



Philanthropy and Government Working Together:

The Role of Offices of Strategic Partnerships in Public Problem Solving



The Center on Philanthropy & Public Policy
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

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Foreword

Government and the philanthropic community have long worked together to solve public problems. More often than not, these efforts are characterized by a focus on a specific issue of shared interest. They are frequently episodic, time-limited and ad hoc. While there are potential gains from partnering with one another, the costs and risks of mounting such efforts can discourage this strategy.

In recent years, there have been a number of efforts to overcome such barriers through new institutional arrangements—which we refer to as offices of strategic partnerships—that are intended to catalyze and facilitate partnerships between government and philanthropy. At times, these partnerships extend to other sectors as well. These arrangements provide the infrastructure for fostering partnerships. They are found at the local, state and federal level. While their names and origins, roles and responsibilities, and structural details differ from place to place, collectively they represent an intriguing innovation in philanthropic-government relations.

These offices were the focus of a recent roundtable hosted by The Center on Philanthropy and Public Policy. Based on the roundtable discussion, as well as interviews with the principals in existing offices and documentary evidence, this report examines the rationale for their creation; how they are organized and do their work; and the opportunities and challenges they create. We view this report as a next step in the development of this new approach to stimulating and supporting philanthropic-government partnerships.

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I. Introduction

Over the last three decades, a great deal of attention has been paid to partnerships that span across the sectors: government, business, and philanthropy and the nonprofit sector. Each sector brings to bear its own unique assets and attributes to solving pressing public problems in a collaborative manner. Consequently, it is now recognized that bright ideas and their translation into transformative and meaningful change is not the sole province of any particular sector, underscoring the importance of new models for collaborative problem solving.¹

As a result there has been an intensifying interest in philanthropy and government working together.² While government and philanthropy have a history of joining forces to address critical problems, these efforts have often been informal and episodic with a good dose of happenstance. There is growing evidence that foundations of various types and scale are taking active steps to engage with government on a more formalized and continuous basis.³ At the same time, governments are exploring new ways to leverage philanthropic assets and to advance innovative solutions to public problems in the context of spiraling budget deficits that are compelling governments to “do more with less.”

As both philanthropy and government seek to expand their impact, new models of working together are beginning to emerge. These models extend beyond traditional strategies of government taking philanthropic innovations to scale or foundations engaging governments to influence public policy to forging ongoing philanthropic-government partnerships through formalized structures.⁴ These formal structures are called many things, but we refer to them generically as “offices of strategic partnerships” (OSPs). They are found at the local, state, and federal level. They vary in their origins, rationales and structures, and they have a range of approaches to their work. In some cases, their roles and functions encompass more than facilitating partnerships with philanthropy to include collaborations with the nonprofit and business communities. Nevertheless, each office seeks to catalyze new and stronger relationships between philanthropy and government to address pressing public problems. They provide infrastructure for cross-sector partnerships and help to lower the transaction costs. Collectively, they represent a new institutional arrangement for facilitating philanthropic-government partnerships.

1. For an interesting framework for understanding the possibilities, sources, and strategies for social change among a broad array of sectors and actors, see: S. Goldsmith, G. Georges, & T.G. Burke, *The Power of Social Innovation: How Civic Entrepreneurs Ignite Community Networks for Good*, San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass (2010).

2. See: GrantCraft, *Working with Government: Guidance for Grantmakers*, New York, NY (2010).

3. For instance, GrantCraft (2010) heard from over 1,500 individuals, in response to a survey, who either were involved or had previously been involved in a collaboration with government. Most of these engagements took place at the local or state level, reflecting the fact that there are many more foundations that can make the connection to government at these levels.

4. See: A. Wolk & C.G. Ebinger, “Government and Social Innovation: Current State and Local Models,” *Innovations*, 5:3, pp.135-157 (2010). The authors examine a number of partnership models for social innovation and entrepreneurship, including efforts to instill innovation in governmental operations as well as efforts to forge partnerships across sectors. They identify two structural models—liaison and office—that can be found within government, outside of government, or in quasi-governmental roles. These models help to foster government partnerships with nonprofits, foundations and corporations with the aim of breaking down “silos,” leveraging funds, cultivating champions and attacking entrenched problems in innovative and systemic ways.

These offices are relatively young. The Office of Foundation Liaison for the State of Michigan, the oldest existing office, was founded only in 2003. While the number of offices has grown since then, not all have survived.⁵ Thus, it is important not only to understand what these offices do and how they operate, but also what it takes for them to succeed. These are precisely the issues at the heart of this paper. We begin with a general discussion of philanthropic-government partnerships focused on the institutional logics of both philanthropy and government, the new imperative for establishing partnerships, and the benefits and costs of such arrangements. Next we examine the forces behind their creation, how they are structured, their primary missions and strategies and some examples of their accomplishments. Then we explore more deeply how these offices work, the challenges they face, and the tactics they use to overcome such challenges.

5. For example, Wolk and Ebinger (2010) identify government offices in Ohio and New Mexico that focus on philanthropic partnerships that no longer exist today. In fact, we found reference to such an office as far back as the early 1990s in Detroit; see: J. O’Gara, “Brother, Can They Paradigm,” *Philanthropy Magazine* (1997).

II. Philanthropic-Government Partnerships

It is generally agreed that a partnership involves a concerted effort at information sharing, coordinating, and ultimately joint decision-making. The precise nature of these partnerships can manifest in a variety of ways from loose agreements between the parties to highly structured initiatives. They often involve co-funding, but that does not itself constitute a partnership. The key feature of the partnerships that are the focus of this paper is a shared commitment between philanthropy and government to work together to solve public problems. These partnerships involve two parties who have common missions, possess their own assets, and value their autonomy and independence.

