

## Stepping Up to the Public Policy Plate

Foundations excel at helping others. We encourage. We rescue. We build. We spotlight. We fund. When we are so generous in serving others, why is it we are so loath to help ourselves? Do we think it unnecessary? Are we embarrassed? Is it unseemly? Or are we simply naive? Whatever the reason, foundations need to become more engaged in monitoring and taking action to protect their interests in policy discussions, legislation, and rule-making.

### **What's Wrong?**

Often at the local level, foundations are revered for their tremendous contributions that enhance communities and improve the lives of their residents. Individual foundations and those affiliated with them may be recognized by name. While revered and recognized by some, many are unaware of the positive impact of organized philanthropy in their own communities. And it is easy to paint all foundations with a broad brush in believing they think and act alike.

That can be extremely dangerous if the excesses of one foundation become splashed across the pages of the popular press. While these abuses may be extremely atypical, they receive publicity that can drive debate, set agenda, and lead to bad policy. Rather than focusing on our accomplishments for which we would like to be known, the focus is on bad actors and inappropriate behavior. Lawmakers or their staff draft retaliatory policy, the agenda for debate is set, and concerned foundations are forced to be defensive.

### **The Danger**

Organized philanthropy has come under scrutiny in recent times. With increased worries about the federal deficit and belt-tightening at the state and local levels, that scrutiny accelerates and there is a temptation to turn to the resources of foundations for additional tax dollars or for "directed" spending. Policymakers and potential grantees debate what constitutes charity or a charity, how much foundations should be required to distribute, who should govern them, and whether some categories of nonprofits are more deserving than others. The result of our silence can be losing control of our own destiny.

### **Take Action**

Now is the time for our voice to be heard. Now is the time to share the stories of the lives touched by our giving. It is the time to make time to educate those who will influence the laws and regulations that control the way foundations operate today and in the future. We have a legacy to protect.