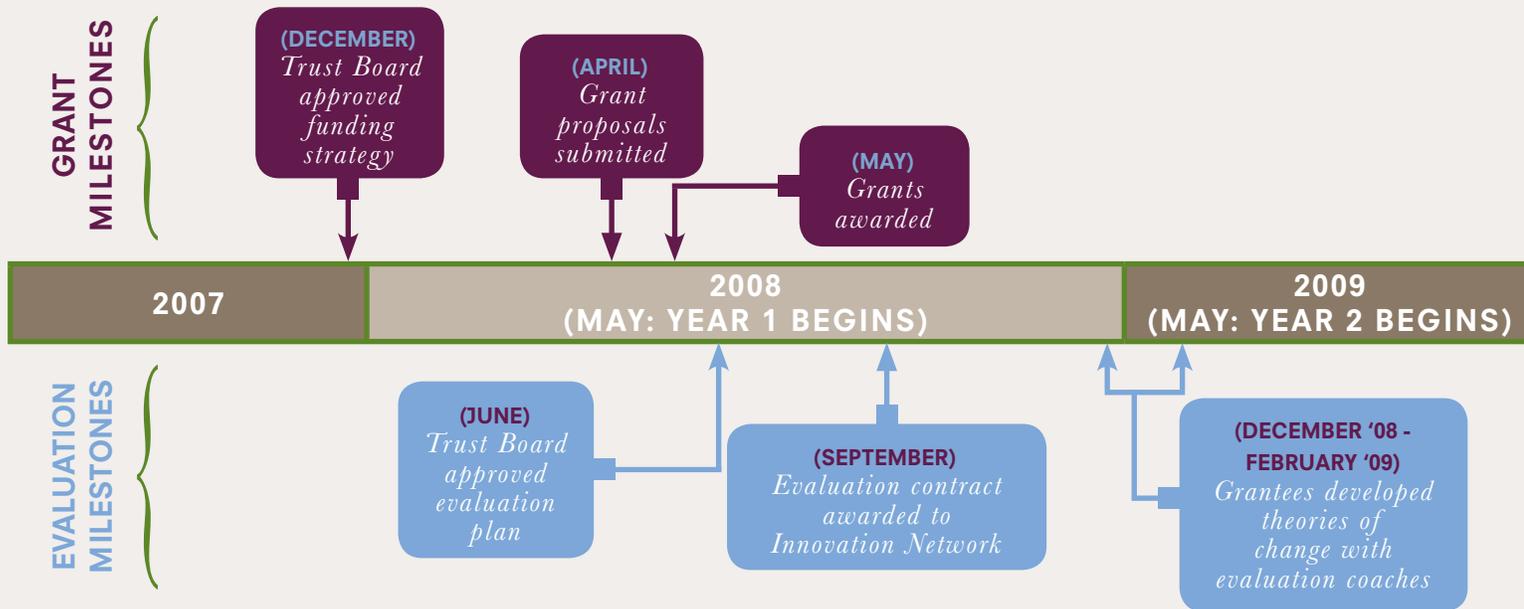
Funders of advocacy should not assume a highly skilled traditional evaluator will necessarily be a good advocacy evaluation coach. Funders should ask: Can this evaluator easily deal with ambiguity? Is this evaluator comfortable with less measurable outcomes? Is this evaluator willing to work with interim outcomes commonly associated with advocacy efforts? Does this evaluator possess the adaptive skills necessary to do this effectively?

II. It is important to bring in the evaluation coaches early in the funding strategy.

As is evident from the timeline on page 12, the grants were awarded to grantees five months prior to the start of the evaluation contract with Innovation Network. Once the evaluation firm was hired, it was another three months before the evaluation coaches were identified and they had started working with their respective grantees on their theories of change. It was a full eight months into a three-year grant by the time grantees had their theory of change completed and creation of data collection tools underway.