INSTITUTIONAL LOGICS

As institutions, foundations and government have an array of resources that they can contribute to address common social problems. And, because each strives to achieve greater capacity and impact, they are motivated to explore the promise of working with each other. Each sector has its own institutional characteristics—rationales, incentives, and formal and informal rules—that shape their behavior. These contrasting features provide the potential for adding value from their collaboration, while also creating additional challenges that entail costs and risks. We consider the differences in the institutional logics of philanthropic foundations and government.

Foundations, as we know them today, are an innovation of the twentieth century. Historically foundations both funded and operated hospitals, schools and universities, orphanages, museums, and other nonprofits. At the turn of the century, the American philanthropic foundation was created to function largely as a grantmaking institution. The prototypical foundation has a permanent endowment, exists into perpetuity, has no allegiance to a particular nonprofit organization, and focuses on grantmaking for an array of public purposes such as education, health, human services and the arts.⁶

With a permanent endowment and only a requirement to payout five percent of its assets, foundations have a unique capacity to take a long view of their work. An endowment obviates the need for foundations to raise funds and insulates them—to a considerable extent—from market forces. Foundations are also relatively free from government regulation in terms of how they direct their grantmaking, protecting them from political forces to a large degree.⁷ As a consequence, foundations have substantial flexibility in pursuit of their mission and the ability to take risks to achieve them. It is up to them to design their grantmaking strategies to achieve impact.

Foundations understand that they have an array of assets that they can call upon to make a difference. They not only have financial resources, but they have information and knowledge about problems and possible solutions as a result of their work. Foundations also have connections and networks

6. See: K. Prewitt, "Foundations," in W.W. Powell & R. Steinberg (Eds.), *The Nonprofit Sector: A Research Handbook*, 2nd ed., pp. 355-377, New Haven: Yale University Press (2006).

7. Aside from abiding by various constraints intended to limit self-dealing and private gain, prohibitions against foundation involvement in electoral politics and restrictions on lobbying and its funding, foundations enjoy a wide degree of discretion in choosing the public purposes and the strategies they pursue.

that enable them to serve as a catalyst for action. With these assets, foundations increasingly realize that there are strategies—beyond simple grantmaking—that enable them to meet their missions. As a consequence, foundations are increasingly looking for ways to leverage all of their assets—whether it is impact investing, activating their networks, or working collaboratively within philanthropy or across sectors—to make a bigger difference.

Governments in the American federal system represent a set of democratic institutions that are designed to be responsive and accountable to the public so as to address public needs. Through taxing and regulatory powers, governments have the ability to generate significant financial resources and to shape behavior through an array of incentives and constraints. Given their pervasive role and coercive powers, governments are in a powerful position to solve public problems.

But there is widespread recognition that governments are imperfect in their capacity to solve public problems. The literature on democracy is filled with a litany of the imperfections of government processes for aggregating individual preferences for collective choices. Governments relying on majority rule are slow to respond to emergent problems and politicians are apt to focus on the short-term and avoid risk in response to the ebb and flow of electoral cycles. In addition, reliance on public bureaucracies to meet collective demands is questioned on the grounds that public bureaucracies lack the sharp incentives and necessary discretion for results-oriented performance that characterize private organizations operating in competitive markets.

Despite the power of the public purse and its regulatory reach, governments realize that they do not have unlimited capacity. Cognizant of their inability to develop new responses to public needs, governments at all levels have been searching for innovative ways to address pressing public problems.

A NEW IMPERATIVE

“ *We recognized that philanthropic funds cannot begin to replace lost funding, but we also recognized the importance of, wherever possible and appropriate, sustaining and developing meaningful partnerships between the two sectors.* ”

As both sectors seek ways to expand their capacity to address the public problems central to their missions, there is a growing interest among both philanthropy and government to work together. This in and of itself is not new since there are ample examples historically where foundations and governments have worked together to meet public needs. What are new are the forces that are compelling governments and foundations to contemplate new models of how they can partner to achieve greater impact.

Local, state and federal governments are fiscally constrained, severely limiting their ability to mount new programs and even sustain existing ones. Thus, while governments have vast resources relative to foundations, they understand that partnerships with foundations may give them added flexibility to pursue new initiatives or innovations. At the same time, the growth in foundation assets has slowed after the “golden era” of the 1990s, leading foundations to look to new strategies—including partnerships with government—that can make an impact. This viewpoint is increasingly prevalent at the state and local level where there is a greater familiarity between policymakers and foundation leaders, and where a larger number of foundations have a greater sense that their resources can make an impact.

Beyond the economic pressures that have helped to push philanthropy and government together, many leaders both inside and outside of philanthropy believe that foundations are well-positioned to play a “venture capital” role for public problem solving. Largely insulated from markets and politics, foundations have the freedom to experiment with innovative solutions to pressing public problems. As a consequence, there is a model of foundation-government relations that sees foundations and their nonprofit partners as developing workable solutions that government can take to scale with their vast financial resources and service delivery systems. This stylized model of foundation-government relations has long dominated perceptions of how foundations and government can best work together. While there are numerous examples over the years of this model’s success,⁸ there is a growing recognition that it is not as prevalent today as the rhetoric suggests. Not all foundations produce evidence that can be translated into large scale solutions and few governments have resources to scale up the solutions that are incubated in the philanthropic and nonprofit sector.

Instead, governments are increasingly seeking to develop platforms that enable foundation support at the community level and diffusing practices and programs that seem to be most effective, particularly at the federal level (e.g., the Department of Education’s Promise Neighborhood and Investing Innovation Programs and the Social Innovation Fund). Beyond leveraging the financial resources offered by foundations, governments are also pursuing and enlisting the support of foundations whose issue expertise may inform how a particular program is designed or implemented and leveraging their connections and networks to address problems locally.

More and more foundations, for their part, view partnership with government as critical to increasing their impact. The sheer pervasiveness of governments at the local, state and federal level and their taxing and regulatory powers make government a powerful ally for those foundations whose philanthropic interests intersect with government’s interests. As a result, foundations increasingly recognize that working with government may give them an opportunity to more effectively address intractable problems.

