



THE TOW FOUNDATION

The Power of Advocacy



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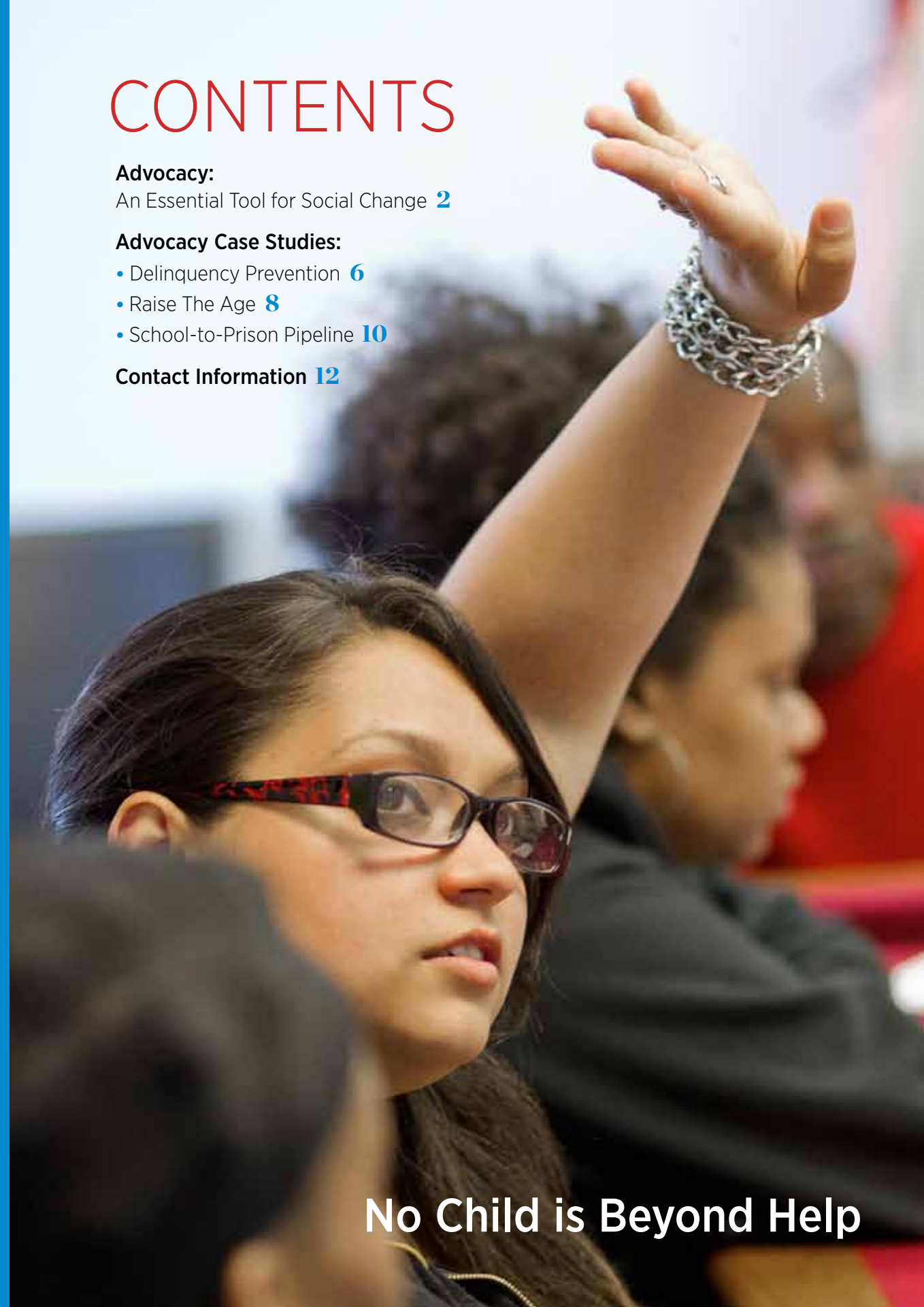
Who We Are

The Tow Foundation envisions a society where all people have the opportunity to enjoy a high quality of life and have a voice in their community. We strive for this by supporting nonprofit organizations to help vulnerable populations and individuals become positive contributors to society. We fund projects and create collaborative ventures where we see opportunities for reform and benefits for underserved populations. We feel it is our obligation to help others achieve success in their own lives. We strive to provide leverage to make possible far greater things than we could achieve alone.

Leonard Tow
and Emily Tow Jackson



No Child is Beyond Help



Advocacy: An Essential Tool for Social Change



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Hector, at age 14, has never been connected to a positive adult role model, is involved in the juvenile justice system and has little hope for the future.

Hector is being raised by his mother in a single-parent home. His mother has mental health issues and lacks basic parenting skills and his father has been absent since his birth.

Hector's schooling has been significantly interrupted, and because he is two grade levels behind in reading and math, he is often truant and is on the road to dropping out. His mother doesn't return calls from the school social worker.

