Supporting the Messengers of Change

Grantee Communications Assessment Report to the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation

Elizabeth Russell and Lora Smith

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In 2013, MRBF chose to examine the strategic communications capacity of its policy grantees, with an understanding that this capacity is closely tied to their effectiveness as advocates for policies that move people and places out of poverty.
Policy change can’t happen without constructive public discourse and influence. Getting to that influence involves persuasive conversations and well-framed messages. Policy organizations must reach and effectively communicate to diverse audiences, and continually deliver compelling data and narratives in order to achieve their desired outcomes. At its very core, policy advocacy is an exercise in strategic communications.

In 2012, the foundation-commissioned learning report, *Sustaining State Policy Infrastructure for Impact on Poverty*, provided the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation with clear and instructive recommendations for an investment strategy to strengthen existing organizations and expand statewide policy infrastructure. Among the report’s final recommendations was one that called for a deeper look at grantee communications needs and increased investing in the strategic capacities of infrastructure organizations. We acted on this recommendation with a study of the communications capacity, challenges and needs of 38 grantee partners working on policy efforts.

The attached report, *Supporting the Messengers of Change*, details the findings. The research led us to the conclusion that in order to maximize the efforts of policy change organizations in the South, MRBF must be open to supporting the strategic communications capacity of our grantee policy organizations more intentionally. MRBF is implementing the following recommendations in its practice to move us toward that intentional support. They constitute our investment strategy in strategic communications to strengthen the effectiveness of existing organizations. While specific to MRBF, these recommendations may be useful for other funders’ consideration.

**Recommendations for Supporting Grantee Communications Capacity**

Simply providing more dollars for staff positions, trainings or polling data might be appreciated by grantee partners, but interviewees told us in all candor that while general operating support is crucial, they have no way to guarantee its use for expanding strategic communications. So, how can foundations be of assistance? We identified four areas where MRBF could better support grantee communications capacity for sustained impact:

1. **Update the Foundation’s Organizational Development Materials**
   In terms of delivering immediate value, MRBF will update and expand its existing organizational development materials to include best practices and guides for communications and communications technology.

2. **Exploration and Expansion of National Networks**
   Given MRBF’s focus on building network capacity, coupled with the absence of existing networks for policy communications in the South, MRBF will explore partnerships to expand or deepen the reach of organizations that are successfully enhancing the capacity of policy groups in the region.
3. Organizational Development Grants for Communications
We found that due to issues of limited resources, policy grantees are not likely to use general operating support for communications without some sort of specific incentive to do so. Therefore, MRBF will consider making specific organizational development grants for enhancing communications effectiveness. The Foundation is also open to supporting new collaborative ways of working among grantee partners that builds communications capacity in a region for greater collective impact.

4. Deepen the Role of the Communications Officer

   Deepen the support for Network Officers: The Communications Officer will work more closely with Network Officers to conduct more thorough evaluations of grantee communications capacity, enhance due diligence to be inclusive of communications questions and ensure communications outcomes are made explicit in grant organizational development outcomes..

   Amplify successful communications strategies: The Communications Officer already collects communications success stories from grantees in our policy network and distributes them as a means of sharing best practices in real-world, compelling ways to our grantee community and the field. However, we are open to developing a range of new resources based on proven grantee models for strategic communications.

A very special thank you to our partners who participated in this study. We are grateful for your insight and look forward to our ongoing learning and work together.

And to our present and potential funding partners, we are always eager to engage in conversations and partnerships that build a stronger state policy infrastructure in the Southeastern U.S.

Lora Smith
Communications Officer
Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation
Background

In 2013, the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation released its report, *Sustaining State Policy Infrastructure for Impact on Poverty*. In it, the Foundation took a deep look at key qualities of 37 policy infrastructure organizations in 11 states, with an eye toward strategies for supporting and strengthening the policy infrastructure in which its grantees and other policy organizations operate.

In the report’s findings, Babcock grantees self-reported a need for additional help with their strategic communications work:

> In this study with Babcock Foundation state policy partners, the groups report that they most need help with organization development and communications, specifically:
> 1. Keeping current and robust their ability to analyze and frame issues and communicate with diverse audiences.
> 2. Modernizing their technology systems.
> 3. Telling their story effectively – About a third of survey respondents report using logic models or other formal processes to plan and assess their efforts. And even those groups ask for support in telling their story to a broad range of stakeholders including prospective funders, policy makers across the political spectrum, potential partner organizations, and the people and communities they are trying to organize and serve.

Among the report’s final recommendations was one that called for a deeper look at grantee communications needs and increased investing in the strategic capacities of infrastructure organizations:

> Invest in the adaptive capacity of organizations and networks. The ability to understand a rapidly changing environment and adapt accordingly requires core organizational capacities such as: framing issues and telling a story in order to communicate effectively; using modern technology and social media for strategic purposes; investing in leadership development and succession plans throughout the organization; integrating racial analysis and equity into policy efforts; and developing truly sustainable financial models. The Babcock Foundation will continue to invest in adaptive capacity of grantees through general operating grants, respectful conversations about capacity, and a deeper look at the communications needs of our state policy partners.

As a next step, MRBF chose to examine the strategic communications capacity of its policy grantees, with an understanding that this capacity is closely tied to their effectiveness as advocates for policies that move people and places out of poverty.

Methodology

To explore the communications capacity that supports the policy infrastructure in the states MRBF serves, our approach was threefold:

1. We conducted a **review of literature** related to communications capacity of nonprofit organizations to gather information about existing gaps, standards, and best practices in the field.
2. We created an **online, quantitative survey** of 39 state policy organizations and garnered 38 responses. (See Appendix C)
3. We then conducted **qualitative telephone interviews** with 13 organizations. These included 11 state policy grantee organizations, one state table grantee, and one organization that consults with policy groups in the region. Our interviews were with each organization’s top leader, communications lead, or both. The questions we asked were based on indicators of best practices and covered topics related to each organization’s practices, challenges, successes, needs, and desires with respect to policy-related communications work.
A Shifting Landscape

Financial Needs Have Increased in Tougher Times
While many policy infrastructure organizations we interviewed feel they have been “swimming upstream” for years in terms of advocating for policies that move people and places out of poverty, events of the past five years, including the 2008 recession and the 2013 federal sequester, have made their work much more critical — and in many cases much more difficult. For policy organizations, this means an increased focus and energy on efforts to maintain funding levels for vital social services — or at least an effort to control budget hemorrhages. At the same time, levels of donor support have dipped, or at best remained flat, for most nonprofit organizations. Like the majority of the populations they seek to help, state policy organizations have had to do more with less.

Political Tensions Create Communications Chasms
The “scorched earth” politics noted in MRBF’s Sustaining State Policy Infrastructure for Impact on Poverty (2013) report continue to result in a politically charged and somewhat hostile environment. Many interviewees noted that where they once were able to create support and foster dialog on both sides of the legislative aisle, they are now met with closed doors and blatant refusals to engage in discussion among conservatives.

“When we started, I was much more sensitive to being an impartial authority, but we’ve found we can’t occupy that space. Eventually, you have to take a stand.”
- Mississippi grantee partner

“There is a new majority in the legislature, and we have no relationship with that crowd. Data and research don’t seem to matter to them as much.”
- Arkansas grantee partner

Traditional Media Coverage is Declining
The continued rise in social networks for communication is indicative of a “scorched earth” effect of sorts in traditional mainstream media, as the number of print reporters dwindle and more online news sources emerge. In many states, MRBF grantees have found their reach into rural markets hampered by a reduced number of traditional media outlets.