Yet, the recognition by both philanthropy and government that each has resources that can be leveraged to more effectively pursue their missions is not sufficient to compel partnership. Partnerships have costs, and those costs increase when the partnerships are forged across sectors with their different institutional logics. These differences, which are highlighted in Table 1, make philanthropic-government partnerships inherently difficult to initiate, manage and maintain.

First, governments are responsive to public sentiments. Consequently, their priorities and issues of interest change in response to elections. In contrast, foundations tend to approach problems incrementally over many years, which can present challenges as to how philanthropic-government partnerships function. Second, while foundations tend to focus on a few areas of interest central to their respective missions, governments must grapple with a much wider range of issues in order to govern. Therefore, the priorities and issues that are important to a particular foundation at a given time may not be what are important to government, and vice versa. Third, governments and philanthropy frequently have pre-conceived perceptions about one another. For example, many in government often view philanthropy only as a resource to fill funding gaps; and philanthropy often views government as too slow or bureaucratic to be an effective partner. For the most part, government and philanthropy seldom understand how the other operates or what an effective philanthropic-government partnership might look like.

8. See: J. L. Fleishman, *The Foundation: A Great American Secret*, New York: Public Affairs (2007).

TABLE 1. THE DIFFERENT WORLDS OF PHILANTHROPY AND GOVERNMENT

Philanthropy	Government
We have a certain amount of flexibility about timing	We have to adhere to annual budget cycles
We see this work as a long term commitment	An election can change everything
This initiative is a top priority	This initiative is one of hundreds of responsibilities
We can be selective about what we focus on	We do not have a lot of flexibility in setting priorities
We don't pick up the tab for defunded services	An important program got cut; let's get philanthropy to fund it
Government is mysterious	Foundations are mysterious

This table is adapted from *Working with Government* (GrantCraft, 2010).

Because of these differences, partnerships between government and philanthropy require more time and resources to function than they would if working alone. Foundation and government staff must identify potential partners, develop relationships and trust between stakeholders, and establish processes and procedures for engagement and decision-making. Efficiencies may be gained if government and philanthropic actors have worked together before, but learning from past efforts is seldom transferred, even within the same institution. Hence, the costs of forging partnerships each time and learning anew can be prohibitive.

In addition, cross-sectoral partnerships carry risks. Neither foundations nor governments are inclined to share authority. Foundations are accustomed to making decisions on their own without the involvement of outside actors. Governments are also conscious of being transparent and publicly accountable and are frequently prohibited from delegating decision-making authority. Because partnerships imply shared decision-making, philanthropy and government must share the risk of involving themselves in decisions that are not of their own making. Working together in partnership across sectors may also be viewed as inappropriate. Foundations may worry about loss of independence, and government may be concerned about charges of undue philanthropic influence.

As a result, there has been an increasing interest by both philanthropy and government to develop new models that begin to address some of the challenges of the episodic philanthropic-government partnerships of the past. Offices of strategic partnerships are one such arrangement. They help to reduce the costs of working around these barriers by creating an infrastructure for partnerships between the two sectors. Through the work of these offices, partnerships between philanthropy and government can be more easily catalyzed and accelerated by reducing the transaction costs of initiating and facilitating such efforts. The nature of these offices and the lessons that are emerging from their experiences are detailed in the following sections.

III. Offices of Strategic Partnerships

As interest in partnerships between government and philanthropy gains momentum, new arrangements for how the two sectors can work together to solve critical public problems are emerging. Building on the work of Wolk and Ebinger (2010), which examines innovations at the local and state level to advance entrepreneurship in government operations and problem solving in a more systemic way, we focus specifically on offices of strategic partnerships (OSPs) that catalyze partnerships between government and philanthropy. In this section we examine six offices: three municipal offices (Denver, Los Angeles and Newark); one state office (Michigan); and two federal offices (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Education). Brief profiles of these offices are provided in Table 2.

MOTIVATIONS AND RATIONALES

While the conditions that create the imperative for government and philanthropy to work together are ripe, offices of strategic partnerships are not automatic. A key impetus for their creation is a champion who believes in the value of working across sectors. A closer look at these six offices of strategic partnerships reveals that all were instigated by such a leader. In each case, there was a leader who, based on previous experiences, understood the potential advantage of philanthropic-government partnerships and encouraged that approach. To them, public-private partnerships are not an abstract idea, but rather a tangible strategy for public problem solving. These offices are a way of incubating that mindset in government. This is particularly the case where we have individuals who have prior experience working with philanthropy. But there are also instances where leaders from philanthropy initiated the conversations with receptive public officials which, in turn, lead to the office's creation.

For example, the three city-level offices (Denver, Newark, and Los Angeles) had strong initial support from their respective mayors. In two of these cases (Denver and Newark) the idea of an office devoted to building relationships and partnering with the philanthropic sector stemmed from their mayor's prior experiences either as a philanthropist or working with foundations. The establishment of the offices at the federal level (Department of Education's Director of Strategic Partnerships and the Department of Housing and Urban Development's Office for International and Philanthropic Innovation) was fostered by cabinet secretaries who recognized the value of partnering with the philanthropic sector and tapped leaders within the agency that had previous experience in philanthropy or with philanthropic partnerships. In contrast, the Office of Foundation Liaison for the State of Michigan, while receiving support from the Governor, was initially championed by leaders of the Council of Michigan Foundations, who had a long history of working with the state on public policy issues. Similarly, the Los Angeles Office of Strategic Partnerships grew out of a close collaboration between a few philanthropic leaders and the Mayor's Chief of Staff and Liaison to Philanthropy.

