

The Role of Philanthropy in Shaping Public Policy

Good morning.

I want to thank Shay and Kathy, the Center for Juvenile Justice Reform and the Georgetown Law Center for inviting me to speak to you this morning, on a subject that has been central to my work for nearly 30 years.

The connections between social justice for children, foster care and the circumstances that put children at risk of entering foster care are profound indeed. I have arrived at this moment in time bolstered by a number of perspectives on this concept we call social justice for children and youth.

I approach this subject through the lens of my experiences as a child of the 50's and 60's in rural Mississippi, a young caseworker in New York City, a Commissioner of child welfare, a CEO in philanthropy, a board member, and a father seeking to ensure that the journey of my daughters is far less rocky than mine. I also approach this subject in a reflective context. Who is responsible for social justice? What role should various sectors play?

Largely because of its somewhat independent and well-financed nature, it has been said that philanthropy is uniquely positioned to engage in institutional entrepreneurship to support the advancement of a civil society, a more just society, a better society for us all.

Some of the keys to being able to play this role include:

- Having strong partnerships with the non-profit sector to meet the challenges of experimentation and replication of innovative strategies.
- Maintaining an unwavering grounding in the values and principles on which we seek to influence a better world.
- Having a clear understanding of donor intent.
- Having the courage to stand up and stand apart if necessary, but always seeking to stand together with others to push the conversation, to help us to think differently, and to act differently.
- Having a willingness to push for a society that not only speaks its ideals but also lives its ideals.
- Knowing that advocacy to build both political and public will to live these ideals is critical.
- Knowing with all that we have that true social justice is not only possible but is absolutely necessary if we are to live at peace with ourselves, our nation, and our world.

It is with a focus on these last two areas that I have compiled my thoughts today as we consider philanthropy's role in public policy when it comes to social justice for children.

I am sure that we are all familiar with the preamble to the Constitution of the United States, the document that spells out the legal framework under which our federal government exists to serve the people it governs.

In the preamble, it says that the Constitution is ordained and established by “we, the people of the United States,” to, among other things:

- Establish justice,
- Promote the general welfare,
- Secure the blessings of liberty (Freedom) to ourselves and those who will come after us, and
- To create a more perfect Union.

The focus was on creating a nation that would be better than what it was at that time. I take from these words the suggestion that the betterment of our nation rests, at least in part, on justice, general welfare or well-being, and the blessings of the opportunities that we provide for our succeeding generations – our future.

So, if in the Constitution, the supreme law of the land, lie certain principles and ideals that form the basis for creating and ensuring a better nation; a more perfect nation; then is it not our duty to safeguard that which makes those ideals a reality for every citizen?

The pledge of allegiance, which was written in 1892, pledges allegiance to the flag of the United States of America. In the context of these ideals the America that the pledge refers to should be one nation, an undivided nation (one that could not be divided), and a nation where liberty and justice are not only the hope of all citizens but are truly achievable for all its citizens.

Justice for all is a core ideal in the democratic philosophy that founded America. It is central to the very essence of who we say that we are.

If you consider the spirit of the Declaration of Independence, written 13 years before Congress ratified the Constitution, it is clear to me that government is supposed to ensure that justice is real for all its citizens.

Thirteen years before Congress ratified the U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of Independence stated that governments are instituted to secure the people’s “certain unalienable rights.” And that whenever government becomes destructive of those ends, it is the right of the people, the right of the governed — to bring about change among those they have chosen to sit as governors.

Their motives must be to secure the required actions or legal changes that will restore our society to living these ideals that are guaranteed by our core documents.

That, to me, sounds like advocacy – a necessary feature of democracy.

So, if the role of our government in social justice is to ensure that all of its people are well and to protect and safeguard that well-being, then the question that leads us to this conversation today is what should our role be – the role of philanthropy – the role of the non-profit sector.

1. To help the government fulfill its role to the people - not to replace government, not to build a counter or parallel structure to government but to ensure that government functions as it was intended.
2. To help the people help themselves.
3. To use our convening power.
4. To help the people demand from their government that it uphold its end of the deal.

Philanthropy cannot replace the role of government in serving people nor can philanthropy achieve these efforts alone. There must be a partnership between government, philanthropy, the non-profit sector, and the people.

People in this country have always had to press government to live up to its ideals and principles. We may sometimes lose sight of the fact that these great documents of justice and freedom that now form the cornerstone of our democracy were not inclusive of all its citizens.

