

ADVOCACY GRANTS FOCUS ON IMPROVING HEALTH

by BRETT FLENER

Beth Uselton is the program director for advocacy and access at The Healing Trust, a local foundation whose mission is “the sacred work of fostering healing and wholeness for vulnerable populations through strategic investing, philanthropy, and advocacy.”

In 2015, The Healing Trust issued its first advocacy grant and has since awarded 17 more to nonprofits working to solve policy or program issues that will help Middle Tennesseans get healthier. Specifically, the advocacy grant program gives to nonprofits that focus on either increasing access to health services or preventing childhood trauma. By the end of this year, The Healing Trust will have awarded nearly a third of their grant funding to support health advocacy work in the form of multi-year grants. Because these grants are typically three-year terms, it will be several years before new advocacy funding becomes available again, so Beth is now working with this first group of advocacy grantee partners to build their advocacy capacity and evaluate their work.

Beth sat down recently to talk about this groundbreaking grant focus and answer a few questions about the program.

The advocacy grant as a concept may seem unusual to people involved in nonprofits and foundations alike. Why are advocacy grants important?

Core to our mission and focus as a foundation is the concept that all people are worthy of dignity and respect. Since our beginning in 2002, we have made grants to support direct health care services to vulnerable populations. Over time, we realized that many vulnerable populations being served by the nonprofits we help support are also

marginalized in other ways and their voices may be dismissed in public policy conversations about the health programs designed to serve their needs.

Many, many nonprofit organizations and charitable clinics willingly raise the concerns of their clients and patients, but they often have little or no financial support for this work. Most foundations fund programs to deliver direct services, but very few fund the hard work of advocacy which can include things that require a great deal of time and energy: attending meetings, studying complicated policy details, preparing educational materials, training their staff/volunteers/clients to engage in advocacy work, providing media interviews, and organizing events to raise public awareness of complicated issues. Nonprofits generally don't have the extra resources to support this type of work.

Why is it important that people experiencing the problem are involved in setting the agenda for advocacy?

There is a great saying in the disability rights community: “Nothing about me without me.” Underlying our advocacy support is a basic belief that the people most affected by an issue have a specific expertise on that issue, and a very important perspective about what steps can be taken to address it. Part of this is about basic respect and empowerment, but it is also a smart approach to developing workable solutions. People with a lived experience are the ones who will help all of us understand what proposed solutions will actually work, how they will be received, and whether there are unintended consequences we may not see.

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What would you say to a nonprofit who is curious about advocacy but doesn't know where to start?

I would say to start by asking your clients or patients about the problems they are facing, identify and name those barriers, then start problem-solving and asking your staff, board, and volunteers “What can we do to affect this?” Nonprofits are very good at envisioning a better future for their clients and engaging them in the work to get there. Advocacy is another way to do that.

The next step is building the confidence that you have something worthwhile to say. Nonprofits tend to be innovative, flexible and creative, they can often propose and test new models of health care service delivery or give feedback on proposed programs they may have already tried. Because they are also frequently expected to fill the holes in government safety-net programs, they can identify the gaps in the system and help explain exactly why people are falling through and what we as a community can do to address that. Lastly, very few voices in public


policy conversations are speaking from a mission-based perspective.

Most voices have their own interest in mind. Nonprofit organizations offer a unique voice of authority because they are speaking up on behalf of others. This can be very powerful and influential.

I'm a program officer in a foundation, and I'm ready to create a similar advocacy grant for issues we are passionate about. Do you have any advice?

Think about the grants program as a partnership. Be humble and be ready to listen and learn. Engage organizations that already do this work and ask them what they need. Trust them to tell you.

One of my favorite things about working with advocates is that I can always trust them to be candid with me, to offer constructive criticism, and to take some responsibility for the outcome.

It is what they do every day in their work to advocate for system changes on behalf of their clients and patients. 

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