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The Four Freedoms Fund Has Backed Immigrant Rights for 18 Years. Here's How, and What's Next

Martha Ramirez | May 10, 2021



THE FUND HAS LONG BACKED ORGANIZATIONS WORKING IN ARIZONA

In 2001, there was hope on the horizon for comprehensive immigration reform in the United States. President George W. Bush had been meeting with Mexican President Vicente Fox, and had [signaled he was willing to tackle immigration](#), even raising the possibility of offering a [pathway to permanent legal status](#) for the millions of undocumented immigrants living in the U.S.

Then 9/11 happened, giving rise not only to anti-Muslim and anti-Arab rhetoric, but prompting anti-immigrant sentiment across the board. Hope for immigration



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reform, which can only happen at the federal level, vanished. Nonprofit advocates then turned to funding local and state-level initiatives.

In some ways, advocates say, that was a necessary shift. “So much of the focus has been on comprehensive immigration reform as the main policy solution, but in local communities, we were experiencing the pain of detention and deportations firsthand,” said Marielena Hincapié, executive director of the National Immigration Law Center (NILC), during a [recent webinar](#) hosted by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

Two years later, in the same year that the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was created, five national foundations—the Carnegie Corporation, the Ford Foundation, Open Society Institute, Mertz Gilmore Foundation and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation—came together to launch [the Four Freedoms Fund](#), which is housed at NEO Philanthropy.

At the time, it was less common for foundations to pool their funds and develop joint strategies. But the move proved to be effective—the fund’s grantees have made an enormous impact in improving the lives of immigrants throughout the U.S.

During the webinar, Four Freedoms Fund co-founder Taryn Higashi, who currently serves as executive director for Unbound Philanthropy, said, “We knew that you couldn’t have federal change without local groups organizing home communities and building political power. The fund was set up to make state and local grants that our national foundations were not equipped to do directly.”

Geri Mannion, who leads Carnegie’s Strengthening U.S. Democracy program and its Special Opportunities Fund, also worked to co-found the Four Freedoms Fund in 2003. “We were trying to think of what was a way to get money out to the states in a very consistent, effective way,” she told me during an interview. “And since most large foundations... don’t have a lot of staff, it’s very hard for us to think about how to fund at a local or state level from my office in New York, for example. So that’s why we got the idea of doing a funder collaborative, that we would come together as foundations to actually put our money into a shared fund.”

“You cannot move any major, meaningful policies unless you have the input from the affected communities,” Mannion added.

That was 18 years ago. Fast-forward to the present, and to a [report](#) Carnegie Corporation commissioned to highlight the history, mission and accomplishments of the Four Freedoms Fund, as well as offer a comprehensive example of how collaborative funding works and what its benefits are.

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Carnegie's 28-page report, titled "The Four Freedoms Fund: A Philanthropic Partnership Helps Build a Movement," was released last week. The Four Freedoms Fund draws its name from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's 1941 speech in which he discussed the fundamental freedoms everyone should enjoy—freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear. The report includes modern-day visualizations of these four freedoms, inspired by Norman Rockwell's own Four Freedoms paintings.

According to the report, the Four Freedoms Fund has given more than \$170 million over the past 18 years to a variety of organizations and initiatives with the ultimate goal to help "grow and strengthen the network of immigrant rights organizations working at the state and local levels across the country." In 2020 alone, the fund awarded 214 grants to organizations in 30 states and the District of Columbia, totaling \$16.4 million.

Donors to the Four Freedoms Fund include many of the most consistent philanthropic backers of immigrant rights work. In addition to Carnegie, they include the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund; the Ford Foundation; the Grove Foundation; the Heising-Simons Foundation; the JPB Foundation; the Kresge Foundation; Luminate (part of the Omidyar Group); Oak Foundation; Open Society Foundations; Solidarity Giving; Schusterman Family Philanthropies; Unbound Philanthropy; the Wallace H. Coulter Foundation; Wellspring Philanthropic Fund, among others.