TABLE 2. PROFILES OF OFFICES OF STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Name	Founded	Organizational Structure	Mission/Purpose	Key Strategies
Denver Office of Strategic Partnerships	2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location. Internal, department-level position inside the Office of Economic Development. (See footnoted changes on page 10) • Staffing. Led by a Director, with support of a full-time staff, a part-time communication coordinator, and a part-time intern. • Advisory Structure. One 15-member commission representing nonprofit, government, philanthropic, and business leaders who provide oversight and guidance. Members are appointed by the Mayor and serve two-year terms. Most partnerships supported by the office also have their own advisory committees. • Funding. Funded by city general funds; a grant from the Strengthening Communities Fund (ARRA); CDBG funds; Xcel Energy franchise funds; and private donations. 	<p>“To leverage the best of Denver’s public and nonprofit sectors to engage in innovative and collaborative work. DOSP believes that by working collectively, the public and nonprofit sectors can be even more efficient and effective in strengthening Denver’s communities.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building relationships, understanding and capacity for the city and nonprofits. • Working with city agencies and nonprofits to initiate and support collaborations. • Leveraging and coordinating resources around nonprofit space sharing and nonprofit access to government funding. • Highlighting efforts as a local and national model of nonprofit-government collaboration.
Los Angeles Office of Strategic Partnerships	2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location. Internal, executive-level position inside the Office of the Mayor. • Staffing. Led by a Deputy Mayor, with support of an Associate Director, an Administrative Assistant and interns. • Advisory Structure. Two workgroups: the Philanthropy Work Group and the Non-Profit Workgroup. The former, comprised of members of the philanthropic community, provides advice and supports strategic planning efforts. The latter shares the needs of the nonprofit community, supports goal-setting activities and assists with implementation. • Funding. Funded by foundations (50 percent) and the City (50 percent). Annual operating budget of approx. \$300,000/year. 	<p>“To develop a shared agenda between the City, nonprofits, philanthropy and other sectors to maximize resources and impact.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Connecting city agencies with nonprofit and philanthropic partners around shared priorities. • Attracting and leveraging philanthropic resources for joint projects and initiatives. • Streamlining government processes for engagement with the nonprofit and philanthropic sector.
The Philanthropic Liaison to the City of Newark	2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location. Quasi-governmental position inside the office of the Mayor. • Staffing. Led by the Philanthropic Liaison. • Advisory Structure. One advisory committee composed of funders of the Liaison Office, which are primarily members of the Council of New Jersey Grantmakers. The Liaison meets and reports to the Advisory Committee on a bi-weekly basis. • Funding. Funded by eight foundations/private funds. No public funds are allotted for the Liaison other than in-kind office accommodations at Newark City Hall. 	<p>“To serve as a bridge between the administration of the Mayor Cory A. Booker and the philanthropic community, helping both entities to address the pressing issues of New Jersey’s largest city.”</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leveraging connections between public and private entities to increase the impact of philanthropy in Newark. • Identifying and sharing information across sectors. • Matching philanthropic foundation interests and the priorities of the city together.

TABLE 2. PROFILES OF OFFICES OF STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS (CONTINUED)

Name	Founded	Organizational Structure	Mission/Purpose	Key Strategies
Office of Foundation Liaison for the State of Michigan	2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location. Quasi-governmental inside the Office of the Governor. • Staffing. Led by the Foundation Liaison with the support of a full-time staff and a part-time staff. • Advisory Structure. One advisory committee of ten foundations, who provide guidance and oversight in helping to set priorities for the office. • Funding. Funded by a consortium of 17 private foundations; also receives in-kind support and \$24,000 a year from the state. Currently it has three-years of funding (\$1.4 million). 	“To identify and broker strategic partnerships between the state and foundations to encourage the success of programs or policy reforms that would improve the lives of Michigan residents.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educating state officials about foundations. • Forging relationships and supporting the development of partnerships between the state and foundations. • Attracting new federal grant dollars. • Responding to opportunities for new local and regional public-private partnerships.
Office for International and Philanthropic Innovation for the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development	2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location. Internal, department-level office housed within the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development’s Policy Development and Research Department. • Staffing. Led by the Deputy Assistant Secretary, with support from a director and a coordinator-level position. • Advisory Structure. No Advisory committee or outside governing structure. (Not allowed). • Funding. Funded exclusively through federal funds allocated to HUD. 	“To use the best available evidence, innovations, and lessons from philanthropic and international partners to help assure HUD achieves long-term community-building results and return on taxpayer dollars, supporting a “triple bottom line” approach—financial, social, and environmental accountability.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinating information dissemination and exchanges across sectors. • Brokering partnerships across sectors and international boundaries. • Coordinating research and knowledge management. • Conducting joint research projects.
Director of Strategic Partnerships for the U. S. Department of Education	2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Location. Internal, position located within the U.S. Secretary of Education’s Office. • Staffing. Led by the Director of Strategic Partnerships for the U.S. Department of Education with the support of other leaders and staff in the department. • Advisory Structure. No Advisory committee or outside governing structure. (Not allowed). • Funding. Funded exclusively through federal funds allocated to DOE. 	“To accelerate high impact business and philanthropic sector involvement to advance and sustain systemic ‘cradle to career’ education reform.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engaging the private sector in support of the Department’s missions and programs • Developing policy that promotes effective private sector engagement • Serving as liaison between the Department and the private sector • Investigating and promoting effective strategic partnership models and best practices

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES

All of the offices are relatively small in terms of budget and staff. They are primarily comprised of a principal position and 1-3 supporting staff, with the exception of the offices in Newark and the Department of Education, which have a sole person. There is considerable variation in their organizational structures, their reporting relationships and how they are funded. These structural differences reflect the experimental nature of the offices and how they have developed. In fact, the organizational structures of some of the offices with a longer history (e.g., Denver and Michigan) have sometimes evolved, at times in response to changes in an administration.⁹

The offices are all embedded within government. Four are housed at the executive level: the Mayor's office (Los Angeles and Newark); Governor's office (Michigan); and Secretary's office (Department of Education). The other two (Denver and HUD) are embedded in an agency and exist as separate offices. For those rooted in the executive's office, there is a sense that the office provides more direct access for the philanthropic community to elected officials and enables them to more easily span across departments and agencies. Those located inside a department suggested that it was in part a strategy to ensure sustainability during executive transitions (e.g., Denver).

