Case 37
The Police Foundation
Ford Foundation, 1969
Scott Kohler

Background. Throughout the 1960s, the Ford Foundation supported an array of projects in the field of criminal justice. Some of these efforts—in particular the establishment of the Vera Institute of Justice—produced significant results. But they lacked cohesion. Furthermore, the urban riots of the 1960s—many of which were touched off by encounters between police officers and citizens—led to widespread recognition that police departments needed to improve. Several studies, including a Presidential Commission, cited “the social isolation of urban police departments” as a major problem. In 1969, the Foundation commissioned Jon Newman (who later became a U.S. appeals court judge) to undertake one of these studies on the state of the police field and on funding opportunities for the Foundation. Newman concluded that existing labor unions and most police departments were resistant to change and insufficiently imaginative. He recommended the creation of a new institution as a vehicle through which Ford could support research and new ideas that might then spread through the field.

Strategy. Responding with enthusiasm, the Ford Foundation allocated $30 million over the next five years to create the Police Foundation. The new organization sought initially to provide resources to reform-minded police chiefs in five different cities. Two of these efforts produced notable successes. In Kansas City and San Diego, Police Foundation programs showed that random preventive patrol and two-officer motor patrol “had no measurable impact on crime.” Later research projects have led to significant findings as well. For example, as Susan V. Berresford, the Ford Foundation’s president describes it, Police Foundation research has shown “the capacity of female police officers to do police work, the value in reducing domestic violence recidivism of removing abusive husbands from their homes overnight[,] and effective measures for reducing excessive use by police of deadly force.”

From 1975 to 1993, Ford gave an additional $14 million, and, in 1993, Ford enabled the Police Foundation to become self-sustaining with a $10 million donation to its endowment fund. In the ensuing years, the Police Foundation “made research and analysis in [the field] a legitimate and recognized undertaking.” As with many of the other important nonprofits it has started up over the years, the Ford Foundation not only underwrote the creation of the Police Foundation, it went on to provide core support, project-specific funding, and major endowment support.

Outcomes. The Police Foundation’s initial results were mixed, and much of the first grant had been swallowed up by the time the Police Foundation found its footing. That happened in 1973, when Patrick Murphy was appointed the foundation’s new director. Murphy, a former police chief who had worked in Rochester, D.C., Detroit, and New York, had extensive connections to many police chiefs, mayors, and other decision makers, and he was able to dampen the internal squabbling that had plagued the Police Foundation from the time of its founding. Recognizing this improvement, the Ford Foundation renewed its support, and enabled the Police Foundation to keep operating.

Relying on Ford funds, as well as limited support from the federal government and other funders, the Police Foundation became the pre-eminent voice for change and improvement in the field. It supported significant research—such as the Newark Foot Patrol project, which demonstrated that residents of neighbors with police foot patrols felt much safer than residents whose neighborhoods were patrolled only by car. This led to widespread reorganization of police patrols. By means of research, communications, and Patrick Murphy’s own networking abilities, the Police Foundation was able to open up dozens of police departments to change and point out many opportunities for
improvement.

Impact. While plenty of its projects did not succeed, the Police Foundation, nonetheless, “must be ranked as one of the major domestic achievements of the Ford Foundation during the ’70s.” According to Hubert Williams, the current president of the Police Foundation, “the police department has changed more than any other institution in our society since the urban riots of the 1960s. It’s changed ethnically, tactically, and most importantly philosophically, with an openness to new ideas, new methods, new people and old-fashioned neighborhood involvement.” Among the most important engines of this change has been the Police Foundation, which, thanks to the Ford Foundation, has been able—both directly and indirectly—to improve the functioning of police departments around the country, and, in so doing, to improve relations between the American citizenry and those to whom the citizens look for protection.

Notes

577. Ibid.
579. Susan V. Berresford, letter to Joel L. Fleishman and J. Scott Kohler. I am extremely grateful to Susan Berresford for her comments on this and several other case studies. Any shortcomings or errors within the text are, of course, my own.
581. Ibid.
582. Ibid.
583. Ibid.