In the Report to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities: Communications Review of State and Local Media (2008), a review of the organizations participating in the Center’s State Fiscal Analysis Initiative (SFAI), the report’s authors found that available space in the media for state budget and tax issues continues to shrink:

“We believe this is the biggest challenge to both CBPP and SFAI in its communication through the media to key audiences. As the ‘news hole’ shrinks, papers cut reporting staff for statehouse beats, shrink the column inches dedicated to these stories, and make the competition for CBPP and SFAI to get into stories more and more intense.”

Online Media Offers New and Broader Outlets
Where direct contact with politicians and traditional media has waned, state policy groups are finding new footholds within their communities. At a time when unfriendly powers hold political control, grassroots engagement is more important than ever. Fortunately, the voices of many can be captured as never before with user-generated content distributed through social media and new communication technologies.

The SFAI review found that blogs are predominantly filling the news vacuum and will continue to do so at an increasing rate.

“We are beginning to include blogs on our media list. We send press releases to blogs; we are known in the blogger world. We felt strongly that this is the new media we need to be part of. The more we focus on newspapers, the narrower our reach becomes.”
- Respondent to SFAI Review

SFAI also reports that while many groups are engaging with bloggers, fewer are blogging themselves:

“Although it is often a good way to be heard without having to build an audience, groups are not blogging themselves, either on their own sites or on sites maintained by others. We understand that many groups are stretched in their capacity, but this is a way that budget-constrained groups can spread the word about their organizations and their work to key policymaking and influential audiences.”
Many nonprofits are looking both to traditional media and social media to build groundswells of voter and public opinion support. In fact, many MRBF interviewees said that their future success will likely depend on their ability to use social media to build support, and they are turning to infographics as a tool of choice for communicating about complex policy issues. This speaks to the need of grantees to have added technology and adaptive capacities to keep up with a rapidly changing media landscape.

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**Traditional Media Decline**
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**Social Media Growth**
Grantees’ future success will likely depend on their ability to use social media to build support. Infographics are a tool of choice for communicating about complex policy issues.

**Rural Challenges**
For rural markets, TV and radio remain important outlets alongside newspapers and online sources.

**Reaching Rural Remains a Challenge**
Despite its growth, using social and online media to reach into smaller, rural markets remains a challenge. For those rural markets, TV and radio remain important outlets alongside newspapers and online sources.

“We are trying to figure out how to develop better relationships with constituents in key legislative districts, but haven’t quite figured out how to do that with social media – how to identify people and get them into our social media loop.”

- Arkansas grantee partner

“We are trying to figure out how most people get their news- and how to get to smaller newspapers in rural areas, and alternative media.”

- Respondent to SFAI Review

Making Connections, a news program run out of Appalshop in Whitesburg, KY, is one example of an innovative strategy to crack rural markets in support of the policy efforts of the Foundation’s grantee partners in the region. The program takes advantage of radio, blogs, and shrinking rural newsrooms by providing ready-made content. Appalshop is also coordinating efforts among organizations for a regional communications strategy in support of a just economic transition in Appalachia. This effort is summarized in Appendix B.
Emerging Trends

In addition to the current context, there are two trends in nonprofit communications that are worth mentioning for their potential impact on policy advocacy groups.

Telling a Good Story
The first is a well-documented push toward incorporating the art of storytelling into communications. Thought leaders in this arena include Andy Goodman, director of The Goodman Center, a communications consulting firm, and Marshall Ganz, Harvard professor and prominent member of the Leading Change Network. Goodman is a popular proponent of the power of stories to compel foundations to action. Ganz is noted for creating a new course at Harvard about storytelling in advocacy, which he calls public narrative, built on the “story of me,” “the story of us,” and the “story of now.” This narrative approach was at the heart of both Obama campaigns and proved successful for building a national “story of now” rooted in the idea of “hope.” Public narrative training is now offered to nonprofit organizations across the country. In states like North Carolina experiencing radical and regressive policy changes, telling human impact stories of how policy changes affect real people will grow increasingly necessary.

Trading Control for Engagement
The second trend is a growing awareness that the ways in which communication systems and networks are built – and the ways in which messages are created and shared – is changing almost as rapidly as communication technology. One needs to look no further than the successful spread of “We are the 99%,” a crowdsourced message about income inequality that emerged out of the decentralized networks of Occupy Wall Street, to see that messages can now be created and spread with lightning speed through regional and national communications networks formed in a matter of days.

Whereas effective communication once meant creating a set of proprietary messages and distributing them to set markets, today an organization’s effectiveness is defined more and more by the public conversations it sparks and engages with, rather than the one-way message it dictates. Communications has evolved from creating one-way broadcasts, to engaging in two-way discussions with an audience, to enabling real-time networked conversations. Effectiveness is measured not by how well an organization controls a message, but by how well it engages others around a shared cause and outcome.

An Emerging Practitioners in Philanthropy report, Doing Good in the 21st Century (2013) highlights the increasing complexity of social justice work this way:

“The ecosystem in which we work is increasingly complex and the pace of change is accelerating, demanding ever more nimble and responsive solutions. Notice that we said “solutions,” not “organizations” or “leaders.” Yes, we need to develop more agile organizations and become more creative leaders, but with the rise of the social entrepreneur and technology-enabled individual actors setting out to affect change, no longer are nonprofit organizations or foundations the de facto leaders of social change efforts.”

The “social entrepreneur” and “technology-enabled individual actors” are becoming a larger part of the communications space around policy advocacy and have a growing desire to become personally engaged in compelling solutions rather than organizations. Successfully harnessing this shift and momentum, especially coming off of movement “moments” like Moral Mondays in North Carolina, can have a positive effect on the work of existing policy groups.

Effectiveness is measured not by how well an organization controls a message, but by how well it engages others around a shared cause and outcome.
Limited Capacity Frustrates a Desire for Increased Effectiveness

While MRBF’s policy grantees are mounting heroic efforts to help shape policies that move people and places out of poverty, there are several capacity obstacles that are limiting their effectiveness in communications. Most notable are the absence of communications planning and region-specific messaging. In addition, very few of MRBF’s grantees seemed to feel they currently have the capacity to address either of these issues. Like most policy organizations in the region, the majority of MRBF’s grantees are largely “playing defense” in a hostile environment and spend the bulk of their time and resources responding to the messages developed by opposing forces rather than planning for and shaping their own.

“Largely, the South is behind across the board, in every area. Individual organizations are doing well, but overall they are very behind and we are really worried about it,” says Alice Aguilar, Executive Director, Progressive Technology Project.

“I see our members struggle with putting all the pieces together,” says one state table organization representative. “We know we need to be better, but we lack the confidence to do it, to use values frames, to step out of our own issue silos. How do we weave the narrative together? Our members want help at becoming better talking about themselves. They want help being more strategic with their communication.”

Those two points — about creating an appropriate narrative and improving the strategic approach — emerged time and again during our interviews and in the quantitative survey.

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Less than a third (29%) of MRBF grantees had a written annual or multi-year communications plan. Less than 18% of those with a plan had discussed its implementation with their staffs.

The Absence of Strategy

In terms of strategy, less than a third (29%) of the MRBF grantees we contacted had a written annual or multi-year communications plan. Less than 18% of those with a plan had discussed its implementation with multiple members of their staffs. Although most interviewees admitted that they probably “should” have a plan, many did not appear confident in their ability to create one. Among survey respondents, only 42% indicated “very high” or “somewhat high” capacity to develop a strategic communications plan and integrate it into their operations. Despite the fact that having a plan is considered a best practice, this finding seems to exemplify a key point made by Jared Raynor, Peter York and Shao-Chee Sim of TCC Group in their report, What Makes an Effective Advocacy Organization? A Framework for Determining Advocacy Capacity (2009): advocacy organizations are focused primarily on action rather than strategy.