The Office of Foundation Liaison for the State of Michigan is funded primarily by the foundation community, though it receives some direct and in-kind funding from government. The Philanthropic Liaison to the City of Newark is funded entirely by foundations in recognition of the city's budget constraints as well as a desire to "maintain its independence." The Denver Office of Strategic Partnerships and the two federal offices are funded exclusively by government. The Los Angeles Office of Strategic Partnerships is funded evenly by philanthropy and the city, not including the costs of office space, supplies and pension and health benefits provided by city funds.

A common organizational feature of the state and local offices is an advisory committee. These committees are an important mechanism for setting priorities for the offices as they allow the philanthropic community—including those that fund the offices—to provide input and help to set the agenda. In contrast, the federal offices operate without an advisory committee because of rules regarding transparency and accountability. Because they are in many ways breaking new ground, federal offices have spent a substantial amount of time working with their general counsels to gain clarity on what is or is not acceptable in working with philanthropy and the broader private sector.

9. For example, in the spring of 2012, the Denver Office of Strategic Partnerships was written into ordinance under the Agency for Human Rights and Community Partnerships. As a result, funding, staffing and reporting relationships in the Denver Office have changed.

MISSIONS AND STRATEGIES

The primary mission of offices of strategic partnerships is to catalyze and accelerate effective philanthropic-government partnerships. While the focus is primarily on philanthropy, in some instances, such as Denver and Los Angeles, there is a concerted effort to include the nonprofit community. The strategies used to achieve their missions in these offices vary, particularly from the local and state level when compared to the federal level.

At the state and local level, a common approach advanced by the offices is to develop a shared agenda between foundations and government that can lead to the identification of specific opportunities for working together. By contrast, federal offices do not work with a set group of foundations; they have no advisory committee; and they do not make decisions jointly with the philanthropic community. They instead focus on creating platforms and opportunities for information sharing that increase coordination and alignment of resources across the sectors so as to increase the effectiveness of problem solving efforts.

Despite these differences, offices at all levels of government use a range of similar strategies to accomplish their missions. Prominent among them are demystifying the sectors, convening stakeholders, and leveraging resources. Each of these strategies helps to lower the transaction costs of partnership by creating an infrastructure for new and ongoing engagement across sectors.

- **Demystifying the Sectors.** Critical to enabling partnerships is that both sides understand each other and have reasonable expectations about what they are able to do. The offices can help to educate government about philanthropy and philanthropy about government. They also coach each side about how to work with the other, encourage the cultural change for working across boundaries, and share best practices with leaders on what it takes to work together effectively. By demystifying the sectors, the cultural and institutional barriers to partner are lowered.
- **Convening and Facilitating.** Beyond education, the offices are able to stimulate conversations among diverse stakeholders—government agencies, foundations, nonprofits, and other critical constituencies—with the purpose of having them understand their mutual interests, exchange information, and recognize the opportunities for partnership. The offices focus on brokering relationships to spark partnerships. They typically do not devise, implement or manage partnerships.
- **Leveraging Resources.** Given their knowledge of both sectors, the offices help to identify resources in both government and philanthropy that might catalyze or support a particular project or initiative. This includes both financial resources, such as philanthropic grantmaking efforts that align with government priorities, and human resources, such as issue experts whose involvement might add value. The offices help to create the conditions under which such resources can be identified, matched and leveraged more easily.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Offices of strategic partnerships note a number of important accomplishments that have resulted from their efforts. While grounded in the missions, strategies, and settings of each office, collectively they demonstrate the potential of this institutional innovation to achieve greater impact.

Offices at the state and local levels refer to a range of accomplishments in the areas of capacity building, technical assistance and leveraging of philanthropic and government funding. For instance, the Denver Office of Strategic Partnerships points to an ongoing series of workshops it created for nonprofits to develop cross-sectoral partnerships of their own. Follow-up surveys of workshop participants suggest that approximately 50 percent are either in the process of forming a cross-sectoral partnership or have done so already as a result of the training. The Denver OSP notes other successful collaborations with the foundation community such as the city's Teen Pregnancy Prevention Partnership, the Denver Transit Oriented Development Fund, and the Green and Healthy Homes Initiative. The nature of these collaborations with philanthropy varied from program coordination to public related investments to direct grant funding.

The Los Angeles Office of Strategic Partnerships also points to successes in securing and leveraging funds among its accomplishments. For instance, it helped to guide the formation of the Neighborhood Revitalization Work Group—comprised of city, county, nonprofit and philanthropic partners—to make Los Angeles more competitive for federal funding, including two grants from the Department of Education Promise Neighborhood Grant program. Similarly, in partnership with the California Endowment, it brokered a joint grant application between the city and county, bringing new resources to the region. It also notes the work it has done to streamline and coordinate the city's grants and contracting processes for nonprofits; its help in securing foundation funding for a range of local programs; its work with both foundation and nonprofits to coordinate Census outreach efforts; and its efforts to organize the city's first “nonprofit day.”

Instances of accomplishment for the Philanthropic Liaison to the City of Newark primarily revolve around identifying and coordinating opportunities to bring additional funding to the city for local initiatives. In close partnership with the Council of New Jersey Grantmakers and the Newark Funders Group, the Philanthropic Liaison has helped to secure more than \$46 million in private and public funding for programs and initiatives ranging from prisoner re-entry programs to workforce development grants to environmental sustainability initiatives to education reform.