Last year, in seventh grade, he got into a fight at school and did not comply when a teacher tried to break it up, leading to an out-of-school suspension and an arrest. He has had difficulty complying with the terms of his probation and is at high risk of further justice involvement.

Hector and his mother have the potential to do better, but they need help to identify their strengths and assets and to access services to guide them onto a more positive path. For that to happen, the school and justice systems must have policies and services in place with the same goals.

Investing in advocacy can make that happen.

Hector has made mistakes. Some of them are of his own design, but others are largely the result of the odds being stacked against him. His mom is doing her best. And yes, she's made some mistakes as well. But are Hector and his mom bad people? Do they deserve to be punished for their mistakes? I'm not so sure. But what can I do about it? How can I address, on both a personal and professional level, the injustices imposed by society on some youth and families? Many of us ask these questions of ourselves and then throw up our hands because the answer is complicated. But through our work at The Tow Foundation, I have had the privilege of meeting many people who seize these complex challenges with gusto. And against all odds, they gather the support, be it financial or in human capital, to face those in power and tell the stories of children like Hector, who often are powerless to do so themselves. These individuals and the organizations they are connected with are what I call our *advocacy partners*. They are agency executives, support staff, young fellows in training, government workers, students, volunteers and family members. They are the colleagues and partners that form our *advocacy community*.

Advocacy is a word that is thrown around widely in the nonprofit world, but is largely misunderstood. It is interpreted in many ways and continues to be a mystery to many. Yet there is a new push in philanthropy to ‘do’ advocacy as a high impact strategy. It sounds lofty and many foundations and donors see it as beyond what’s allowed, unattainable with a small staff, or simply just not what they do. I understand because our foundation was there not so long ago. It was not originally an intentional strategy for The Tow Foundation and, like so many others, we officially shied away from advocacy as a concept. But looking back over a decade of focus on how we could improve the lives of young people in the juvenile justice system, it’s clear that we were ‘doing’ advocacy and, in fact, *being advocates* ourselves all along. We just didn’t fully understand the definition in the beginning. The result is that we have played a significant role in successful policy change, legislation and litigation, which in turn has enabled us to affect thousands of young people like Hector and their families, offering them a better chance for success.

Because advocacy has led us to successfully influence policy, I’m often asked to explain what it is and how we at The Tow Foundation do it. People want to know how we found ourselves in the center of social change, functioning as an agent of that change. It’s easy to tell the story of how we are doing it, but defining the concept and why and how foundations can embrace advocacy is more complicated.

What is advocacy?

I looked at many dictionary definitions and noticed that none of them specifically mentioned lobbying, which is often falsely associated in the field of philanthropy with the concept of advocacy. The definition that makes sense to me is: *public support for or recommendation of a particular cause or policy*. A good start, but it needs to say more in order to really explain how it relates to Hector and can affect social change. To me, advocacy is when individuals and groups of people (who may be gathering in networks or coalitions) develop an opinion about a social issue, work to find evidence to support their stance on that issue, and share this evidence with those who are in positions to make changes to the policies that affect that issue. As a foundation, we get involved in advocacy both by funding these groups and by actively participating in the work they do.

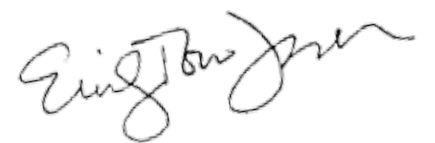
Why should we advocate?

Helping Hector is a great achievement, but to affect large scale social change, supporting people one by one is just not enough. What we really want to do is help thousands of Hectors. Only then can we truly say we are making a difference when it comes to the most difficult social issues affecting families and communities. That’s why the support of advocacy efforts is catching on as a strategy for foundations. In an age when having impact, going to scale and other such statements are the mantra in our field, understanding, supporting and ‘doing’ advocacy is essential to success. Funding really great direct service programs is very important to get to the heart of the individual stories, but then you need to amplify these stories and tell them to those who have the power to actually change the policies and practices that drive government systems.

How is effective advocacy done?

Below and on the following pages, we will offer some ways that foundations can integrate advocacy into their work. We will also give a few examples of issues on which The Tow Foundation has advocated, along with our nonprofit partners, and the results that have been achieved. Our hope is to clarify the steps and inspire others to make support of advocacy a priority, which can help your foundation become an agent of social change. Then you will be able to say you helped not just Hector, but thousands more like him.

That is the power of advocacy.