“We have been working on communications, but have not developed a full blown plan. We recognize that it’s really important. We put out a lot of reports and push for them, but we could get more impact with a coordinated plan.” - Louisiana grantee partner
The Desire to be More Effective
It’s not surprising, given their capacity limitations, that MRBF grantees report an overall sense of dissatisfaction with their own effectiveness, saying that they could — and would like to — be better.

In the online survey, 52.9% of respondents rated their communications activities as “somewhat effective” and 32.4% rated them as “very effective.” In comparison to other organizations in their regions, 52.9% said they were “in the middle of the pack” in terms of communications effectiveness while 38.2% considered themselves leaders in effectiveness. None seemed unhappy with what they had accomplished, but all wanted to do more than they are currently capable of doing. Per the online survey, 69.7% rated their overall communications capacity as “moderate” and 18.2% as “very high.” Only 4 respondents felt their capacity was “very low.”

MRBF grantees say that they could — and would like to — be better.

Proactive Capacity: North Carolina Justice Center
Given the shifts in the region’s political landscape and the shrinking of traditional media for policy coverage over the past few years, it is a challenge for the vast majority of policy organizations in the Southeast to push proactive communications forward. However, one group that does so with a well-defined strategy and social media savvy is the North Carolina Justice Center. Through a statewide network of blog contributors and continual outreach to more than 300 media outlets, the North Carolina Justice Center ensures key policy messages remain in the forefront.

“In terms of more traditional media, we’ve almost tripled our coverage from 2008-2011, and now appear in various media about six times a day. We placed three times as many OpEds in 2013 as in 2009. As there are fewer and fewer media folks devoted to state policy, we become more of a go-to source.”

“New media means people want quick facts that are visually accessible and shareable. We didn’t have a social media presence until 2010, but we concentrated efforts and now have about six staff on Twitter regularly. And the online readership of our blog posts is through the roof.”

-Melinda Lawrence, Executive Director

Overall Communications Effectiveness?

- moderate 52.9%
- very effective 32.4%
- somewhat low 14.7%

Overall Communications Capacity?

- moderate 69.7%
- very high 18.2%
- very low 12.1%
An Absent Trend: The Dearth of Policy Communication Networks

Neither a scan of existing literature nor our survey responses uncovered an existing network specifically focused on communications capacity for policy advocacy in the South. This is not to say that no communications support exists. There are various technical assistance programs for communications offered by state associations of nonprofits, peer-to-peer learning offered by the Community Media Organizing Project (CMOP), and a number of independent consultants and firms that offer communications consultation and tools. But, to our knowledge, there is no current communications network in the South that is providing expert support to MRBF policy grantees, nor is there one that might easily be convinced to take on that task.

“There isn’t infrastructure to help groups build capacity, then it’s logical that organizations will develop in a way that’s not aligned,” says Aguilar, whose group developed an assessment tool to gauge nonprofit capacity in terms of technology use, including for communications. “In the South, this is exacerbated because of the absence of resources.”

Possible Network Builders
The one exception to the absence of networks is the State Fiscal Analysis Initiative (SFAI), a national project of the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities in Washington, DC, created with support from the Ford Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. SFAI was created to help state-level policy organizations speak more effectively to policies that affect low-income and vulnerable populations. SFAI provides technical assistance, help with messaging, strategic planning, and conducts annual trainings. SFAI groups we interviewed said they received great value from the network.

However, only seven MRBF policy grantees are involved with SFAI and the network provides assistance and information meant for a national audience. Their messages have not been tested with Southern voters and policy makers.

“Until now, we have had to rely on messages that were crafted and tested outside of the South for a national audience. However, the South is a unique place with a distinctive history, culture, and resulting values system. What we want, and what we need, are messages that resonate with Southerners.”

- Alabama grantee partner

State table organizations could also potentially emerge as “homes” for supportive networks, but currently there are only two in the states where MRBF works and they are struggling with capacity issues of their own.

“It would be interesting to see us get to the point where there is a cadre of policy communications specialists who figure out among themselves the tools, tactics, and trends and learn from one another. That might change the way we do things and improve them.”

- Mississippi grantee partner

Areas of Strength

While MRBF’s policy grantees may fall short in planning or face challenges in creating an overall narrative that satisfies their needs, they excel as a group in four areas: top-level leadership, media relations, messaging for specific policy objectives, and the use of traditional tools.

Executive Director Buy-In and Leadership
While it stands to reason that larger organizations would see a gulf between executive director and communications staff in terms of the priority of communications work, only one MRBF grantee we surveyed indicated any dissatisfaction with the level of executive director involvement. Indeed, since communications is such a core part of policy advocacy, and since many of the MRBF grantees are small organizations, in many cases the executive director was also the lead on communications activities.

MRBF’s policy grantees excel in four areas: top-level leadership, media relations, messaging for specific policy objectives, and the use of traditional tools.
Media Relations
The majority of the policy groups we interviewed have former journalists in communications staff roles and view the relationships held by those staffers as a primary asset in their media outreach work.

Crafting Campaign-Specific Messages
Many interviewees reported the ability to craft messages about their campaigns as a strength that they would be willing to share with others. Nearly half have had their messages picked up and used by other groups, policy makers, or thought leaders, thereby advancing their advocacy efforts.

Use of Traditional Tools
Practically all of the MRBF policy grantees are comfortable with traditional communications tools like brochures, newsletters, and press releases. The majority appear comfortable with “first-gen” electronic communications as well, such as website, email, and e-newsletters.

Specific Challenges & Needs
As mentioned earlier in this report, a more divisive and hostile political climate, the devolution of mainstream media into fragmented news outlets, and the increasing need to do more with a limited budget are all challenges faced by policy advocacy groups in the South.

To face them, these organizations most desire assistance with staffing, funding, state-specific message development, and social media skills.

Increased Staffing and Staff Training
This was the number one need identified by the groups we interviewed. This includes both the need for more time and the need for more strategic use of available time. Some try to address this through partnerships with other organizations, but none had a clear strategy or consistent method for doing so. “Lack of staff time to focus on communications” was the second highest ranked challenge in the online survey results, and “lack of staff skills/training” was the third highest-ranked challenge.

One major potential asset among policy organizations is the prevalence of young staff members under 40. Assuming that grantee organizations can retain these staff members and provide engaging professional development for them, the South’s policy advocacy organizations could become an incubator for an emerging generation of technology-savvy policy leaders.

Grantees say general operating support would be preferable to funding specifically directed toward strengthening communications, but none could name an incentive that would influence the amount of general operating support that might be directed toward communications.

Increased Funding & Explicit Communications Budgets
Not surprisingly, eight of the 11 interviewees said their work was not adequately funded, and lack of general operating funding was the top challenge listed by online survey respondents. In addition, donors often see other specific programs within an organization as more important than communications, and policy groups can find other programs within their own organizations competing for limited dollars.

“The priority is to keep doing the work, and there’s also the mindset that communications is fluff. And in proposals, foundations typically have already said what they’re looking for.”
- Louisiana grantee partner

All but one interviewee said that general operating support would be preferable to funding specifically directed toward strengthening communications, but none could name an incentive that would influence the amount of general operating support that might be directed toward communications. Organizations reported that they might use general operating funds for adding staff, building communications capacity, taking advantage of new opportunities or for specific events.

One respondent pointed out that a benefit of direct funding for communications would be that it could focus on the effectiveness of the communications.

“You always want general support, but sometimes general support fills holes in existing infrastructure or fills budget gaps. Creating new capacity would require an earmark.”
- Kentucky grantee partner

In addition to the question of funding is the absence of budgets specifically for communications among many policy organizations. The SFAI review found that many respondents did not know the amount or simply didn’t have an amount budgeted for communications. Others
only budgeted for a portion of expenditures, such as the communications director’s salary, the cost of services like email or graphic design, or communications for a specific project. As the SFAI review stated:

“We understand that many groups for funding purposes include communications within their budgets for specific programs, but not having a clear communications budget for internal use is a recipe for communications taking a back seat to other important activities in which groups engage.”