Michigan's Office of Foundation Liaison, created in 2003, has brokered more than \$100 million in foundation investments for economic and workforce development, K-16 education, health, early childhood, and land use programs and initiatives since its inception. But its successes extend beyond securing funds. The Office of Foundation Liaison brought together a diverse group of government and philanthropic stakeholders to reform state and federal benefits systems for low income families, thereby expanding access. And, there is ample evidence that leaders involved with Michigan's OSP recognize its impact: 87 percent of government and foundation leaders surveyed in an assessment in 2010 agreed that the office had increased government-philanthropic

partnerships in the state. A recent assessment of the office concludes that it has “evolved into an important networking agent for government and philanthropy” and suggests that it has played a key role in “building partnerships” in the state that help to increase government’s effectiveness.¹⁰

The accomplishments of the offices at the federal level are consistent with their different role and contexts as compared to the local and state offices. Rather than leading with securing funding, federal offices point to successful efforts to facilitate matchmaking, innovation and more efficient government processes. For example, HUD’s Office for International and Philanthropic Innovation developed an open source web platform that provides information about funding sources and potential partnerships for local urban development efforts (Partner.HUD.gov). The Department of Education’s Office of Strategic Partnerships created a similar platform, the i3 Registry, in partnership with the philanthropic community and the Foundation Center, to match the department’s grantees with philanthropic and business resources. Federal offices have also supported catalyzing efforts to spread innovation across sectors. For example HUD’s office developed an open, online platform to collect and disseminate best practices and innovations in housing, community development, and the built environment; it partnered with the business and philanthropic community on research initiatives related to program related investments and impact investing; and it developed an award in partnership with the Council on Foundations for community foundations whose work through a public/private partnerships led to meaningful and measurable results.

In the process of achieving these outcomes, those spearheading the efforts have developed a deeper understanding of what the challenges are of making philanthropic partnerships work and how offices of strategic partnerships can best catalyze those partnerships. Based on their experiences we now turn to the challenges that these offices have encountered and the tactics that they have found effective to overcome them.

10. Community Research Institute (CRI) at Grand Valley State University, “Office of Foundation Liaison: Findings from the 2010 Assessment.” A Report to the Foundation Liaison Advisory Committee, June 30, 2010.

IV. Challenges and Tactics

As the experience with offices of strategic partnerships grows, there are a number of lessons that we can learn from those who have been at the forefront of these innovative efforts. The following section takes a closer look at how these offices do their work, the difficulties that are inherent in working across the two sectors, and the issues that offices identify as critical to ensuring their success and sustainability. The primary challenges identified by the offices are: changing the behaviors of the two sectors and managing their expectations; matchmaking between the issues, institutions and individual actors; fielding the right team, with the right skill set, to lead the office; ensuring transparency and accountability in the ways the offices operate; and sustaining the offices over time. We discuss each in turn along with some tactics that these six offices use to address them.

CHANGING BEHAVIORS AND MANAGING EXPECTATIONS

“ *One of our early challenges was that government said, ‘Yes, we want to partner with foundations,’ and foundations said, ‘Yes, we want to partner with government,’ but nobody wanted to change. No one wanted to do it any differently.* ”

At the heart of the work of these offices is changing the behaviors of the two sectors and managing their expectations as they work across boundaries to address problems of common interest. As previously noted, both philanthropy and government have different institutional structures, cultures and norms that guide their behavior. Because behavior is largely guided by these institutional logics, government and philanthropy may not be willing to change their behavior. For example, government officials act in response to immediate circumstances and do not typically have the luxury of study and contemplation as do foundations. Alternatively, the expectations or misperceptions about philanthropy can be challenging. For example, the notion that foundations are an “ATM machine” or that offices of strategic partnerships are merely fundraising entities of government are often entrenched and difficult to alter.

These offices have developed a range of approaches to change the behavior and set the expectations of both government and philanthropy.

- **Focus on the Tangible Benefits of the Partnership.** Offices frequently emphasize the immediate value of partnerships to both foundation and government leaders. They focus on highlighting the importance of shared learning and shared opportunities to make an immediate and lasting impact on the community. This can include information sharing, joint funding opportunities and better alignment of programs and systems across the sectors.
- **Develop a Memorandum of Understanding with Clear Roles and Responsibilities.** Offices suggest developing written documents that detail the roles and responsibilities of the OSP at the outset. This includes the nature of the underlying philanthropic-government partnership, the office’s mission and the expected outcomes. Boundaries, reporting relationships and conditions of funding should be clearly articulated, particularly in cases where philanthropy is providing funding for the offices.

- **Create a Trusting Environment to Strengthen Relationships.** All collaborations or partnerships generally require a trusting environment in order to flourish. Because OSPs focus on catalyzing partnerships across two distinct sectors, building trust becomes even more important. Offices spend significant time creating opportunities to build relationships and identifying and working with individuals who “understand the struggles their partners face.” As one office states: “we need to ensure [government] that they can trust us with their intimate issues and get them to believe that their partners in the foundation community should be trusted.”
- **Leverage More than the Financial Benefits of the Partnership.** Offices suggest that the partnerships they help to catalyze should extend beyond funding alone. One office notes that “knowledge and financial resources are equally important.” Another says that “we are not a development office in any way and we don’t lead with the aligning of funds... we lead with innovation. We are about coming to the philanthropic sector and to others and just trying to figure out where the ideas are: what’s working and what’s not working.”

MATCHMAKING

“ We had to decide right at the beginning what was going to be the focus of this philanthropic liaison office, and we wanted to determine how to match what the foundations are looking at with what government is prioritizing. ”

The core work of offices of strategic partnerships is finding a “match” between government and philanthropy. Each has a range of different and often competing interests. Of primary concern to them are identifying which of these interests are shared across the sectors and may be ripe for partnership. This process of matching interests is not easy. One office notes that the value set of the nonprofit and philanthropic community is sometimes at odds with the political realities of government. Even in cases where interests may align, the timing of the two sectors may not be in sync. In addition, each public agency or individual foundation has its own values, missions, resources, strategies and programs. OSPs can act as a resource to find the right match at the institutional level. Such matchmaking is often easier at the local and state levels where there tends to be a larger pool of interested philanthropic partners. And, since it can be a challenge to identify who has the authority and skills to work together across sectors, offices also act as a resource or access point to match key actors and decision-makers within government and philanthropy together.

