

## Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation

### Why Invest in Grassroots Leadership Development?

The Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation focuses on helping people and places move out of poverty and achieve greater social and economic justice. The Foundation has a long history of investing in grassroots organizations and grassroots leadership development. We believe in the responsibility and power of individuals—including youth and young adults—to improve their own lives and to act collectively to increase opportunity for themselves and their communities. We value democracy and inclusiveness. We believe in working with people in low-wealth communities to shape their own destiny. We believe that working inclusively and across differences is essential for sustaining our democracy and for expanding economic opportunity. We hold an unflagging interest and belief in the *grassroots leaders and organizations* that nurture just and caring communities.

“Grassroots” has become a popular phrase in recent years; likewise the word “leader” connotes different meanings for different people. When we at the Babcock Foundation speak of grassroots leaders and organizations, we mean those who:

- hold particular values consistent with building just and caring communities, including economic opportunity for all, justice, equity, fairness, democracy/representative power, and inclusiveness;
- are **rooted in their community**, with a base of fellow residents to whom they are accountable and from whom they draw support; and
- are working towards results that will be realized in low-income communities.

As the “roots” part of the name implies, grassroots leaders know and celebrate where they come from. At the same time, they hold a vision for personal and community development. Their roots intertwine with neighbors in bonds of mutual accountability. And, like the roots of any living organism, they use local assets (human, social, political, economic, and physical) to nurture growth and development in their communities. They create networks of support and knowledge, including both other grassroots leaders and mainstream leaders, upon which those communities can stand, and from which new growth and development can spring. They connect with partners outside the community to build investments and assets in the community, often beginning with struggles to establish parity in negotiations and then progressing to working partnerships.

The Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation invests in grassroots organizations and leaders for a number of reasons.

1. **It’s practical and effective.** Grassroots leaders and organizations have a vested interest in succeeding because they are working to make their *own* lives better. For example, grassroots leaders make community crime watches work because the safety of their families and neighbors is at stake. They design and implement economic development projects to increase their own economic assets and improve their

community's quality of life. They run tutoring programs and advocate for school policies to ensure opportunity for their children.

2. **Grassroots leaders are seldom recognized as leaders in the larger community.** They are often people who typically have had few opportunities to participate as equal partners with traditional leaders and government representatives in making the decisions that affect their communities. Their connections to the information, skills, and relationships that mainstream leaders and professionals take for granted are often remote or nonexistent. These connections are intangible assets that can open opportunities for both individuals and communities to build tangible assets.
3. **Grassroots leaders embody the values democracy and inclusiveness.** They bring the interests of low-income and minority people to local and state programs and to public policy arenas. Involving grassroots leaders in solving the problems that affect their communities typically results in better, smarter approaches to addressing community issues related to moving people and places out of poverty.
4. **Grassroots leaders hold government accountable to individuals and communities.** Grassroots leaders can mobilize the voices of many into a unified call for elected and appointed officials to be responsive to low-wealth communities. For example, grassroots leaders have pressured and then cooperated with local school boards to change disciplinary policies and practices that harm rather than protect their children; they have forced government agencies to clean up ignored toxic waste dumps in their communities; they have challenged state economic development policies that promote industrial recruitment without support for entrepreneurship programs and community economic development.
5. **Grassroots leaders are essential for bridging the faultlines of race and class in communities.** Across all of the Foundation's grantmaking, we have seen that the best way to bridge differences is for people to get busy working together on specific issues or projects. When grassroots leaders, who are often low-income or people of color, work in parity with mainstream leaders, everyone learns new respect, skills, and perspectives that help to bridge differences and advance solutions.
6. **Investing in the development of grassroots leaders accelerates and increases the positive impact they have in their communities.** Intentional, well-designed programs help uncover new and diverse leaders. We have learned through our grants and through gatherings of grantees that organized leadership programs for grassroots leaders can accelerate their learning curve, stimulate action, and encourage thoughtful reflection so that their community improvement work gets done faster and better.