As we have so painfully come to understand, the Declaration of Independence did not acknowledge life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all people who were living in America. At its outset, our Constitution did not establish justice, or promote the general welfare, or secure the blessings of liberty for all its people. “We the people” has for quite some time meant a select privileged subset of the people.

The ideals expressed in these great documents have always needed to be enlarged upon and in reality they still do. That is what social justice is about, enlarging the umbrella of justice to cover all citizens; guaranteeing and protecting basic rights, fairness and equity for all.

And this “all” that we speak of must include all of our children. “We the people” must include all of our children.

I do not begin with this message because I believe that those of us in the room are unaware of this context, I start here as a reminder to all of us as to why we must overcome the challenges that continue to slow the progress of an effective public policy agenda that delivers on the promise of social justice for all of America’s children.

The notion that philanthropy can and does play a role in influencing public policy development is not new. The Emergency Medical System that we have today can be directly traced to the efforts of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

The efforts of the Rockefeller Foundation have had an indescribable impact on health care policy and the health care system of today.

The efforts to change public policy in each of these areas were filled with many challenges, but none quite like those that stand in the way of a sustainable public policy agenda of social justice for all of America's children and youth.

Let's talk about some of those challenges:

1. Conflicting agendas of those who must be involved in making the policy change a reality (government, philanthropy, non-profit sector, and affected families and communities)
2. Larger society's aversion to the worthiness of the population on whose behalf we seek to preserve justice (gender, race/ethnicity, economics)
3. Shrinking economic base for philanthropy, government, and non-profits leaves us facing difficult choices and we may not all agree on the steps that need to be taken because survival mode has been "turned on"

So what is the role of philanthropy in public policy?

Philanthropy must be:

- A convener of all those who must play a role in change
- A partner with the non-profit sector
- A partner with those affected (families, children, communities)
- A partner with government
- A partner with other philanthropic organizations

Philanthropy must find a way to adopt an integrated response paradigm as it pertains to their trends of supporting change and improving outcomes for vulnerable children and families.

The need for such a philanthropic shift is evident if we take a look at the philanthropic response following Hurricane Katrina. It would not be difficult to find numerous references on the Web sites of many philanthropic organizations regarding the enormous amount of good that has occurred as a result of foundations' investments in rebuilding and relief efforts. But the reality is that the 9th Ward still has not been rebuilt, while the city of Greensburg, Kansas which was completely demolished by a tornado after the Katrina disaster, is being completely rebuilt as a model green city.

Imagine if the heads of the foundations who provided resources to New Orleans had all sat with the elected leadership in New Orleans, the state of Louisiana, and FEMA to say, combined we have X million for education, we have X million for housing, we have X million for mental health, etc how can we combine this with your efforts to effectively change the future of families and communities most affected by Katrina?

Imagine the results, imagine the possibilities.....

Last fall, the Marguerite Casey Foundation's Equal Voices for America's Families Campaign unveiled a platform to present to the new administration. Equal Voices is a family-led national movement to improve the economic well-being of families. They, in essence, want to create a sustained shift in national attitudes and policies affecting poor and working families.

The platform those families presented said no to the current piecemeal approach that addresses various issues in isolation as if the challenges of the poor and low-income were singular, separate, standalone, and unrelated. But in this world of interdependencies, where one act or circumstance sets off reactionary circumstances and actions, the platform called for an integrated and comprehensive approach to address the challenges confronting low-income families.

We know solving a piece of the puzzle here and there doesn't work. We need to solve the entire puzzle, linking all the pieces together to make sense of the picture. Whether you're talking about low-income families or families involved in the child welfare system or at risk of becoming involved in the system, families often need help in many areas of their lives.

The families involved in the Equal Voices campaign quickly recognized the role that government and policy play in easing burdensome conditions in their lives, and their power to petition the government for change. That is why philanthropy's role in public policy is so important.

Where do we want to be? How do we get there? We must take a step back to consider the tensions between the limits, the possibilities, the goals.

When philanthropy adds government and public policy to its strategy, nonprofits and others can easily scale their work to make a real and sustained difference in people's lives and in society as a whole. The goal is the uplift of all of society by helping families to elevate themselves.

To position families to lift themselves, philanthropy has to recognize, reinforce and capitalize on the strengths of those it is serving. You have to start from a position of strength versus one of loss.

Philanthropy can connect the dots and bring in all parties who have a hand in eliminating poverty, and we most certainly need the aid and assistance of the public sector.

The same is true when we talk about social justice for children. Of course we need to work directly with children and families. We need to work with the communities that surround those children and families to make sure there are strong, stable community institutions, services, programs and resources available to serve as trusted supports and safety nets.