The first grantee capacity assessment took place more than one-third of the way through the grant. This delayed start-up for the evaluation, in addition to the time needed for evaluation coaches to build trust

» ADVOCACY FUNDING STRATEGY TIMELINE



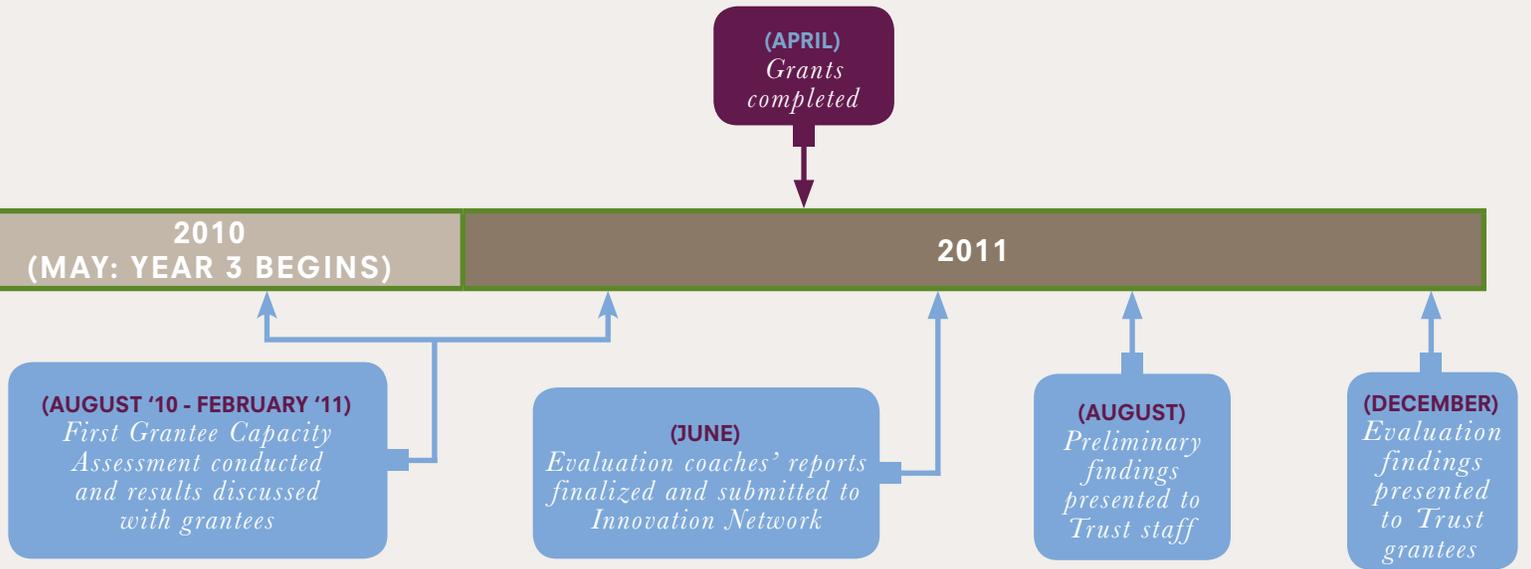
and relationships with grantees effectively meant the learning process did not fully begin until sometime in Year 2 of a three-year grant. On top of that, the concept of *evaluation for learning* was new for some grantees, and it wasn't until late in the process that all grantees understood the concept of strategic learning – and that evaluation was not just for The Trust, but for their own increased effectiveness.

Trust staff needed time to explore options for real-time advocacy evaluation and identify the best evaluation firm to do this. At the same time, staff felt an urgency to award grants and did not want to hold up the grant process while evaluation options were being reviewed. Additionally, staff waited until the next opportunity to meet with the board to ask for evaluation funding approval, further delaying the evaluation. In hindsight, it would have been better to plan the evaluation and go to the board with the plan for both the grant and evaluation funding at the same time. Starting the evaluation at the same time as the grantees' work would have ensured better integration of the learnings into the grantees' work, as well as increased opportunities for foundation staff learning.

