

policy: the essential investment

what we do

Since 2007, Blue Shield of California Foundation has considered policy investments essential to achieving its mission of ensuring access to affordable and effective health care for vulnerable populations and to end domestic violence. In 2013, the Foundation made policy work one of four cornerstones of its strategic plan, along with leadership development, capacity building and innovation. It also has increased its financial investment in policy work significantly in recent years and has integrated a focus on policy change more deeply into its grantmaking.

why it's important

Foundations have a unique role to play in the creation, adoption and implementation of public policy. Whereas nonprofits must necessarily bring a lens of self-interest to their policy work as a means of survival, foundations are able to take a longer, broader view and inform policy discussions in a more objective manner. They can commission research, disseminate findings, convene a broad range of stakeholders, focus conversations and evaluate the effects of policy on the public. Indeed, foundations can play a critical role in this way, building trust and consensus among

advocates and governments without pushing a specific legislative agenda. This is especially important for a foundation like BSCF, which focuses intently on elevating the performance not just of the nonprofits it supports but also of the entire healthcare safety net and the domestic violence field in California.

how we do it

While most foundation discussions of policy advocacy focus on the legislative discussion phase of policy development, there is a great deal of groundwork that happens years in advance of proposed legislation, and there are numerous decisions to be made after a policy becomes law. For its policy work, BSCF has chosen to focus most of its effort in these two areas — the “before” and “after” that occur on either side of legislative activity, where the environment is created for policy development and where the implementation of policy becomes a reality across California.

BSCF engages in the “before” and “after” in a variety of ways, including:

- Informing a broader perspective on issues for which policy change might play a key role.
- Supporting and sharing objective research.

spectrum of policy engagement

BSCF conducts and shares research, convenes stakeholders and engages consultants to help identify policy opportunities and germinate new ideas

BSCF convenes and provides information for discussions. (Others engage in advocacy.)

BSCF helps state and county governments and local organizations shape and/or comply with new policy

create an environment for policy ideas and discussion

legislative policy action

support implementation of new state and federal policy

- Convening robust discussions and processes that are diverse and inclusive.
- Shifting conversations from funding concerns to potential outcomes.
- Providing policy training for stakeholders.
- Supporting pilot programs that test potential policy solutions.
- Helping public and private entities determine how to most effectively implement new policies.

what we've learned

- **A narrow focus helps go deeper into policy discussion.** Because BSCF focuses exclusively on two fields, it is able to accrue a deeper understanding of the issues at play and create a broader network of stakeholders to discuss policy ideas.
- **Cultivate a full spectrum of policy tools.** Policy engagement requires every tool in a funder's toolbox: capacity support, leadership, research, convening and more.
- **No one partner can cover the entire policy spectrum.** Funders, governments, advocates and others can find the areas that fit within their comfort zones and expertise to make a meaningful contribution.
- **Working with others increases effectiveness.** BSCF has collaborated with other foundations, each bringing their individual strengths and focuses into the mix, creating a full spectrum of support for the state's efforts.

- **Transparency breeds clarity.** There are reasons why policy supports a funder's mission, and it pays to be clear about those connections up front. Foundations that are very involved in convening stakeholders should also be clear about the intended outcome, to avoid confusion about the roles of the stakeholders in the dialog.
- **Maintain organizational humility.** Respect the work and knowledge of those who came before and remember that policy work requires far more learning and fewer actions than one might expect.
- **Know what you're talking about.** Policy issues are complicated and complex. Commit to understanding what different stakeholders want, what needs to change and what each branch of government brings to the table.
- **Find common ground.** It helps to think about a foundation's policy goals holistically and identify those goals that others share.

policy: one piece of the puzzle

Supporting the creation of supportive public policy is important, but more is needed to create long-term change. The Foundation's logic model incorporates a wide range of strategies for adaptive leadership, capacity building, innovation and policy.

Download the full case study at blueshieldcafoundation.org.