ADVOCACY ACTION STEPS

1. Define an issue or problem
2. Find a story of an individual, family or community affected by this problem
3. Take it to a forum
4. Spark a movement for reform
5. Invest in evidence-gathering research to validate the needed reforms
6. Inform and educate policymakers and the public

Issue

DELINQUENCY PREVENTION

Problem

*Status offenders— young people who are habitually truant, runaways or beyond control of their parents, but who have **committed no crime** – were routinely handled in Connecticut’s juvenile courts prior to 2007, often getting caught in the delinquency system when they violated court orders to go to school or adhere to curfews, filling detention centers.*

Advocacy

Foundation support enabled the Center for Children’s Advocacy to lead the state’s advisory board and their advocacy partners on this issue, collect cost/benefit data, and identify and educate legislative champions to support the passage of laws in 2005 and 2007 that removed status offenders from the juvenile justice system. New services also were created throughout the state to address the needs of these youth and their families in their communities.

Result

1,432 fewer status offender cases were filed in Connecticut courts in 2009-10 compared to the year before the law was adopted, a drop of 41%, and none of these youth were placed in juvenile detention.*

*Court Support Services Division, Connecticut Judicial Branch



“This essential foundation support helped advocates convince the state to adopt practices and redirect significant funding where it rightfully should be focused – serving youth who are at the highest risk in their communities, not in the juvenile and criminal justice systems.”

*Martha Stone, JD,
Executive Director*
Center for Children’s
Advocacy

Issue

RAISE THE AGE

Problem

Until 2010, Connecticut was one of only three states in the nation that prosecuted all 16-year olds in adult court, which research shows increases their likelihood of a lifetime of crime.

Advocacy

Foundation support helped the Connecticut Juvenile Justice Alliance and its advocacy partners initiate a successful campaign to *Raise the Age* that a delinquent youth could be handled in juvenile court from 16 to 18. Support for this legislative change was built through monthly statewide meetings of advocates, development of legislative champions, public forums, and organizing of youth and families that helped educate community leaders and citizens about adolescent brain development, public safety implications, and the personal consequences of trying youth as adults.

Result

4,186 sixteen-year old offenders were served in Connecticut juvenile courts in 2010, all of whom would have been in the adult criminal system had it not been for the new law. 17-year-olds will be included in the juvenile system in 2012.*

*Court Operations, Connecticut Judicial Branch



“ Convincing legislators, policy-makers and even the public that kids who are 16 and 17 should be treated as youth, not as adults, in the justice system takes time and strong evidence. The support of foundations helped advocates like us pull all the resources together to make this happen for thousands of young people.”

*Abby Anderson,
Executive Director*

**Connecticut Juvenile
Justice Alliance**

Issue

SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

Problem

In 2006-7, Connecticut's school districts suspended 41,227 students out of school for mostly minor disciplinary infractions, causing students to miss more than 250,000 school days – despite extensive research showing that exclusionary discipline practices are counterproductive and can lead to school failure and court involvement.

Advocacy

Foundation support enabled Connecticut Voices for Children to document out-of-school suspensions by school district and create a manual of best practice disciplinary alternatives for educators. Along with other partners, they successfully advocated and lobbied state legislators to support the implementation of a law that restricts the use of out-of-school suspension to serious offenses. This advocacy also led the Connecticut Department of Education to issue for the first time Guidelines for In-School and Out-of-School Suspensions for use by local school districts.

Result

10,353 fewer Connecticut students were suspended out of school in 2008-9 than just two years earlier* and the number of out-of-school suspensions statewide decreased by 30%.**

*"Teaching Discipline: A Toolkit for Educators on Positive Alternatives to Out-of-School Suspensions," Connecticut Voices for Children, June 2010

**Connecticut Education Data and Research (CEDaR), http://sdeportal.ct.gov/Cedar/WEB/ct_report/CedarHome.aspx.



“The outcome of the foundation support we received is that many schools in Connecticut have begun to invest in alternative, positive disciplinary strategies that improve school culture while keeping more children in school, where they learn best.”

Alexandra Dufresne, JD,
Senior Policy Fellow

Connecticut Voices
for Children

Advocacy toward system reform is not work that can be done alone.

Being a hands-on, contributing member of dynamic groups made up of advocates, nonprofits and public system leaders has been the key to The Tow Foundation's success in influencing system reform. Our unique position as a foundation has allowed us the freedom, credibility and authority to bring juvenile justice to the forefront of policy discussions and to serve as a broker between public and private stakeholders.

There are many ways in which we do this:

- 1. Learning** from experts, site visits, and research. *We can then define a problem or issue where there is an opportunity for positive change.*
- 2. Listening** to our grantees and the families they support, advocates and other foundations. *Asking questions gets to the heart of the issues and problems we hope to address.*
- 3. Sharing** through convening and facilitating stakeholders, participating in local and national coalitions, writing op-ed or opinion pieces and talking to the media. *A network can become a powerful force for change.*
- 4. Investing** in leadership at all levels, from grassroots to legislators, and in gathering and disseminating data to make a case for needed reforms. *Decision makers need to hear from the affected community and have the facts in order to change policy for the better.*
- 5. Inspiring** by educating those in power and encouraging them to do things better. *By leveraging successes, building on momentum and standing by and with our advocacy partners, social change is possible on a grand scale.*



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DISCLAIMER

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