Relevant, Region-Specific Message Frames
While some policy organizations are connected to national policy groups who supply messages and frames for advocacy, many in the South find that the messages crafted for a national audience simply don’t “sit well” in their states. The South is a unique part of the country, with a historical, cultural, and racial context for many deep-seated policies that is unlike other regions. See LIHCA’s story in Appendix A for more on this.

Indeed, even from state to state, the way in which messages are received may vary greatly.

“There is a growing disconnect with citizens in rural areas who vote against their own best interest. National communications consultants don’t get that rural issue at all. It would be great to learn from peers in other Southern states who have similar political environments. A lot of national messaging would not work here.”
- Arkansas grantee partner

“I would love to have access to polling and message development around how to get to poor rural whites. That could be a game changer.”
- Louisiana grantee partner

Many in the South find that the messages crafted for a national audience simply don’t “sit well” in their states.

“We have access to national messages and polling, but we try to do our own to see how it differs and how we might fashion language to be more relevant. We want to have a meta-message that shows interconnection, but in a large, values-based frame. We’re still trying to figure out if the national frame works in Georgia.”
- Georgia grantee partner

Top Three Biggest Obstacles for Communications

- lack of financial resources
- lack of focused staff
- other priorities
- lack of planning
- lack of leaders’ buy-in
- lack of staff skills/training
- issues too sensitive for public
- other

ranked #1
ranked #2
ranked #3
One other smaller, message-related challenge arises in navigating the differences between 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) organizations when it comes to policy communications. Some of the South’s policy organizations work with both types of organizations and can encounter a challenge in creating focused, effective communications strategies for (c)(3)s in the shadow of their more aggressive and politically charged (c)(4) counterparts.

**Increased Social Media Savvy** While policy groups are making forays into social media communications with varying degrees of boldness, more than half of the interviewees we spoke with wanted assistance in furthering their reach and skills in this realm. This is entirely understandable, as the social media field itself continues to develop so rapidly that simply keeping up can be a full-time job.

At the same time, the communications field in general is still working to understand how to measure the impact and effectiveness of social media use. Out of necessity, policy organizations must “build the car while the wheels are turning,” but they crave assistance in doing so. It is important to note that the greatest opportunity for social media support would be in terms of developing strategies and metrics for effectiveness, rather than just skills in using social platforms.

“We're getting better at social media, but we need to know how to use it better – how to get our allies to go to our site as an information hub. I am too busy and don’t have the skills.”
- Tennessee grantee partner

“We know social media is coming. We see our allies using it effectively, and we know we’re going to have to develop a greater strength in it. The platform is expanding so fast it’s hard to keep up.”
- Alabama grantee partner

**Access to Networks and Resources** As previously stated, there is an absence of networks in the region to support policy communications. However, interest among policy groups to take part in such a network seems lukewarm. While roughly half of the groups we spoke with said they would like to be part of a collaborative group for peer learning, information exchange, or skills practice, they were skeptical about having the time and energy required to take part in such a group. For some, simply understanding how a peer group might be beneficial or difficulty in explaining their own work to peers were seen as hurdles.

The interviewees participating in SFAI named it hands down as the preferred resource for communications training, and gave it high marks as a source of great value. SFAI, Opportunity Agenda, and Progressive Technology Project were named by survey respondents as the organizations that had been most helpful over the past three years.

Along with an absence of existing networks to support communications, more than half of survey respondents and several interviewees said that there were not enough sources of communications expertise in their areas to provide support or consulting.

“Access to a consultant pool specific to understanding the South would be great!”
- Louisiana grantee partner

**Enough Communications Expertise for Support or Consulting?**

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Half of grantees said they would like to be part of a collaborative group, but they were skeptical about having the time and energy required to take part.
Strategic communications skills are one of the required technical capacities of any successful advocacy group according to Raynor, York and Sim (TCC Group, *What Makes an Effective Advocacy Organization? A Framework for Determining Advocacy Capacity*, 2009). Yet, they also describe a particular characteristic of advocacy groups in that they typically think of themselves in terms of outreach rather than organizational introspection:

*Nonprofit advocates frequently cite the need for programmatic skill development, such as media relations or grassroots mobilizing. But while those abilities are important, evidence has shown that, in isolation, strengthening those skills does little to enhance programmatic performance. The reason is that skills are implemented within a structure. If the skills change, but the structure remains the same, there is only limited space for the new skills to operate and other activities are not prepared to leverage the new skills. There is a need for nonprofit advocates to move beyond technical skills in order to think more systemically about organizational capacity.*

This observation translates directly to communications, and was borne out in our surveys and interviews where respondents indicated satisfaction with their capacity in terms of specific skill sets, such as media relations, but not as much with their ability to plan and strategize their communications activities as a whole.

“Groups are very good at being productive, but not so much at being strategic,” said Aguilar. “They think about campaigns rather than organizations. They also bring communications in at the end, rather than the beginning.”

It may be that the expressed desire for more staff or more funding could be as much a desire for deeper knowledge about strategic communications as it is the need for more shoulders to the wheel or more dollars in the budget. In many instances, the discussions with grantees about wanting more staff was more about missing skills and less about lack of time. This makes sense, particularly in light of the fact that so many organizations we interviewed seemed stymied at how to enhance their communications efforts beyond simply hiring an additional staff person. This is indicative of both lack of a clear communications plan but also lack of clarity around how their organizations could function at a higher level.

### A Note About Evaluation

While evaluation is often a struggle for nonprofit organizations, it is particularly hard to evaluate the effectiveness of communications around policy change. Interview respondents said that they measure effectiveness largely by web tracking and media coverage. Only one respondent surveyed a target audience to gauge effectiveness of communications. Several reported that their messages had been picked up and shared by mainstream media (88.2% said the same in the online survey). Some pointed to successful policy change as an ultimate indicator, but all know that’s not provable. Some spoke of the results of “insider” meetings on policy outcomes.

Steven Teles & Mark Schmitt explored the difficulty in evaluating advocacy in their *Stanford Social Innovation Review* article “The Elusive Craft of Evaluating Advocacy” (Summer 2011). Advocacy organizations, they argue, should be evaluated in terms of their “long-term adaptability, strategic capacity, and ultimately the influence of the organizations themselves.” This aligns well with potential communications evaluation efforts, which could include adaptability of messaging and media, strategic planning ability, the frequency with which an advocacy organization’s messages are picked up by other players, and the extent to which policy organizations attract like-minded organizations in advocacy efforts.
CONCLUSION

Strategic communications is the cornerstone of policy change work – and is becoming even more so in an era where policymakers are moved by the volume of consistent messages they hear from multiple quarters. Policy groups must keep up with – or better yet lead – as communication technology, tools, and strategies continue to evolve.

MRBF’s policy grantees are mounting a valiant effort in terms of communications, but they are, by and large, doing so in ways that are focused on the immediate and responsive, rather than the strategic and proactive. This is unsustainable over the long term. If MRBF relies on the success of these organizations to achieve its mission, then it must consider further investments in their communications capacity.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Case Studies from Southern Currents
   • Alabama’s Housing Trust Fund
   • Georgia Budget and Policy Institute

Appendix B: Case Study: Making Connections and the Appalachian Transition Convening

Appendix C: Grantees Representing State Policy Infrastructure
Messaging Matters: Alabama’s Housing Trust Fund
Author: Ashley Kerr, Low Income Housing Coalition of Alabama
Originally Published: September 23, 2013

In 2012, the Alabama legislature took a significant step forward to address our ongoing housing crisis by passing HB110, the Alabama Affordable Housing Act, which established a state housing trust fund. The Low Income Housing Coalition of Alabama (LIHCA) has advocated for increased housing opportunities for low income Alabamians since its inception and we view the passage of HB110 as a promising victory. A housing trust fund is a well proven model for sustaining needed funds for the production, preservation, and rehabilitation of affordable homes. In passing HB110, Alabama became the 45th state to adopt such a fund.