Among the fund's grantees are longstanding advocacy groups whose work has had a significant impact on the lives of immigrants, as well as some new arrivals. The grantees include the National Immigration Law Center (NILC), One Arizona, the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA), Asian Americans Advancing Justice Atlanta Inc., Voces de la Frontera, Detention Watch Network, South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT), UndocuBlack Network, and the United We Dream Network, among many others. (A full list of grantees can be found [here](#).)

The report also elaborated on the fund's strategic priorities. They include building state and local movement infrastructure, combating immigration enforcement and the criminalization of immigrants, civic participation, capacity building, rapid response, and strategic communications.

The Four Freedoms Fund provides grantees with general operating support, capacity building, rapid-response grants, and other supports, according to the report.

Beyond federal policy

When it comes to bipartisan immigration reform on the federal level, the past three decades have been [a tale of failure](#). The last major immigration bill that

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passed was in 1986, during Ronald Reagan's presidency.

In 2013, a bipartisan immigration reform bill passed in the Senate but never came to a vote in the House. In January of this year, on his first day in office, President Joe Biden introduced a comprehensive immigration reform bill, which, among other things, would grant the 11 million undocumented immigrants a pathway to citizenship. The bill is widely recognized to have no hope of passing in Congress.

However, according to the Four Freedoms Fund's Director Anita Khashu, the immigrant rights movement is about more than one piece of legislation. While federal immigration reform is a goal, it is far from the only goal.

Organizations on the ground have also tackled issues specific to their communities, advocating both for policy that would improve people's day-to-day lives and to work against anti-immigrant policies that numerous states hoped to pass. For example, 16 states and the District of Columbia have passed laws that [allow undocumented immigrants to obtain drivers' licenses](#). In Wisconsin, Four Freedoms Fund grantee [Voces de la Frontera](#) is advocating for similar legislation.

According to Hincapié, the Four Freedoms Fund has also assisted with litigation strategy, which allowed the fund's legal and civic partners to oppose a series of discriminatory anti-immigrant laws that were passed in 2010 and 2011. One example is Alabama's HB 56, which was signed into law in 2011, allowing police officers to inquire into a person's immigration status. It also prohibited undocumented individuals from attending public colleges or universities and from receiving any public benefits at the local and state level. Parts of the law have since been blocked.

Equally important, the fund also understood the need for proactive investment in organizing, which would have an enormous impact in the decade to come.

Arizona: a study in success

In few places is this dynamic more readily noticeable than in Arizona, a hotspot for immigrant rights advocacy in recent years. In 2010, Gov. Jan Brewer signed SB 1070, also known as the show-me-your-papers law. It gained notoriety at the time for its draconian nature, giving law enforcement officers wide latitude to detain anyone they even suspected of being an undocumented individual.

After SB 1070 was signed into law, the Four Freedoms Fund provided seed funding to One Arizona, a coalition of organizations that work in the state to protect and advance immigrant rights and opportunities. The fund's support included a focus on capacity building for civic engagement.

“Our grantees have really focused a lot on making those positive changes, and... pushing back on really draconian anti-immigration policies,” said Mannion.

Organizations that are a part of the 501(c)(3) nonprofit, One Arizona, include the Arizona Center for Empowerment (ACE) and the Arizona Advocacy Network. Since its inception, One Arizona has helped increase both Latino voter registration and turnout during the past decade, culminating in [record-breaking turnout](#) in the 2020 election. That being said, it's important to note that the Four Freedoms Fund is a philanthropic endeavor that pursues its goals by supporting movement infrastructure, boosting civic participation and the like—not by backing any political candidate or campaign directly.

Bottom-up momentum

Although immigration policy is decided at the federal level, Khashu said that changes at the local level can impact state-level policy, which can then impact federal-level policy, in a process of building momentum.

“You can't just fund a bunch of policy advocacy groups in D.C. and get the change that we want on a federal level,” Khashu said. “You need to have groups working communities and... at the state level and the local level that are doing the work to build momentum toward that reform.”

While immigration reform that would provide a pathway to citizenship for the 11 million undocumented individuals living in the U.S. has failed several times, Four Freedoms Fund grantees have made some progress on the national level.