III. Networking among grantees is a critical component of success.

Grantee networking had been a critical piece of Colorado Trust funding for decades, and it was initially a part of this advocacy funding strategy. Sharing successes and challenges with one another is a critical part of learning. Bringing grantees together to learn skills – and, more importantly, learn from one another – is the cornerstone of grantee networking. Due to some staffing turnover at the foundation, certain components of this funding strategy were reduced, including networking – although there were networking funds associated with this funding strategy, they were less than anticipated. When used, the focus was specifically on advocacy and policy issues. Given the varying capacity levels of the grantees, it was difficult to bring them all together meaningfully around a shared advocacy topic.

The result was that there were no networking events in which grantees, evaluation coaches, Trust staff and Innovation Network all came together to discuss progress, learnings and challenges uncovered in the strategic learning efforts. In retrospect, this was a significant oversight. In a follow-up assessment of the funding process all stakeholders – grantees, evaluation team members and Trust staff – commented that the lack of opportunities to come together and learn from one another regarding the evaluation was a missed opportunity. Building time and resources into cross-grantee evaluative information sharing is critical to maximizing the foundation's investment.



IN THE WORDS OF GRANTEEES:

“In retrospect, I wish [grantees] had spent more time as a group talking about our data collection and evaluation strategies...I think we would have benefitted from discussion in more depth what each organization was learning...”

“One activity we would have found valuable is a sharing of each organization’s theory of change and what they are learning...A fuller conversation [with other grantees] about the evaluation, rather than our advocacy efforts, would have been helpful.”

“...creating opportunities for grantees to share technical assistance would be especially valuable...”

IV. The purpose of the evaluation needs to be clearly understood by everyone involved.

The goals of this evaluation were twofold – learning and accountability for outcomes. While the evaluation coaches were tasked with facilitating the learning process, Innovation Network was responsible for tracking overarching advocacy and policy outcomes that would contribute toward The Trust’s theory of change, and the measures of success described earlier in this report.

To track overarching outcomes in a meaningful way, grantees were provided with a template of common outcomes to work toward as they developed their theories of change. Despite this common framework, there was significant variance in the activities, and thus the outcomes, pursued by the nine grantees. There was great variety in geographic target areas as some organizations focused on rural Colorado, while others concentrated their efforts in the Denver metro area. Advocacy target audiences varied, as well; some organizations focused on direct advocacy with decisionmakers, others worked to generate grassroots support for their work. The capacity to conduct successful advocacy varied tremendously as some grantees were newer organizations that focused more intently on organizational capacity building, while others were experienced and sophisticated veterans in the world of advocacy.

The Trust’s theory of change recognized a strong and diverse advocacy community across the state was necessary to reach the foundation’s access to health goals. To build this strong advocacy community, grantees were intentionally selected from a wide geographic area with varying capacity for advocacy work. While this selection made sense for building the field of advocates in Colorado, the

variety of grantees made measuring outcomes across the grantee pool challenging, if not impossible. During the funding strategy planning process, Trust staff knew that a wide variation of grantees was necessary to meet our benchmarks, yet did not consider the impact of this selection on the ability to aggregate results. Given the wide variety of grantees and grantee-level outcomes, trying to arrive at cross-grantee policy outcomes resulted in a “comparing apples to oranges” scenario. Before funding an advocacy strategy, foundation staff should be clear on what they hope to achieve; building a strong field of advocates is an important outcome, yet may be inconsistent with some boards and staffs desire for evidence of a single policy outcome.