While we have been successful in creating the fund, there is still work to be done to secure dedicated revenue. An integral component in our campaign strategy is a successful communications strategy. In addition to disseminating information about the need for more affordable housing, we are teaching Alabamians how to effectively advocate for a dedicated revenue source for the housing trust fund.

When we look at the data, the case for a state housing trust fund in Alabama is strong. Local and national estimates put Alabama in need of over 90,000 affordable homes for seniors on fixed incomes, persons with disabilities, and low-wage workers. According to the 2013 Out of Reach report by the National Low Income Housing Coalition, nowhere in Alabama can you find a 2-bedroom apartment that is affordable for a family living on minimum wage. However, we know that facts and data alone will not convince the legislature to create a revenue source. We need to build political will and that begins by framing the trust fund as an issue that aligns with Alabama’s values.

Successful campaigns use strategically crafted messages to influence policymakers – and LIHCA is doing just that. With support from our members and the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, LIHCA recently conducted focus groups and statewide polling to test messages about housing and its relationship to opportunity, responsibility, and reward for work. We found that these are universal values and as a result we crafted messages that reinforce these values like:

Children deserve an opportunity to succeed in school and in life.

In Alabama, this begins with a place to call home.

Public opinion research shows that people become more responsive to our issues when we talk about values that are specifically important to them. Therefore, we’ve also tested messages related to Southern pride, economic impact, and faith – values that resonate with many of us in the South. Testing these messages with Alabamians is helping us determine what messages we use and adapt moving forward in our communications strategy. Until now, we have had to rely on messages that were crafted and tested outside of the South for a national audience. However, the South is a unique place with a distinctive history, culture, and resulting values system. What we want, and what we need, are messages that resonate with Southerners, and Alabamians, in particular.

This fall, LIHCA is hosting a series of trainings entitled, Messaging Matters. Trainings are being offered statewide in Decatur, Mobile, Montgomery and Tuscaloosa. Our goal for these trainings is to equip advocates with the knowledge, skills, and messages they need to talk with legislators and their communities about the need for a viable, i.e. funded, housing trust fund.

Our focus groups, statewide polling and our Messaging Matters training are three key components of our overall communications strategy. This coming year, we plan to expand on these efforts by launching a housing trust fund campaign website, starting a blog and utilizing social media platforms to disseminate our message. LIHCA members and partners are reaching out across the state to make the case for dedicated housing revenue. We are optimistic that the tide is turning and we will secure dedicated revenue for the housing trust fund, because we know that the people of Alabama believe in the message and value that everyone deserves a place to call home.
Changing the Conversation: How GBPI Helps Shape the Policy Debate
Author: Alan Essig, Georgia Budget and Policy Institute
Originally Published: October 28, 2013

The scene is an early October forum in suburban Atlanta. A gathering of conservative Georgia lawmakers who focus on education issues pose a challenge to the people at the meeting – help us make the case it is time to raise state taxes for the sake of our schoolchildren.

Whoa. What did they just say?

Not many of Georgia’s elected officials publicly broach the possibility of raising taxes. As is the case in most Southern states, many Georgia lawmakers pledged to heed Grover Norquist’s anti-tax agenda, even in the wake of severe underfunding of our public schools and desperately needed infrastructure upgrades to support technology and commerce.

I’ll probably never know if our recent report spotlighting the depth of K-12 budget cuts to local school systems was on the minds of lawmakers that day, but I do know the report received unbelievable statewide coverage and raised more than a few eyebrows.

This is just one recent example of GBPI’s work to shape state policy conversations.

Georgia Budget and Policy Institute (GBPI) is a member of the collaborative State Fiscal Analysis Initiative network, which brings together nonpartisan, independent, nonprofit organizations across the country that share a commitment to rigorous policy analysis. Based in Washington, D.C., network staffers provide communications support to GBPI and the other statewide organizations.

Our goal at GBPI is to serve as the intellectual underpinning for public policy in Georgia, with a special focus on ways policies impact low and middle income Georgians. We don’t just spotlight problems, we highlight solutions. Through our sophisticated communication strategies we take an active role in informing the public policy debate every single day.

GBPI marks its 10th anniversary in 2014. Our evolution is a source of pride and motivation for me, especially this year. Here’s a sampling of how we combine policy analysis and communications to influence the policy debate:

- In 2011, the Georgia Legislature changed the state’s financial aid scholarship program for technical school students by raising the minimum GPA from 2.0 to 3.0. Alarmed this would hurt the ability of low and middle income students to pay for college, GBPI spotlighted the problem in a 2012 report. The report found thousands of students would lose access to training to become medical assistants, truck drivers, and for other skilled jobs that pay well. The warnings in the report spread quickly and in 2013 Georgia’s Legislature reversed the change, reinstating financial aid benefits for nearly 10,000 technical school students who lost aid in 2011 under the new restriction.

- Georgia is one of many Southern states resisting Medicaid expansion. Expansion remains the single best opportunity for poor, elderly, and disabled Georgians to gain access to health care. To make this case, GBPI produces attention-grabbing research highlighting the myriad benefits of expansion on a regular basis. We participate in coalitions and briefings and frequently distribute communications with data to support expansion. Persuading Georgia’s governor to embrace expansion is a work in progress and we are committed to remaining in the thick of it.

- Georgia relies on an income tax for nearly half its annual budget. Nationally-funded fringe interest groups are pushing legislation across the Southeast to shift states from an income tax to a drastically increased sales tax. This push manifested itself recently in North Carolina. The latest battlefront is Georgia. Just as the so-called “Fair Tax” proposals started to gain traction in Georgia this summer, GBPI rolled out a comprehensive research, communication, and outreach campaign to expose the idea for what it is – a tax shift. It would threaten Georgia schools, raise taxes on families, and make it hard for small businesses to compete. When a state senate study committee held a hearing on “Fair Tax” plans with supportive witnesses preaching to the converted, GBPI was quick to point out the one-sided approach. Our tax and economic policy expert was soon testifying before the committee, providing a fresh perspective.

We all struggle to measure and take credit for influence on policy making. And those of us promoting progressive policy issues in the South have a steeper mountain to climb than others. But these examples show developing credible information and disseminating it through a solid communications strategy is an effective way to gain ground. I have no doubt we are steadily getting closer to the top of the mountain.
Although coal employment has been declining in central Appalachia for at least 30 years, political and business leaders of all stripes have made few attempts to openly address the situation or ensure significant investment in diversifying the economy.

Over the past few years, as job losses grew and the accompanying economic crisis deepened, the coal industry created a “Friends of Coal” public relations campaign that made it all but impossible to openly discuss the need for transition to a different kind of economy. Launched after President Obama’s 2008 election, amidst the fear that they might face new and stricter regulations, the industry funded a massive campaign that frightened coalfield residents and convinced them that their heritage, livelihood, and future were under attack. The coalfields have become a solid voting block for industry-backed “Pro-Coal” politicians who stymie progressive legislation on climate change, energy alternatives, environmental protection, worker safety, and community health and wellbeing.

