



BRIDGING THE DIVIDE

New Law Strengthens Partnerships to Benefit Public Schools, Libraries

On a December day in 2011 when Eileen Connolly-Keesler made the 90-minute drive to the state capitol to testify before the State Legislature's Education Committee.

As CEO of the Oshkosh Area Community Foundation, her expertise was needed to educate legislators on the reasons they should cut the red tape that for decades had prevented public schools and libraries from investing gifts with charitable organizations, such as community foundations.



Assembly Bill 224 was poised to fix that problem. It already had been five years in the making after Connolly-Keesler brought the issue to former State Sen. Carol Roessler. After several delays and derailments, the bill's current authors, State Rep. Dean Kaufert, R-Neenah, and State Rep. Gordon Hintz, D-Oshkosh, were determined to see it through in this legislative session.

At issue was the fact that without specific direction from a donor regarding the use or investment of these gifts, school boards and library treasurers were left with the task of investing and managing the money. A little bit of legal red tape blocked them from tapping the expertise and vast resources of their local community foundations.

The years of dogged determination by the bill's advocates paid off in March when the Wisconsin Senate passed the measure, and Gov. Scott Walker soon thereafter signed it into law. School districts and libraries across the state already have begun moving their charitable funds to the management of community foundations.

"Fortunately, we had someone like Eileen who was willing to take control and say 'hey, we need to change this,'" Kaufert says. "It was a perfect example of how the process should work. Legislators working together, keeping the politics out of it, and educating other legislators around the state of what the problem is and how it needs to be fixed. I think Gordon and I did a good job, and Eileen explained it in a way that everyone could understand."

Among the roles of a community foundation is that of civic engagement. In times when resources are limited, neither government nor philanthropists alone can resolve the broad and

complex issues many communities are challenged by, says Deborah Fugenschuh, president of Donors Forum of Wisconsin, a statewide professional membership association of grantmakers which supported the measure. A good working relationship between charitable organizations and government leaders is essential to maximize the public-private partnership.

"(This bill) is strengthening community capacity across the state," Fugenschuh says. "When you have an expert who is managing these funds for the community, you leverage dollars. You show results more quickly, so a city or library can develop the programs they need to, strengthening the ability to provide services for residents, while the community foundation maximizes their investment. It truly is leveraging dollars."

Bridging the ever growing political party gap is not only a credit to Connolly-Keesler, but a testament to the neutral territory that community foundations hold, Fugenschuh says.

"For all the differences that exist (between the political parties) out there, the value that we see on a daily basis of the Oshkosh Area Community Foundation speaks volumes," Hintz says. "It made us want to get this done because we think that school districts and libraries will benefit from this, but it also made it easier to pass into law because we could bring Eileen down to testify. ... It should be viewed as a success story."

In the photos: *From left, State Rep. Gordon Hintz, D-Oshkosh, and State Rep. Dean Kaufert, R-Neenah, meet on the steps of the Winnebago County Courthouse in Oshkosh.*