Perhaps more important than the challenges related to measuring overarching strategy outcomes, were the challenges related to communicating with grantees and foundation staff regarding the purpose of the evaluation and what could be expected as a result. Evaluation for strategic learning necessitates that grantees be nimble and willing to shift directions quickly, as well as the foundation to allow that kind of flexibility. Grantees that receive negotiated general operating support and who also undergo a strategic learning effort will rarely be implementing a predetermined plan; the shifts in the external environment, as well as the rapid feedback they receive from their data collection efforts, will require them to shift gears and make course corrections. While a dynamic process such as this is a critical component of a learning process, it can be frustrating for funders who want to know answers to questions such as, “Did they achieve the outcomes they planned?” or “Did our investment in advocacy result in policy change?” Clarity on the part of foundation staff, board and grantees as to the purpose of the evaluation is paramount to its success. Deciding on a simple way to describe the evaluation, and adhering to that language throughout the entire funding strategy, can minimize confusion and unmet expectations.

V. Learning is not just for grantees. Foundations also have an obligation to learn.

The Trust has a long tradition of providing non-monetary support to grantee organizations, including technical assistance. That history of support has helped The Trust understand that distributing technical assistance dollars in the most efficient and effective way possible requires a systematic assessment of need. For example, for use in past initiatives, The Trust developed a tool called the Organizational Capacity Assessment¹⁴ specifically to assess the types of assistance needed to help build a grantee organization’s capacity. Only after the implementation of this assessment was technical assistance provided to grantees.

Such an assessment was not in place for providing evaluation technical assistance and coaching in this funding strategy. Instead the technical assistance funds were divided equally and each grantee received the same allotment of their evaluation coach’s time. During the first year, each grantee was provided with six hours per week of technical assistance; that number was reduced to four hours per week during Years 2 and 3.

Unfortunately, the lessons about assessing technical assistance needs and allocating resources accordingly did not transfer to this project, with unsurprising results – the lesson was learned again. To maximize funders’ investments in evaluation for learning, some type of assessment must be implemented in the beginning, and technical assistance plans should be created from those assessments. This advocacy funding strategy clearly illustrated grantees did not need the same level of assistance, nor were they all ready to benefit from the same levels and types of assistance.

To meet the goal of increasing the voice of advocacy organizations – particularly those often overlooked, throughout the state – The Trust funded a mix of advocacy organizations: some start-ups (low advocacy capacity), some established organizations new to advocacy (medium advocacy capacity), and some with a long history of successful advocacy (high advocacy capacity). Yet, the same number of coaching hours was provided to grantees, irrespective of their initial capacity. In reality, some organizations were better equipped and/or more motivated to take advantage of their coach’s time than others. Others started at a higher capacity level and may have done just as well with fewer coaching hours.

Rather than providing all formal technical assistance through the evaluation coaches, funders should consider a mix of trainings, grantee gatherings, and resources and guides...along with the provision

of coaching. This would result in a more valuable means of building these organizations' evaluation capacity.

Providing technical assistance in a variety of ways was a lesson The Trust considered in numerous previous projects, yet it was not applied to this project. Funders should pay close attention to lessons learned from previous seemingly unrelated projects. It may be that lessons learned are applicable to more situations than apparent at first glance. This is particularly important for funders engaged in multiple content areas and strategies. Lessons learned in a violence prevention initiative, for example, can have important implications for an early childhood education funding effort. Similarly, lessons learned in the provision of general technical assistance can have important implications for evaluation technical assistance.

» CONCLUSION

This report provides lessons learned from The Trust's advocacy funding strategy specifically for advocacy funders. Those new to advocacy funding should be prepared for surprises to emerge throughout the process – surprises that require the foundation to be flexible and willing to change, just as grantees who are undertaking the work of advocacy need to be innovative and creative in their work. Providing negotiated general operating support allows grantees this flexibility. Providing strategic learning coaches to facilitate the collection of meaningful data and a rapid feedback loop to enable shifting direction when needed greatly enhances the chances of success.

Considerable research has been done on what characteristics are needed for an advocacy organization to be effective. The ability to assess, understand and adapt to the changing environment is a cornerstone of successful advocacy. The Trust's investment in supporting evaluation coaches to help with this process served to increase the capacity of Colorado's advocacy community to meet the challenges ahead of them.

» ENDNOTES

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