In the belief that policy follows public perceptions, Appalshop began Making Connections News in 2010. A proactive communications strategy, Making Connections counters the coal industry narrative that no future beyond coal is possible in the mountains to engage communities in policy conversations. Producers created a multi-media platform for sharing news, stories, and information highlighting opportunities and challenges for building a healthy future for Appalachia’s people and land. Through video and audio stories that highlight policy ideas, programs, models and local businesses tied to transition efforts, the producers are helping to shift the coalfield conversation from one based in fear to one that is based in solutions by showing what’s possible and already happening in the region. The stories are distributed online through websites, blogs and an e-newsletter, on the radio through WMMT and regionally syndicated shows like Inside Appalachia, and in print through the distribution of written transcripts of stories sent to local papers.

So far, Making Connections has produced approximately 100 stories. Many of them feature MRBF grantee organizations, their projects, their members or their policy ideas and all are in alignment with MRBF’s overarching Appalachian strategy for transition. The initiative is supported by the blue moon fund, Media Democracy Fund of Proteus Fund, Open Society Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Appalshop Production & Education Fund, Rural Policy Action Partnership, and the contributions of WMMT listeners.

In October of 2013, Making Connections producers convened twenty-six representatives from seventeen transition-focused groups in West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Virginia for the “Appalachian Transition Communications Summit.” The Summit was an opportunity to explore the development of an aligned communications strategy around transition that could elevate and accelerate everyone’s work and move the groups closer to their shared goals.

“The Appalachian Transition Communications Summit was a first step in addressing a critical question: How do we seize this “moment” we are feeling to shape and give voice to an emerging vision of a more inclusive, just and prosperous economy for central Appalachia?”

-Mimi Pickering and Sylvia Ryerson, Making Connections News

At the summit, the organizations were led through a facilitated process that:
• Analyzed public opinion and focus group research from a media audit conducted by Resource Media, a research firm contracted by the blue moon fund to analyze and recommend communications strategies around transition.
• Compared the current transition moment in Appalachia to others experienced in the United States, such as the decline of the Pacific Northwest lumber industry, as a means to learn from previous efforts to effectively communicate transition.
• Analyzed the framing of the highly successful and divisive Friends of Coal campaign funded by the coal industry.
• Discussed who appropriate messengers are for transition and the existing tensions around framing the issues involved.
• Outlined the opportunities and challenges related to the upcoming Shaping Our Appalachian Region (SOAR) Summit.

By the end of the two-day Summit, organizations arrived at a stopping point, knowing that they wanted:
• More opinion research
• Development of common framing and messaging tools
• More communications among the groups
• Joint strategy efforts
• Shared principles

The Summit was made possible by support from the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, blue moon fund, and Appalshop Production and Education Fund. A valuable report that captured salient points from the conversation, defined the ‘next steps’ the group agreed to, and identified the gaps and questions that remained after the meeting was generated and made available to all participants. The organizations involved are currently working on their next steps to move collaborative work forward.

This type of group capacity building work offers one model for how grantee organizations can use communications strategy development and deployment to move their organizations toward greater collective impact.

The following 39 grantees are part of the progressive state policy infrastructure. All received the survey for this study.

**Alabama**

**Alabama Appleseed**
http://www.alabamaappleseed.org
The mission of Alabama Appleseed is to identify root causes of injustice and inequality and to develop and advocate for solutions that will improve the lives of all Alabamians. We work for constructive and lasting systemic change of policies and practices in Alabama that detrimentally and unfairly affect residents of the state. We seek to make legal and social systems better serve Alabama citizens, and we are dedicated to creating a more just and equitable society in Alabama. Through a combination of education, advocacy and policy expertise, we craft and promote lasting, practical solutions to systemic problems. We work in partnership with community and statewide leaders and organizations, academia, the legal and judicial communities, the business community, and a broad spectrum of volunteers.

**Alabama Citizens for Constitutional Reform Foundation**
http://www.constitutionalreform.org
Alabama Citizens for Constitutional Reform is a non-profit, nonpartisan, public interest group dedicated to educating the people of Alabama about the 1901 constitution and the need for reform, as well as encouraging citizen involvement in the reform process. ACCR’s mission is to provide credible, nonpartisan advocacy of constitutional reform and to educate Alabama’s citizenry about constitutional reform proposals.

**Alabama Poverty Project**
http://alabamapossible.org
Alabama Possible is a campaign from the Alabama Poverty Project. The Alabama Poverty Project mobilizes Alabamians to eliminate poverty through strategic partnerships with higher education institutions, community partners, policymakers and faith-based organizations. Our supporters are committed to leveraging their collective assets to develop creative solutions to end poverty. We provide a wide range of services, including professional development opportunities, on-site presentations, and information services in response to requests from our members and their community partners.

**Arise Citizens’ Policy Project**
http://arisecitizens.org
Arise Citizens’ Policy Project (ACPP), founded in 1994, is a statewide nonprofit, nonpartisan coalition of 150 congregations and community groups and some 1,400 individuals united in their belief that low-income people are suffering because of state policy decisions. Through ACPP, groups and individuals join together to promote state policies that improve the lives of low-income Alabamians. In a state that by many measures is the worst place for poor people to live in the United States, ACPP believes acts of charity are vital, but they are not enough; we must work to improve harmful state policies. ACPP provides a structure in which Alabamians can engage in public debates with the goal of improving the welfare of all Alabamians. Donations to ACPP, a 501(c)3 organization, are tax-deductible. ACPP’s sister organization, Alabama Arise, is an advocacy coalition comprising the same membership.

**Federation of Child Care Centers of Alabama**
http://www.focalfocal.org
Improving the lives of children and families in Alabama has been the mission of the Federation of Child Care Centers of Alabama (FOCAL) since its founding in 1972. Our first members were child care programs run by African-American women in rural areas of Alabama. These women were determined to meet the requirements to become licensed child care facilities and care for the children in their communities. During nearly 40 years of existence, FOCAL has adapted to meet the needs of children and families as economic and political conditions shifted. We remain a grassroots organization, led by our constituency. Our core programs are child care training, leadership development, advocacy, and organizing. We have expanded to embrace a broader membership, work in partnership with a number of other organizations addressing issues for working
families, and expand our use of tools for personal and community development.

**Greater Birmingham Ministries**  
[http://www.gbm.org](http://www.gbm.org)  
Greater Birmingham Ministries is a multi-faith, multi-racial organization dedicated to serving people in need, pursuing justice, and building stronger communities. GBM began in 1969 when three different denominations each launched new ministry efforts to respond more effectively to people in need and to seek a faithful community of justice and peace in Birmingham. These three efforts, begun by the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Church and the United Presbyterian Church (now Presbyterian Church USA), merged in 1971 and set the pattern for GBM’s work as shared, ecumenical ministry. Today GBM is sponsored by 20 different faith communities, making GBM now an interfaith as well as ecumenical organization. GBM has also worked consistently on the hard, slow work of systems change, particularly in the realm of state constitutional reform, seeking to make the social networks of the community open and fair to all, especially to those with little economic and social power. At the heart of this commitment is a belief in human dignity which connects all of us to each other, regardless of our relative economic or social position.

**Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama**  
[http://www.hispanicinterest.org](http://www.hispanicinterest.org)  
The Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama (HICA) is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization dedicated to the social, civic and economic integration of Hispanic families and individuals in Alabama. ¡HICA! engages and empowers Alabama’s Hispanic community and its numerous cultures as an economic and civic integrator, social-resource connector, and statewide educator.

**VOICES for Alabama’s Children**  
[http://www.alavoices.org](http://www.alavoices.org)  
Established in 1992 through the vision of leading child advocates, VOICES for Alabama’s Children was the first, and remains the only, organization to document the conditions of children in each of our state’s 67 counties. From building public awareness to leading legislative advocacy efforts, all of VOICES’ activities are based on a solid foundation of research. The organization’s goal is to ensure that all Alabama children have the best chance to succeed in life. VOICES focuses on the issues that matter most to children and families: health, safety, education, and economic security.