One example is United We Dream, the largest immigrant youth-led network in the country and a Four Freedoms Fund grantee. United We Dream was instrumental in helping to build the movement that led to Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, commonly known as DACA. To date, DACA has helped more than 800,000 undocumented young people and protected them from deportation. Along with other Four Freedoms Fund grantees, United We Dream subsequently helped defend DACA from the Trump administration's attempts to overturn the program.

Accomplishments and goals

Immigration has long been a hot-button issue in the U.S., but during the Trump administration, immigrants faced even greater difficulties. “These past four years, if you've been alive in America, you know that it's just been a really, really hard time for immigrants. It was a level of attack on immigrants, on immigration policy, that we have never seen,” Khashu said.

“The greatest accomplishment in the four years is that we have helped enable our grantees to tap into their collective resiliency and help them to continue to grow stronger under incredibly hostile political environments,” Khashu said. “The movement deepened and developed new capacities. There were new alliances built.”

Khashu also credits the movement for the “day one” actions the Biden administration took. “We felt that Biden’s day one bill, as well as the executive orders that he had announced immediately on day one, were a testament to the power that the movement had built.”

Khashu added that future goals for the fund include continuing to strengthen the immigrant justice movement across the U.S. so that all immigrants, both documented and undocumented, can live with dignity, power and agency. Additionally, the fund is looking to take advantage of opportunities that come with the more immigrant-friendly Biden administration, and to continue to grow the skills, capacity and impact of its grantees.

But beyond documenting its success, the report stresses that Four Freedoms Fund also serves as a model for how funders can work cohesively, sharing strategies and ideas and pooling their resources, in order to tackle a bigger problem.

“One of the goals, I think, is to go beyond Four Freedoms Fund,” said Mannion. “I think one of the reasons we commissioned this report was to really highlight the importance of collaboration in philanthropy, like you do some things much better together than you do separately,” she added. “Secondly, highlight that funders from other issue areas should recognize immigrants and immigration cut across their issues, whether education, healthcare, climate change, economic justice, etc.”

The California Immigrant Resilience Fund is another good example of funding collaboration around immigration on the regional level. Other examples include the Immigrant and Oregon Refugee Funders Collaborative, the Massachusetts Immigrant Collaborative and the Immigration Strategic Funders Collaborative of Connecticut.

“Immigrant issues have always been in our DNA”

During the webinar, Mannion drew attention to the fact that immigration has long been a priority for Carnegie. “For both of us, our institution and me personally, immigrant issues have always been in our DNA,” she said. “Our founder, Andrew Carnegie, was a poor immigrant from Scotland when he came to the United States in the 19th century and ended up the richest man in the world.”

Carnegie’s late president, Vartan Gregorian, who died last month, [was an Iran-born Armenian immigrant](#). Mannion herself is an immigrant whose family came

from Ireland.

“They did not become billionaires or college presidents,” said Mannion, referring to her parents, “but they raised their children in New York to always remember our immigrant roots, to work hard, to achieve a better life than theirs.”

“Immigrants should be an important part of everyone’s philanthropic strategy,” Mannion said. “Ten years down the line, there’ll be another wave of immigrants, and they’ll be coming from other, different places. There needs to be some sort of capacity building for all these new and different and changing issues that will impact and confront immigrants in the decades to come, as well,” said Mannion.

Recent census results have shown that the overall population growth in the U.S. has slowed to its lowest rate since the 1930s. Economists see these trends as alarming as [population growth leads to economic growth in wealthy countries](#). A decline in population growth potentially means a decline in economic growth—a trend already seen in other countries like England and [Italy](#).

For some, immigration may be the best way to [avoid this problem](#). A better-functioning immigration policy would bolster the nation’s population, thereby potentially avoiding economic decline.

Regarding the longer-term future of immigration to the U.S., Mannion added, “I hope the Four Freedoms Fund will be a part of that and will continue to attract new funding and be a place that will consistently remind people of the importance of immigrants to this country, to our economy, to our culture and to our future.”

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