

# Democratic Practice



A woman surveys the aftermath of Hurricane Rita from her home.

## Power in the Hands of the People

Following Hurricane Rita's devastation of communities in the Lake Charles area of Louisiana in 2006, Julio Galan, executive director, Family and Youth Counseling Agency, saw that the needs of southwest Louisiana's children and families were going unheeded. But when he tried to mobilize local nonprofit organizations (NPOs) to organize and advocate for their clients, he was met with the equivalent of blank stares.

"We found that nonprofit staff and board members didn't even recognize advocacy as part of their mission on behalf of children, families, and communities," he said.

Calan, working with the fledgling Children and Family Action Network (CFAN), used a tool kit created by the Alliance for Children and Families to galvanize NPO leaders with lessons in the basics of government and how to effect changes in public policy.

Now, with 200 members, CFAN has lobbied successfully for tax credits to businesses, childcare providers, and parents to support and increase quality childcare. It is also promoting better access to health care and gaining support from the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation for more widespread training with the tool kit.

The tool kit is a product of the Alliance for Children and Families' New Voices at the Civic Table program, the culmination of a four-year national exploration of how to strengthen civic engagement. New Voices uses a range of efforts, including technical assistance, online learning, and minigrants in its work with organizations around the country.

"We help them get beyond their concerns of jeopardizing their government funding and asking already overworked staff to provide additional services," said Linda Nguyen, director, Civic Engagement, Alliance for Children and Families. "We show them how to work within their existing culture toward a more holistic approach that results in more-effective services, greater accountability in the public arena, and improved quality of life for recipients of services."

According to Ben Shute, secretary and program director, Rockefeller Brothers Fund, nonprofit groups, especially service organizations, are particularly well suited to take on this role. "They are trusted institutions embedded in neighborhoods that are often otherwise marginalized or ignored," he said. "Supporting constituent voice and power is an important way service providers can proactively change the role of poor and marginalized groups from service seekers to active citizens."



Members of Alliance for Children and Families.

Another of the Fund's multiple efforts to increase civic engagement by helping bolster the relationships between NPOs and their constituents has been its support of the Building Movement Project at Dēmos: A Network for Ideas & Action. Building on its enormously well received pilot project, the 2006 Social Service Change and Process Guide, Building Movement, along with the Alliance for Children and Families, initiated a two-day discussion with local and national foundations and NPOs to learn from successful models, focus on key barriers, identify levers for changes, and plan how to spread the word. Building Movement is now designing a national project and conducting trainings throughout the country to help nonprofits become sites of democratic practice and to involve their constituencies in social change.

"Both staff and clients of service organizations know how frustrating it is and what it means to have no voice," said Frances Kunreuther, founding director, Building Movement. "But they have an existing infrastructure that can be used to mobilize their clients and build the capacity of the people they serve to be involved in their communities."



Encouraging voter turnout.

### Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network

With a direct eye on elections and voter turnout at the polls, the Nonprofit Voter Engagement Network (NVEN), a project of the Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, is dedicated to expanding the role of America's nonprofits in voting and elections. NVEN supports NPO efforts to expand voter participation through a slate of resources that includes training materials, how-to guides, legal and election reform resources, monthly webinars, and annual conferences. Working on a state-by-state basis, it too aims to integrate its work with existing services and activities.

"Nonprofits have tremendous reach and credibility with their constituents, and we have evidence that their efforts increase voter participation," said George Pillsbury, policy

and development director, NVEN, "but the last thing they need is another program."

In addition to supporting efforts that increase constituent engagement and voter turnout, the Fund's commitment to the health of democracy in the United States has led to its support of campaign finance reform through the work of such organizations as Democracy Matters Institute (DMI) and Web-based Maplight.org.

DMI draws on the energy and commitment of the newest generation of voters to heighten awareness about the influence of money in U.S. politics. Founded in 2001 by Adonal Foyle, a professional basketball player and 1998 graduate of Colgate University, DMI gives college students a voice in the pro-democracy movement and an active role in the national dialogue on campaign finance reform. DMI pays 65 undergraduate interns on a diverse range of college campuses in 22 states to organize students and educate them about clean elections and other leadership and citizenship issues. The interns are closely mentored by DMI national staff, who host an annual summit to help define national goals, share best practices, and coordinate strategies with other campaign finance reform organizations.

"DMI advocates for a more open process that will bring the 99 percent of us who can't afford to run for office back into politics," said Joan Mandel, Ph.D., executive director, DMI. "Our work also creates very broad coalitions among other different social issue groups on campus and gets people hopeful about working together to change the things that bother them."

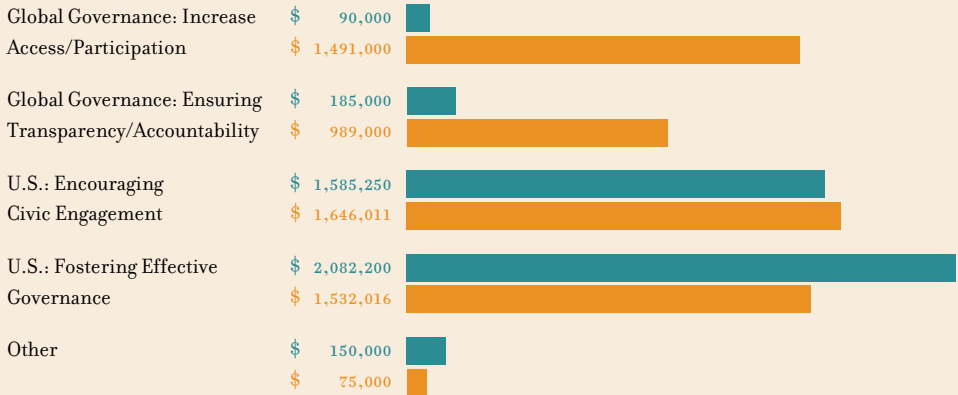
Another RBF grantee that helps make the case for public financing of political campaigns, Maplight.org offers a public database that, with the click of a mouse, reveals patterns of money and influence on legislators in a way that was never before possible. The organization, which launched in 2005, currently tracks the correlation between campaign contributions and the votes legislators cast in the U.S. Congress and the California state legislature. With support from the Fund, it plans to expand its reach to more states within the next five years and make its software available to organizations on the local level. Also key to its mission is sharing with the media the information it gathers.

"When the Congress voted to prevent the import of drugs from Canada and other less expensive places, we could show that senators who voted to block imports received an average of three times more money from pharmaceutical companies than those who voted the other way," said Dan

## Democratic Practice

Grants Awarded and Paid in 2007  
Distribution by Program Goal

Total Grants Awarded \$ 4,092,450  
Total Grants Paid \$ 5,733,027



The program director who carries responsibility for the Democratic Practice program is Benjamin R. Shute, Jr. During 2007, a portion of the responsibilities of program associate Naomi Jackson was devoted to this program (U.S.). For more information about the Democratic Practice grants and to learn how to apply for a grant, visit [www.rbf.org](http://www.rbf.org).

Newman, executive director, Maplight.org. "People care a lot about the issues but often miss the connection between contributions and politics. Our goal is to make that connection number one on the agenda at both the state and federal levels."



Bilingual poll workers in Boston.