Child welfare practice is evolving to be more strengths-based and family-centered, an approach that recognizes that families have value, they have a voice, and they have strengths. What some of them who end up in precarious situations don't have, but need, are guidance, a choice of workable solutions and basic tools and resources so that they can provide a safe, nurturing and loving home environment for their children.

But we also need to work with those families and communities to shore up their capacity, to help them give voice to their concerns and issues so they can petition for policy change.

Because of its far reaching impact, public policy has to be part of philanthropy's strategy around a big issue such as social justice for children. Public policy sets the stage or platform upon which we can build a more just society for children.

Public policy is necessary to scale the work of nonprofits and philanthropy; it's necessary if we are to make a real, sustained, systems-wide difference in the lives of the greatest number of people. Public policy provides the space within which we can create the world we envision for children. It provides that broad-sweeping national framework that is essential for any meaningful change to occur.

But as we work with children, families, their communities and nonprofits, philanthropy must be careful to not usurp the role of families or stifle their voices. The role of philanthropy in public policy is to give families and children a vehicle, the tools, training and encouragement to voice their concerns and mobilize action. Our role is to help build and strengthen their capacity to go after and get what they need. It is to help them realize the power of their voice; the power of their collective action; and to act on that realization of the power they possess.

It isn't about philanthropy having all the answers and dictating those answers to families. But, rather, it's about recognizing that families themselves have answers; it's about philanthropy listening to those answers and solutions; and it's about philanthropy providing them with the tools and resources required to take their ideas forward in an impactful way.

It's also not about philanthropy having more say in what is done because we happen to help fund the work. But, rather, it is about helping to bring together other entities who have ownership and a say, forming collaborations with them and working together as partners toward a common goal. It's not about promoting our own organizations and work, but, rather, it's about lifting up the voices of those who believe they are voiceless, empowering those who believe they are powerless, and promoting their work.

Government and philanthropy should complement each other, working together to improve the well-being of people.

When we talk about everyone in this country being guaranteed life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and those guarantees being systemically infringed upon; when government is not fulfilling its responsibility to make sure those infringing circumstances are held at bay, then philanthropy has to step in. Not to fill the gap or play the role that government is failing to fulfill, but to be a bridge between government and those in need. Philanthropy must work with the left out and left behind to mobilize and petition for policies that can stimulate a course correction that opens the guarantees of a just society for everyone.

Like many of you, I've been doing this work for a long time. I started out in the early 80's as caseworker in a foster care prevention program in New York, working with daycare centers on child abuse prevention. It was in this job, as a child abuse prevention caseworker, that I developed a passion for this work and for our children. It was at that point that I committed myself to making life different for abused and neglected children. I wanted to see children parented effectively. I wanted all children to be able to dream, blossom and live to their full potential -- the same hope that I have for my own children and that you have for yours.

It's been more than 30 years. I've seen progress and yet there is still so much to do. I still have the same hopes and dreams for our children that I had 30 years ago.

Speaking to a crowd in Chicago in 1968, shortly before his death, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that he was tired of marching. He said he was tired of marching for something that should have been his at birth. I'm sure we all get tired sometimes. I know our families get tired. I know our children in foster care get tired. We all get tired at times fighting for something that should have been a child's birthright.

But what inspires me is that despite what Dr. King calls being world weary, he kept marching, he kept pushing, he kept demanding. He kept hoping. He kept dreaming. He knew he couldn't let up; he couldn't give up. The price, he knew, would have been too great to all of society. Injustice of any kind undermines democracy and destabilizes society. It's too high of a price to pay. We don't have the luxury to stop, because we're not there yet.

As long as more than a million students drop out of school each year, social justice for children has to be part of the public policy agenda.

As long as 1.3 million juveniles are arrested each year, social justice for children has to be part of the public policy agenda.

As long as 900,000 teenagers in this country become pregnant every year, social justice for children has to be part of the public policy agenda.

As long as 800,000 youth and children become involved in the child welfare system every year, social justice for children has to be part of the public policy agenda.

As long as 24,000 young adults age out of foster care every year with no system of support in place to help them successfully transition to adulthood and life on their own, social justice for children has to be part of the public policy agenda.

Someone once said, it is a wise man or woman who plants trees from which they will never have the opportunity to receive shade.

Our work today and the reason why we must continue to educate lawmakers and work with constituent groups to influence public policy is all about planting trees of justice so that our children and all future children can enjoy the shade of justice offered by the trees we planted.

Thank you and God bless.