**Arkansas**

**Arkansas Advocates for Children**  
[http://www.aradvocates.org](http://www.aradvocates.org)  
Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families was founded in 1977 by a group of prominent Arkansans who believed that children needed an “independent force to provide information and education to parents and citizens about our state’s policies toward children and families.” For more than 30 years, AACF has provided leadership, research and advocacy to promote wide-ranging reforms that have improved the lives of Arkansas children, and we have never been afraid to lead the way when the need arose.

**Arkansas Public Policy Panel**  
[http://arpanel.org](http://arpanel.org)  
Arkansas Public Policy Panel is a non-profit organization founded in 1963. We work for social justice by helping community people to organize, to grow as leaders, and to influence public policy at the local level and the state level. The Panel provides organizing, training, leader development and strategic planning services. In addition, the Panel also supports a diverse coalition of community groups and organizations that develop campaigns and lobby at the legislature as the Arkansas Citizens First Congress. The Citizens First Congress works to get laws passed that improve Arkansas schools, protect Arkansas’ environment, change regressive tax structures, add citizen representation to state boards and commissions, strengthen civil rights, protect victims of violence, reform elections, hold government and corporations accountable and more.
Southern Bancorp Capital Partners
https://banksouthern.com/category/southern-bancorp-capital-partners
Southern is a unique organization that combines the vision, passion, and creativity of non-profit organizations with the stability and permanence of America’s largest and most profitable rural development bank. Southern’s family of companies includes traditional community banks and 501(c)(3) non-profit organizations. The banking organizations are long-term members of their respective communities with the ability to influence both public and private policy initiatives and create local, state, and national support for Southern’s community development work. Because of this unique public-private partnership, Southern is able to access both the grassroots individuals most affected by regional change as well as the community leadership base of professional, civic, and governmental institutions that traditional non-profit organizations are unable to reach. Southern’s goal is to organize all of the above in a manner that promotes action and stimulates fundamental community change.

Georgia

Georgia Appleseed
http://www.gaappleseed.org
The Mission of Georgia Appleseed is to increase justice in Georgia through law and policy reform. Georgia Appleseed seeks a Georgia where the voices of the poor, the children and the marginalized are heard and where injustices that no one should endure are resolved.

Georgia Budget and Policy Institute
http://gbpi.org
The Georgia Budget & Policy Institute is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that strives to raise the level of public policy debate in the state of Georgia. Founded in 2004, GBPI uses research, analysis and education to advance policies and practices that improve the quality of life for all Georgians.

Georgia Justice Project
http://www.gjp.org
Georgia Justice Project (GJP) is celebrating 25 years of a better approach to indigent criminal defense. We defend people accused of crimes, and win or lose, stand with them while they rebuild their lives. Founded in 1986, our mission is to ensure justice for the indigent criminally accused and their families and to assist them in establishing crime-free lives and becoming productive citizens. We do this by offering free legal services coupled with a full range of social and employment services.

ProGeorgia
http://progeorgia.org
ProGeorgia is Georgia’s non-profit civic engagement table. ProGeorgia is a member of the State Voices Network, a new model of cooperation and sharing amongst grassroots groups. ProGeorgia brings together the power of existing non-profit groups to work in a more strategic way, with new tools and technology, to change the policies of our state. ProGeorgia is building infrastructure by supporting, connecting, and coordinating civic participation efforts of our non-profit member groups. And ProGeorgia is implementing ways to win policy and electoral battles for progressive social change.

Georgia Stand-Up
http://www.georgiastandup.org
Our mission is to provide information and resources to help create healthy, livable neighborhoods while respecting the right of existing residents to benefit from the progress and developments taking place within their communities.

Kentucky

Community Farm Alliance
http://communityfarmalliance.org
Since 1985 Community Farm Alliance has been building positive relationships between farmers, consumers, legislators, and communities. From its humble beginnings in the farm crisis of the 1980s, Community Farm Alliance’s members, once predominately white farmers, twenty-five years later, are a diverse mix of urban, rural, farmers, non farmers, rich, poor, young and old. CFA members come in all shapes and colors and the “community” in Community Farm Alliance is not defined by geography but by the values of good stewardship of the land and water, and also of family and community. CFA members believe that the people most affected should lead in addressing their problems. CFA helps people organize and build leadership to define the problem,
identify barriers and needed resources, and create a plan to make change. Through community organizing and strategic alliances, CFA works to bring a critical public voice to policy makers.

**Federation of Appalachian Housing Enterprises**
http://www.fahe.org

The goal of the Federation of Appalachian Housing Enterprises (FAHE) is to provide affordable quality housing to those in need. We started out doing this in Appalachia, but over time, our dream and reach has grown. We are a non-profit. Many folks think of a non-profit organization as a charity. The service we provide is not a handout, but a helping hand that allows families in need a chance to obtain home ownership. We offer this assistance in many ways, including providing affordable, low-interest loans. These loans allow families to experience vast improvements in life such as heat in the winter, running water, and access to proper sanitation, which are not easy to come by in many rural Appalachian communities. FAHE does not do this alone. Our major strength is that we partner with 46 (and growing) non-profits across several states to form a powerful network that brings about real change.

**Kentuckians for the Commonwealth**
http://kftc.org

Kentuckians For The Commonwealth (KFTC) is a statewide citizens’ organization working for a new balance of power and a just society. As we work together we build our strength, individually and as a group, and we find solutions to real life problems. We use direct action to challenge – and change – unfair political, economic and social systems. Our membership is open to all people who are committed to equality, democracy and non-violent change.

**Kentucky Domestic Violence Association**
http://www.kdva.org

The mission of Kentucky Domestic Violence Association (KDVA) is to end intimate partner violence, promote healthy relationships and engage communities through social change, economic empowerment, educational opportunities and other prevention strategies.

**Kentucky Youth Advocates**
http://www.kyyouth.org

Kentucky Youth Advocates (KYA) promotes positive changes and policies that impact children by providing research, timely publications on issues and collaborating with a variety of groups to craft policies that positively affect Kentucky’s children, especially those who are poor and otherwise disadvantaged.

**Kentucky Center on Economic Policy**
http://www.kypolicy.org

The Kentucky Center for Economic Policy (KCEP) seeks to improve the quality of life for all Kentuckians through research, analysis and education on important policy issues facing the Commonwealth. KCEP produces research briefs on timely issues; promotes public conversation about those issues through media and presentations; and advocates to decision makers on the need for policies that move all Kentuckians forward. KCEP launched in 2011 and is a project of the Mountain Association for Community Economic Development (MACED). MACED is a community development organization that seeks to create economic alternatives that work for people and places in eastern Kentucky and Central Appalachia. Founded in 1976, MACED’s efforts include promoting enterprise development through capital investment and capacity building; operating demonstration programs that test new development ideas; and conducting research on public policy issues.

**Louisiana**

**One Voice Louisiana**
http://uniteonevoice.org/ovla

One Voice is excited to expand our reach into Louisiana, building toward our role as a southern regional hub for policy advocacy, base-building and training. Much like our successful work in Mississippi, we will work to advance the development of a progressive advocacy and legislative infrastructure and nonpartisan technical assistance and training for state and local elected officials in the State of Louisiana. As we hit the ground running in Louisiana, One Voice is working directly with elected officials and communities to increase awareness of key legislative issues, as well as identification of entry points in the political process where all voices can be heard. Key to our approach is using the tools of research
and policy analysis, trained and connected community leadership, and building community-based structures through which broad public involvement can be organized and sustained. It is our hope to use our proven, strategic approach to achieve system change throughout the state by connecting the engagement and advocacy efforts of grassroots groups with progressive policy makers.

