

U.S. REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH, RIGHTS, AND JUSTICE

STRENGTHENING YOUTH ENGAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

May 2019

Problem to solve

The Hewlett Foundation's [U.S. Reproductive Health and Rights strategy](#) aims to improve the wellbeing of women and families by preventing unintended pregnancy and ensuring access to abortion. Its grantmaking in this area works towards these goals primarily through support of organizations conducting policy advocacy.

Over the past decade, the reproductive health, rights, and justice movement has struggled to secure access to contraception and abortion for all people. The inclusion of copay-free contraception in the Affordable Care Act had a positive impact on millions of women, and several states have passed progressive abortion laws. However, recent actions by policymakers, regulators, and the courts have sought to reduce access to both abortion and contraception, eroding protection of reproductive rights.

Reproductive rights supporters and advocates have reflected on what the movement could be doing differently to be more effective in ensuring that policymakers support reproductive rights. One problem that has been identified is that most of the resources, leadership, and power resides in a small number of organizations that have dominated the movement for decades. The people most impacted by lack of access to good quality and affordable reproductive health care - women of color and low-income, rural and young people - have not been in positions of leadership, and have not been provided with resources or opportunities for their voices to be heard.

When the people who have the most at stake in policy advocacy are marginalized, they can become disengaged. This dynamic is both morally wrong and strategically misguided.

The foundation recently expanded the U.S. Reproductive Health and Rights portfolio to be more representative of the full scope of work needed to achieve success, including grassroots organizing and mobilization, and organizations led by women of color. One additional area that has not yet been a specific focus of the portfolio but that has the potential to affect change in this political moment is **youth-led organizing, engagement, and leadership**.

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The Opportunity

Young people are leading on some of the most intractable social issues of our time. In 2018 more than 500,000 people marched with Parkland students in Washington, DC and across the nation demanding Congress take a stand against gun violence (West, Darrell M., 2018). Thousands of “Dreamers” have risked arrest and deportation by coming out of the shadows and galvanizing people across the ideological spectrum to support permanent resident status. And in 2013, three young women founded the #BlackLivesMatter movement to organize and build local power to intervene in systemic violence inflicted on Black communities.

Young people are also becoming more engaged in the democratic process. In the 2018 midterm elections, young people cast their votes in historically high numbers. According to the Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 31 percent of people aged 18-29 turned out to vote, a nearly 50 percent increase from the 2014 midterm elections.¹

Despite this momentum, there is significant untapped potential to engage young people in the fight for reproductive rights, health, and justice. While young people are actively engaged on many social issues, in recent years they have tended not to focus on reproductive health, rights, and justice. A recent national analysis of 1.4 million individuals’ social media activity revealed a 10 percent decrease between 2016 and 2017 in the online engagement of 18- to 29-year-olds on reproductive rights and abortion. As other issues such as immigration have become more urgent, the attention and energy of young people has increasingly turned to those issues. However, reproductive rights are under threat and young people’s activism and engagement can help make progress.

Grantmaking sub-strategy

Through this grantmaking sub-strategy of the U.S. Reproductive Health and Rights portfolio, the foundation aims to increase the organizational strength of selected youth-led engagement and leadership organizations so that they:

- Are better able to develop and communicate compelling messages to key audiences;
- Focus attention on reaching and mobilizing larger numbers of young people; and
- Have the ability to increase the engagement of young people in issues related to reproductive rights, health, and justices, within the larger set of priorities.

Over the medium term, this increased capacity will result in reproductive health, rights, and justice being included in multi-issue youth organizations’ advocacy, policy, and/or strategy work; and greater youth participation in civic activities related to reproductive health, rights, and justice. It will also create the conditions for larger scale funding toward strengthening the leadership pipeline of low-income and young people of color, especially young women.

¹ Young People Dramatically Increase their Turnout to 31%, shape 2018 Midterm Elections. The Center for Information and Research on Civic Leadership and Engagement. November 7, 2018. <https://civicyouth.org/young-people-dramatically-increase-their-turnout-31-percent-shape-2018-midterm-elections/>.

Through this three-year (2018-2021), \$3 million grantmaking portfolio we are committed to investing in youth-led and multi-issue organizations that are expanding spaces and opportunities for young people to lead, mobilize, and engage on reproductive rights, health, and justice as stand-alone issues or as they intersect with other issues affecting them. Building on a useful study of effective youth organizing², we are expecting that grantees will adopt and/or promote good practices including:

1. ***Assume young people want to be engaged and provide opportunities for them to conduct both online and in person activism.*** Researcher Seema Shal has found that, contrasted with online activism alone, when young people are connected to a local organization there is a higher probability they will continue to remain civically and politically engaged in their adulthood.
2. ***Develop their leadership and decision-making skills.*** Young people want to be part of a community that values their experience and contribution. In surveys with 124 youth, Dr. Shal found that young activists want to stay involved and active, with most planning to continue their work or enhance their learning about politics in the future, and around 40 percent considering running for political office in the future.
3. ***Experiences that demonstrate they have the power to hold decision-makers accountable.*** Many young people believe they don't have the power to make change. When young people go on a journey of exerting power to hold decision-makers accountable, they better understand the decision-making process and come away seeing how the "game" of influence works. They want to create a unique vision and have access to the skills, resources and connections to begin experimenting with putting it into place.
4. ***Seeing the issues that affect them as interconnected.*** While abortion rights are an interest of many young, self-identified progressives, it is usually not the top reason that they are seeking an organizing home. They want to talk about strategies to bring down the barriers they, their families, and communities experience.

We expect to make between six and eight grants over a three-year period. Grantees will be youth-led organizations with a national reach that do community organizing, advocacy, and civic engagement. They will have demonstrated commitment to reproductive health, rights, and justice but could also be focused on varied issues, such as economic, gender, or environmental justice. Examples of grantees to date are:

1. [Alliance for Youth Organizing](#)
2. [Advocates for Youth for the support of Young Women of Color Council Program](#)
3. [Funders' Collaborative for Youth Organizing](#)

² Shah, Seema. Building Transformative Youth Leadership: Data on the Impacts of Youth Organizing. Occasional Papers series on Youth Organizing. Number 11. Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing. 2011.