



Influencing Congress to Act on Housing and Homelessness Issues

Takeaways from the 2019 Funders Institute, July 23, 2019

Philanthropic dollars are just a drop in the bucket compared to what government spends on housing and homelessness issues, so partnership with government is vital. On Tuesday, July 23, 2019 funders sat down to hear from four Senate staffers about what works in influence Congress about housing and homelessness issues. Here are some of the takeaways from this conversation.

What Works to Influence Congress on Housing & Homelessness Issues

Seeing examples of success in person

- Seeing projects and organizations that are effective is vital to increasing advocacy efforts. It is powerful and helpful when members of Congress can see things like housing first in person; this helped one Senator agree with housing first as a model.
- Local organizations can and should invite Senate staffers to see the issues on the ground. Staff can do these visits and relay information back to their Senator.

Building relationships with Congressional staffers

- Congressional staffers are trusted voices who can influence members of Congress. If a staff member is passionate about something, they can often help bring their Senator along on the learning journey.
- Start with developing relationships with members who are very involved in the issues you care about and then branch out from there. And don't forget that there are staff in both DC and in the home states, and that staffers are interested in hearing from many people across the country since they do their work from a national perspective.
- Understand whether your member is on a committee that has voting power over the issues you care about. Committee and non-committee members can look at a bill together which often helps push members to think in new ways. Different angles add to innovation.

Communicating the intersectionality of housing stability

- It's vital to understand the complexity of homelessness and housing. We need to address homelessness and housing instability from a multitude of angles and to make sure Senators understand the way that these issues intersect.
- There are often huge siloes when issues and bills come up. We need to do a better job talking about how access to services and infrastructure is critical in ending homelessness.

What's the Specific Role of Philanthropy?

Use your voice to educate and share feedback

- Philanthropy can and should write letters and emails to let Congress know how their changes and proposed changes would impact communities. This is also a good strategy when a policy will do good in a community. Feedback is needed to continue creating better policies.
- Serve as a convener. Congressional staff don't have the time to read long research documents (even though they'd like to), but they do want to have conversations that are distilling information from research.

Develop relationships on both sides of the aisle

- We need champions across the aisle and throughout both the Senate and the House. The CBDG program is a prime example of this happening.
- It's important to maintain relationships with advocates and non-advocates. If you have advocates on both sides of the aisle, be sure to ask them how to create more advocates.

Support advocacy groups and homelessness providers in doing advocacy work

- Continue to fund advocacy groups and homelessness providers in their advocacy work.
- Continue to fund daily on-the-ground work and research. The research is vital to help government grow programs.

Use your board

- Encourage your board to get involved in advocacy and educate them on how to do so!
- Your board is likely comprised of locally important people. Call on your board to help arrange meetings if they have ties to Congressional staff.