Offices described several strategies to identify and make the right “match.”

- **Recognize that Different Levels of Partnership and Collaboration Exist.** As vehicles for catalyzing government-philanthropic partnerships, these offices are in a unique position to identify potential relationships between the sectors that may not currently exist and to initiate and nurture those in early stages of development. One office notes that “you have to explain to both government and philanthropy that it is not necessary to come to the table with a full-fledged collaboration.” They emphasize that there can be “many different levels of involvement of government and philanthropy working together,” from information sharing to coordination to joint funding to full-fledged collaboration.

- **Understand that Government and Philanthropic Timetables Differ.** Government and philanthropy operate on different timelines. Governments tend to be dictated by budgetary and electoral cycles while foundations tend to implement their strategies over longer periods. Offices must frequently remind the parties of these differences. For example, sometimes they must underscore for foundations that “if you’re going to play, now is the time to play.” At the same time, they must explain to government agencies and actors that “you can’t wait until today to ask for money for something you want next week.”
- **Educate Both Philanthropy and Government on How the Other Works.** The strategies, processes and procedures used by philanthropy are frequently unknown to government, and vice versa. Therefore, offices must continually educate stakeholders in both sectors on how each operates or might be motivated. One office notes it has been instrumental in “educating not just government cabinet members and staff about philanthropy but also foundations in how public agencies operate and work.”
- **Be Flexible and Innovative.** Offices of strategic partnerships must straddle two dynamic sectors. This requires an ability to be adaptable to changing circumstances, stakeholders and priorities. Moreover, the complex problems that many of these partnerships are grappling with require creative thinking that may be outside of the comfort zones of either sector. Offices note that a “cookie-cutter approach” does not work. Each foundation and government agency is different and the offices must figure out how a partnership might work on a case-by-case basis.

FIELDING THE RIGHT TEAM

“What we found time and time again is: if you don’t have this extremely highly-energized go-getter, eyes-on-fire—‘wow, this is the coolest thing ever’—person, stuff doesn’t seem to really go anywhere. It’s not enough to sort of broker the interest in this at the very highest level, but you really need... the social entrepreneur inside government who really wants to make this happen. And, if not, there’s a real challenge to kind of keep this alive.”

Offices of strategic partnerships recognize the importance of finding the right individual to lead the office. Nearly all of the leaders from the offices we talked with have had experience working in or alongside both government and the nonprofit sector before taking on their current roles. Such prior experience is critical given the need to understand how each sector functions and how to translate that understanding between sectors. However, as one director states: “we do not have a deep bench of people who really understand government (in foundations) and understand foundations (in government),” which limits the pool of new potential leaders for these offices. Beyond that cross-sectoral understanding, it is also important to have individuals in these positions who are entrepreneurial and networkers. The ideal leader is “creative, courageous and tenacious,” and relishes acting as a relationship broker and catalyst, especially in difficult circumstances.

Offices suggest several tactics to field the right team.

- **Find a Leader whose Skills and Experiences Fit.** Identifying a leader whose skills and experiences fit is viewed as critical to making the offices work. This includes not just knowledge of how philanthropy, nonprofits and government operate in general, but also the ability and experience to navigate the different systems effectively.
- **Act as a Facilitator, Rather than a Project Manager.** Offices of strategic partnerships broker relationships and frequently have many efforts happening at once. As a result, offices say that they do not try to “project manage” all of the ongoing partnerships. “We’re happiest when we can step away and leave the work to someone else... our goal is not to stay in and run things.” They emphasize the importance of finding alignment on issues and helping to catalyze and facilitate the development of partnerships. They do, however, step in at strategic points to move partnerships forward.
- **Learn How to Say “No”.** Offices must represent the interests of two different sectors whose ideas, opinions, processes and approaches frequently differ. Not surprisingly, offices suggest that perseverance, tenacity and the ability to “say no” are all key leadership characteristics of OSPs. These characteristics help leaders to establish the founding priorities, advance the agenda when circumstances change, and overcome obstacles as they arise. They are also important when one partner (e.g., a government or foundation actor) makes a request that may threaten to derail a partnership or is clearly against the best interest of the other.

ENSURING TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

“ I think accountability is one of the most complicated pieces of being a good partner in these kinds of relationships. People come to the table with the best of intentions to be a partner and put out what they think is right for that collaborative, but there is a rigidity within government that calls people back based on a changing political context. There is also the fact that I have a boss, the mayor is his boss, and that—ultimately, is where the pragmatic accountability comes in... ”

Offices of strategic partnerships are embedded in executive offices or agency departments of government. Therefore, they must play by government rules of transparency and accountability. These rules are often complicated and not always apparent. Moreover, complex reporting relationships in the government agencies that may be involved in partnerships, as well as political pressure on those agencies or officials, may render efforts to hold them accountable difficult. At the same time, because philanthropy is critical to the mission of OSPs, and they often receive both funding and input from foundations, offices must understand and be responsive to their norms and rules of transparency and accountability as well. Offices must at once ensure that they are following government rules and regulations, and that the sectors maintain their independence, while also sharing information with and eliciting input from philanthropy.

Offices recommend a number of practices to address these challenges.

