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Changing Systems, Changing Lives: Reflecting on 20 Years by the Nicholson Foundation

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Changing Systems, Changing Lives: Reflecting on 20 Years (The Nicholson Foundation, 2021) tells the story of the Nicholson Foundation and its approach to philanthropy in New Jersey and beyond, and from inception in 2002 to sunset in 2021. Far from a procedural description of grantmaking, the chapters of this volume lay out a rationale for why systems change is necessary and offers a roadmap and lessons learned for addressing social, economic, and health disparities. It explains for the reader that “government policies and safety net service systems are our society’s front-line response to the inequity problem” (The Nicholson Foundation, 2021, p. 5), and in doing so, makes a compelling case for ensuring that purposeful effort be focused on change at the systems levels. The stated goal of the foundation “was to augment or change these systems so that the services they provide individuals, families, and communities would be more accessible, more effective, and not work at cross-purposes” (The Nicholson Foundation, 2021, p. 116). This volume accomplishes this goal and serves as a call to action to other foundations, community organizations, and changemakers to undertake transformation so that systems provide accessible, effective and equitable services, and well-being can be achieved. This concise volume is essential reading for anyone engaged in making the U.S. a better place for children and families.

The twenty-year journey of The Nicholson Foundation is told through six theme-based chapters that serve as the core of the volume. These are bookended by an opening chapter on the history of the foundation and its evolution, and a closing chapter reflecting on its contributions and legacy. Each of the theme-based chapters include the philosophy or ‘big ideas’ undergirding and providing structure for the foundation’s work, a rationale for the importance of the theme, one or more illustrative examples of funded projects in which the theme is operationalized, and key insights or takeaways that could guide others embarking on similar efforts. These themes include: 1) engaging with government for systems change, 2) elevating best practices and building evidence for New Jersey, 3) finding and nurturing effective partnerships, 4) investing in organizational nuts and bolts, 5) tackling complex problems through multiple and complementary strategies, and 6) developing future leaders. The introduction also provides an overview of how the foundation operated and why it was successful. These strategies deployed included, among others, engaging with grantees through

technical collaboration, using performance-based grantmaking tying funding to outcome achievement, and elevating issues experienced by those in need and systems change successes through purposeful communications.

The chapter on the history and evolution of the foundation includes a developmental timeline in three-to-five-year increments accompanied by pie charts with funding priorities and amounts. We learn, for example, that in its later years (i.e., 2017–2020) 138 grants worth approximately \$37.7 million were made in the areas of arts, early childhood, health, and strengthening families. Profiles of the foundation's five strategy leaders are provided to frame direction setting at each developmental stage. These descriptions start with Mark Hoover, who established a systems change approach and encouraged partnerships with institutions and government, and end with Kim Boller, who elevated evidence building to quantify impact and supported staff to transition to other organizations where their perspectives and skills gained at the foundation could be put to good use.

Systems change to reduce inequality is a bold undertaking by any philanthropy as government administers policies that were often designed, explicitly or implicitly, to create or further inequity. This endeavor, then, requires not only changing the practices of government but also the mental models, interpretation, and application of policy by leaders and front-line staff. It is also necessary to build trust, coalitions and capacity across government, the nonprofit sector, advocates, communities, and other philanthropic partners to address the policy framework and achieve true systems change. Many philanthropies do not attempt to try and thus limit the scale of change possible given the vast governmental resources, reach, and continuity across time.

Each of the chapters concludes with a summary of impact and sustainability, often with key programmatic or fiscal policies that have been changed as result of The Nicholson Foundation's multi-pronged collaborative efforts. For example, the chapter on 'Tackling Complex Problems with Multiple and Complimentary Solutions' notes that policies related to the child care subsidy rate, the level of income eligibility to qualify for the Child and Dependent Care Tax, and a reduction by 50% in child care co-pays have all been changed to better resource parents. These are enormously important policy changes that directly address social, economic, and health disparities. A discrete chapter on the importance of policy change specifically, as a core component of system change, would have been helpful to synthesize how policy changes were made and the ways in which the Nicholson Foundation contributed to these changes.

Additionally, systems change requires philanthropies to release themselves from expecting impact at the individual level and instead incorporate a focus on more proximal or macro-level outcomes—like policy change. In the concluding chapter, a key passage related to these considerations is worth repeating here:

It is impossible to assess—much less assert—whether our particular initiatives have made life better for people on a lasting basis. The Foundation has been but one, small, player in a sea of effort. We did prove to ourselves that it is possible to influence government from a position outside it, that it is possible to inspire a variety of partners to join in, and that these public–private collaborations can bring about fundamental change (The Nicholson Foundation, 2021, p. 118).

The Nicholson Foundation should be commended for not only attempting systems change but also for reflecting, through this volume, on what was accomplished, what was not, and how

this information could encourage more philanthropies, non-profits, communities, families, and government entities to engage together in this critical endeavor. The overwhelming majority of poor and inequitable social, economic, health and well-being outcomes are preventable and solvable. This essential volume describes how and why systems change is worth pursuing.

Disclosure Statement

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest that relate to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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