**Mississippi**

**Hope Enterprise Corporation/Enterprise Corporation of the Delta**

http://www.hope-ec.org

HOPE is a private, nonprofit community development financial institution (CDFI), that provides commercial financing, mortgage loans and technical assistance to support businesses, entrepreneurs, home buyers and community development projects. HOPE’s mission is to strengthen communities, build assets and improve lives of people in economically distressed areas of Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Memphis, Tennessee. HOPE also sponsors Hope Credit Union, which provides a range of financial products and services that meet the needs of low- and moderate-income residents in its four-state service area. Since 1994, HOPE has generated over $1 billion in financing for entrepreneurs, homebuyers and community development projects, and assisted more than 40,000 individuals in low-income communities throughout the Mid South.

**Mississippi Center for Justice**

http://www.mscenterforjustice.org

At the heart of the Center’s mission to create a just society is a desire to build healthy communities across Mississippi. By engaging elected officials, faith-based leaders, media, community activists, educators, child-care providers, healthcare professionals and other advocacy partners, the Mississippi Center for Justice provides the legal perspective to policy initiatives that improve the lives of Mississippians. With offices in Jackson, Biloxi and Indianola, the Center seeks systemic solutions that promote educational opportunity, protect the rights of consumers, secure access to healthcare, ensure equity in disaster recovery and put affordable housing within the reach of all Mississippians.

**Mississippi Low-Income Child Care Initiative**

http://www.mschildcare.org

The Mississippi Low-Income Child Care Initiative (MLICCI) was founded in 1998 by child care providers, parents and community leaders who gathered to share concerns about child care in Mississippi and to explore how they could work together to address those concerns. Together, they improve the quality of child care for all or Mississippi’s low-income children; advocate for better policies and greater public investment in child care subsidies; and build a strong, grassroots constituency for the working poor and their children.

**Southern Echo**

http://southernecho.org

Southern Echo is a leadership development, education and training organization working to develop effective accountable grassroots leadership in the African-American communities in rural Mississippi and the surrounding region through comprehensive training and technical assistance programs. This work has carried Echo staff into 12 other states in the south and southwest. The underlying goal is to empower local communities through effective community organizing work, in order to create a process through which community people can build the broad-based organizations necessary to hold the political, economic, educational, and environmental systems accountable to the needs and interests of the African-American community. A special emphasis for Echo is the active inclusion of young people, in an inter-generational model of community organizing, on the same basis as adults.

**North Carolina**

**Blueprint NC**

http://blueprintnc.org

Blueprint NC is a partnership of public policy, advocacy, and grassroots organizing nonprofits dedicated to achieving a better, fairer, healthier North Carolina through the development of an integrated communications and civic engagement strategy. Ultimately, Blueprint aims to influence state policy in NC so that residents of the state benefit from more progressive policies such as better access to health care, higher wages, more affordable housing, a safer, cleaner environment, and access to reproductive health services.
North Carolina Justice Center  
http://www.ncjustice.org
As a leading progressive research and advocacy organization, our mission is to eliminate poverty in North Carolina by ensuring that every household in the state has access to the resources, services and fair treatment it needs to achieve economic security. To make opportunity and prosperity for all a reality, we work toward jobs that are safe, pay a living wage, and provide benefits; access to quality and affordable health care; quality public education for every child; consumer protections from abusive practices; safe and affordable housing; public investments that expand opportunities for economic security; a fair and stable revenue system that adequately funds public investments while fairly distributing tax responsibility; fair treatment for everyone in North Carolina – regardless of race, ethnicity, or country of origin.

Southeast Immigrant Rights Network  
http://seirn.squarespace.com
The Southeast Immigrant Rights Network (SEIRN) represents many groups and organizations that are primarily devoted to serving the immigrant community. While each organization maintains its own identity and governance, we share a common vision. SEIRN’s mission is to build just and inclusive communities throughout the South by supporting immigrant rights organizations, fostering regional collaboration and peer exchange, strengthening alliances with the progressive movement, and facilitating joint analysis and action on issues of common concern.

South Carolina

SC Community Loan Fund  
http://www.scommunityloanfund.org
CLF is a regional lender that raises and pools capital from public and private investments to create a revolving loan fund that finances critically needed community development projects. Its mission is to support the development of vibrant, sustainable communities by providing loans, technical assistance, and advocacy for affordable housing, healthy food retail, community facilities, and community businesses. In 2007, CLF became a U.S. Treasury certified Community Development Finance Institution (CDFI). CDFIs are market-based, private-sector financial intermediaries that exist to create opportunities that benefit communities.

With more than 90 percent of their capital derived from private sources, CDFIs leverage scarce public resources as few, if any, other industries can do. South Carolina has six CDFIs, but only CLF is dedicated to financing affordable housing.

South Carolina Appleseed  
http://scjustice.org
For more than three decades, South Carolina Appleseed Legal Justice Center has been a forceful and respected advocate for low income South Carolinians on issues such as housing, education, hunger, public benefits, domestic violence, immigration, health care and consumer issues. SC Appleseed has always been dedicated to advocacy for low-income South Carolinians and to effecting systemic change by acting in and through the courts, legislature, administrative agencies, community and the media, and helping others do the same through education, training and co-counseling.

South Carolina Association of CDCs  
http://www.communitydevelopmentsc.org
The South Carolina Association of Community Development Corporations is a state-wide trade association of non-profit, community-based development corporations within the state’s economically distressed communities. The SCACDC places particular emphasis on promoting development in communities that have been left out of the economic mainstream, especially minority communities. The mission of SCACDC is to raise the quality of life for low-wealth families and communities by advancing the community economic development industry in South Carolina through the capacity building of local community development corporations through the provision of Grassroots Leadership Development, Access to Capital, Advocacy, and Technical Assistance. The SCACDC works to increase the participation of the State’s financial institutions in community economic development initiatives by facilitating public/private partnerships. The association educates the state’s legislature, state agencies, local governments, major state and national foundations, religious denominations, colleges and universities and lending institutions as to their potential role in creating opportunities and overcoming obstacles for community-based economic development throughout the state of South Carolina.
Tennessee

Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition
http://www.tnimmigrant.org
The Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition (TIRRC) is a statewide, immigrant and refugee-led collaboration whose mission is to empower immigrants and refugees throughout Tennessee to develop a unified voice, defend their rights, and create an atmosphere in which they are recognized as positive contributors to the state.

Virginia

Virginia Organizing Project
http://virginia-organizing.org
Virginia Organizing is a statewide grassroots organization dedicated to challenging injustice by empowering people in local communities to address issues that affect the quality of their lives. Virginia Organizing especially encourages the participation of those who have traditionally had little or no voice in our society. By building relationships with individuals and groups throughout the state, Virginia Organizing strives to get them to work together, democratically and non-violently, for change.

West Virginia

Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition
http://www.ohvec.org
The Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition, formed in 1987, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Our mission is to organize and maintain a diverse grassroots organization dedicated to the improvement and preservation of the environment through education, grassroots organizing and coalition building, leadership development and media outreach. Our work encompasses much of West Virginia.

West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy
http://www.wvpolicy.org
The West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy is a policy research organization that is nonpartisan, nonprofit, and statewide. The Center’s research and analysis is designed to support informed public dialog and policy in West Virginia. The Center consults and collaborates with other organizations to ensure that its analyses are relevant and timely and strives to be a knowledgeable and respected source of credible information on public budget and fiscal issues for policymakers, advocates, media, and the public.

West Virginia Healthy Kids and Families Coalition
http://www.wvhealthykids.org
We, along with other individuals, private organizations, and state agencies, work to improve the health of children and families in West Virginia. We provide a forum for diverse organizations to discuss, coordinate and collaborate on issues that improve the health and well-being of West Virginia children.