- **Document What You're Doing.** Offices frequently record what they are doing. This helps to ensure accountability to their superiors in government, their foundation partners and the public as well. Such documentation emphasizes both their actions and their achievements. Taking it a step further, as a condition of funding for the Office of Foundation Liaison for the State of Michigan, the foundation community requires an outside evaluator to assess the office in delivering its mission.
- **Communicate Regularly on Actions and Decisions.** Sharing information before, during and after a decision is made to relevant stakeholders helps to increase transparency. Establishing how information can and should be shared and the process that the office will use to make decisions and advance project goals is critical to manage expectations about transparency.
- **Draw Lines and Boundaries.** Offices should be clear on both what they are able to do to catalyze and facilitate a partnership and what they are not able to do. In addition to the strong leadership of the office's director, such lines and boundaries should be explicit in the memorandum of understanding between parties. This process frequently includes working with legal counsel to ensure compliance with government and foundation rules and regulations.

SUSTAINABILITY

“ We realized that if we were going to survive, we really needed to create an infrastructure for the office that would withstand term limits and changes in administration. ”

There are no assurances that the offices will become institutionalized. Offices in some cities and states that were highlighted in Wolk and Ebinger's 2010 article do not exist today. For example, the idea behind the creation of the Office of Foundation Liaison for the State of Michigan was spurred by an effort in Detroit in the early 1990s, which had faded even before the Michigan office was established in 2003. Thus, the promise of the offices will only succeed to the extent that they are both fiscally and politically sustainable.

Many government agencies and executive offices have successfully launched offices of strategic partnerships with the financial support of the foundation community. Such a strategy provides a short-term financial solution, but not one that is necessarily sustainable in the longer term. Foundation interests and priorities change, and there are currently no offices of strategic partnerships with long term guarantees of funding. And, while the structure of the federal offices currently entails public funding, they have yet to survive beyond the current administration. Beyond fiscal sustainability, ensuring the political support of OSPs in the transfer of power from one administration to another is critical. They must win the support of political and nonpolitical appointees prior to their establishment, maintain that support through the administration's tenure and be savvy enough to gain the support of new leaders when they turnover.

A number of ideas were mentioned as best practices for sustaining OSPs.

- **Identify, Cultivate and Leverage Champions.** Just as champions are important to the initial development of OSPs, they are also central to their sustainability. Champions in both government and philanthropy can advocate on behalf of the offices. One of the offices that successfully managed a political transition first established relationships with many different departments through various projects. They then systematically coached them to say: “when your new directors and managers get here, you need to have this project on your list to talk with them about as a priority.” The same office leverages its relationships with philanthropic leaders and associations to promote the office to government officials as well as aspiring candidates for office.
- **Develop Support in the Community.** OSPs seek to develop a broad community of support for the offices that extend beyond just the foundation sector or government. As one office states: “We had some amazing advocates rise up out of the community to really talk in very strong terms about what our office had meant for them, for their work and for the way they thought things could work to enable them to do their jobs better.”
- **Provide Evidence of Value.** All of the offices collect and share information regarding their key projects, programs and related accomplishments. They can use this as evidence of their value to enlist and maintain the support of government and philanthropy. This information can also be used to memorialize the office’s mission, strategies and how it functions so as to foster learning over time. In addition, this knowledge can be disseminated to help those interested in creating similar offices elsewhere.
- **Avoid the Appearance of Partisanship.** Offices emphasize the importance of remaining nonpartisan and attacking problems that transcend politics. Becoming “too close” to an administration raises the specter of a new administration pushing them out. Instead, offices tend to focus on issue areas that cut across party lines including: veteran’s issues, economic development, and children’s health. Such an approach also helps OSPs to galvanize the support of foundations with a range of ideological leanings and funding interests.

V. Conclusions

Offices of strategic partnerships represent a new form of working together for both government and philanthropy. They are reflective of changing circumstances for both governments and foundations that are looking for new ways to broaden and widen their impact at a time when resources for the public good have become more and more limited. The emergence of these offices reflects the increased interest in partnerships. But they represent more than just an interest. They provide evidence of increasing efforts to develop and institutionalize mechanisms that can facilitate cross-sectoral approaches to public problem solving. And, while these offices are relatively new, we are beginning to better understand the value proposition at their core, how they do their work, and what it takes for them to be successful.

All of the offices of strategic partnerships are focused at enabling government and philanthropy to work together. They exist at all levels of government – city, state, federal. But they are not monolithic. They vary considerably in their missions – ranging from securing public/private funding to providing technical assistance and information sharing to demystifying the processes of both government and philanthropy. While they differ in how they are funded and structured, they are all relatively small in terms of budget and staff.

These offices are at their core relationship brokers. They match interested and relevant partners from philanthropy and other sectors with the appropriate decision-makers in government where there is potential value from working together. They serve as a resource for partnerships, making meaningful connections among the sectors, and stimulating information sharing between them. The offices do not devise or manage initiatives or projects. Instead, at the state and local level, they catalyze and facilitate them. And, at the federal level, they enable greater alignment between the public and private sectors.

These offices offer the possibilities for providing greater traction for cross-sectoral partnerships. Their creation has been championed by those who understand the potential value of these offices and their importance in accelerating a new way of addressing public problems. As partnerships across boundaries become more common in addressing critical problems, the momentum behind these offices is likely to increase. To the extent that the success of these offices is demonstrated, the possibilities for sustaining and institutionalizing them will be enhanced.

As OSPs become more commonplace, there will be greater scrutiny on the tensions that they present for those who are concerned with the independence of the philanthropic sector and its role in ensuring governmental accountability. Likewise, there is a need for ensuring transparency and accountability for the public sector so that foundations do not have unwarranted access. The best response to these concerns is to ensure clarity about the roles and responsibilities of the two sectors and the rules of engagement.

As these offices grow in number and their experience mounts, there is a need to assess what it takes to work together across government and philanthropy, understand what these offices make possible, and learn what practices are most effective—both from the successes and the disappointments. Only then will the true potential of these new institutions for working together be fully understood.

*Philanthropy
and Government
Working Together:
What Does it Take?*

A ROUNDTABLE

April 26-27, 2012

Los Angeles, California

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