



# Triangle Community Foundation Community Grantmaking Program Civic Engagement Primer

*Expanding opportunities for people to engage in their communities and create a vibrant, inclusive, responsive, and fair society.*

## What is Civic Engagement?

Civic engagement refers to individual or collective actions designed to identify and address issues of public concern. It can take many forms, from individual volunteerism to organizational involvement to electoral participation. It can include efforts to directly address an issue, work with others to solve problems, or interact with the institutions of representative democracy.<sup>1</sup>

The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement divides civic engagement into three categories of activities in which engaged citizens participate:<sup>2</sup> civic, electoral and political voice. Examples of each of these categories include, but are not limited to:

- Civic Activities - community problem solving, regular volunteering and active membership in a group or association.
- Electoral Activities – regular voting, volunteering for candidates or political associations, or displaying buttons and signs.
- Political Voice Activities – contacting officials, contacting media, protesting or canvassing.

Triangle Community Foundation’s Board of Directors has decided that the Community Grantmaking Program will not fund voter registration activities. However, as part of the Community Grantmaking Program the Foundation’s Board, staff, grantees and other supported nonprofit organizations will be actively engaged in learning about and providing workshops on other specific areas of civic engagement.

## Best Practices for Civic Engagement

Because civic engagement encompasses a broad range of strategies, a variety of best practices exist. For civic engagement strategies such as grassroots education, volunteer management, policy analysis and legislative advocacy, best practices often differ depending on the target audience. Through the Community Grantmaking Program, Triangle Community Foundation hopes to learn which civic engagement strategies are most effective in our community.

## Notes on Nonprofit Organizations and Lobbying

Despite common misconceptions, lobbying by public charities is legitimate, encouraged and protected by law.

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has provided clear guidelines and regulations for the lobbying activities of public charities and for foundations making grants to public charities that lobby. The IRS has placed limits

on the percentage of a public charity's budget that can be spent on lobbying. These limits differ depending on the type of lobbying being conducted.<sup>3</sup>

Section 501(h) of the IRS code sets clear dollar limits on the amounts that electing organizations can spend to influence legislation without jeopardizing their 501(c)(3) status. While it is essential that nonprofits carefully comply with the limitations and requirements of the law, this is not a difficult task – especially for nonprofits that take the relatively simple step of “electing” to be covered under section 501(h). The section's provisions usually make sense for all but the largest 501(c)(3)s.<sup>4</sup>

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**(Endnotes)**

<sup>1</sup> The Pew Charitable Trusts, Michael Delli Carpini, Director, Public Policy. [www.apa.org/ed/slce/civicengagement.html](http://www.apa.org/ed/slce/civicengagement.html), 3/1/07.

<sup>2</sup> Lopez, Mark Hugo, et al. *The 2006 Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Detailed Look at How Youth Participate in Politics and Communities*. 2006. Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Worry-Free Lobbying for Nonprofits: How to Use the 501(h) Election to Maximize Effectiveness*. 2003. Alliance for Justice.

<sup>4</sup> “Nonprofits Can and Should Engage in Public Policy.” North Carolina Center for Nonprofits. <http://www.ncnonprofits.org/advocacy/nps%20can%20should.asp> 3/6/07.

