

## The Trusts' initiatives in state-level change now have a(n) (un)common center.



# STATES UNITED

By Marshall A. Ledger

Imagine a young couple standing on the border of California and Nevada, poring over statistical summaries and trying to decide in which state they should live and raise a family. In Nevada, they notice, they would be more likely to own a house and have jobs. Less of their income would go toward taxes.

Across the border in California, they would probably earn more, but their cost of living would be higher. Yet they would be breathing cleaner air and drinking better water and have access to 10 times as many acres of state parks. Their children would be twice as likely to attend preschool, and their public schools would be better financed.

Of course, we rarely immerse ourselves in statistical data when deciding where to settle. We rely, instead, on personal considerations. Yet it matters where we live, because many of the issues that affect our lives are shaped by state policies and practices. And increasingly, issues strongly debated on the national stage—global warming, health care and education reform—are becoming the province of the states.

“State policy makers spend far less time in the limelight than their congressional counterparts—and yet their deliberations and decisions on a wide range of critical issues deeply affect the lives of all Americans,” says Susan K. Urahn, the Trusts’ director of State Policy Initiatives.

“In many ways, states are well equipped for the challenge,” she points out. “They’re often more willing than the federal government to take risks to develop innovative solutions to difficult problems. And in seeking examples of what works, state policy makers, business leaders, advocates and others look across their borders to see how other states are managing the same issues.”

In 2001, the Trusts launched a major initiative aimed at demonstrating the benefits of high-quality prekindergarten for all three- and four-year-olds. Recognizing the growing influence of state policy on a range of issues of national importance, the Trusts has been expanding its state policy portfolio. Recently, it took a giant step forward in supporting this work by creating a new operating unit, the Pew Center on

the States, based in Washington, D.C.

“In early education and other important areas, we work to help states advance effective policies that benefit their citizens,” says Urahn. “We want to expand our efforts—address a wider range of critical state-policy issues—but in the most thoughtful, efficient and strategic way possible. The center will help us achieve this goal.”

*Trust* asked her for details.

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**Q:** How does the center fit into the Trusts’ work?

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**Urahn:** As your readers are aware, the Trusts already invests in several critical areas of state policy development, including early education, death penalty reform, government performance and voting reform. While the issues are quite different, these initiatives have several important elements in common.

All are grounded in credible, rigorous, nonpartisan research. They focus on identifying centrist, pragmatic policy options. They shine a spotlight on states that have succeeded so that other states can learn. And they



engage a wide range of partners—at the national level and, most important, in the states—who are on the front lines working to solve important problems.

In the past, we designed our state policy initiatives one by one. Given how much they have in common, that's not the most efficient way to operate. Plus we recognized that, in reality, issues often intersect. State policy crosses an enormous range of topics, and state policy makers are very well aware that what they decide in one area will affect their choices elsewhere.

Others are making the same connections. For example, a growing number of business and law-enforcement leaders are interested in early education because they recognize it's a good economic investment and an effective way of reducing crime.

The center is about both the big picture and the details. It helps the Trusts and other funders maintain a bird's-eye view of state policy, looking across issues and across states. It also helps us develop particular expertise and work intensively in a handful of states on select issues. We need both perspectives to succeed.

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**Q:** What will the center do in, say, the near future?

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**Urahn:** A range of activities. Medicaid is on a collision course financially, with state expenditures rising yet federal contributions getting cut. The center is working with *Governing* magazine to develop a report analyzing the real-world experiences of states that have tried reforming the system. This study will be timely and inform both state and federal policy deliberations on this crucial program.

We are continuing our work to highlight states that are doing well on important issues, including working with partners to issue "report cards" on education and government per-

formance. We are designing an initiative that will help states look at both the public safety and fiscal nature of corrections policy, and exploring another that could examine state tax structures and monitor states' fiscal health. Meanwhile, we're setting up a scanning network that will look across states and issues to identify areas in which the Trusts and other funders might play a role. How's that for a start?

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**Q:** How does the Pew Center on the States work?

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**Urahn:** The center starts with the facts—but it doesn't stop there. It gathers data across the states on factors that affect policy—everything from budget, population and economic trends to states' policy climates. This baseline research helps inform Trusts' staff as we explore a range of potential state-policy issues on which to work.

It's also used to generate a series of Web-based indicators and reports that highlight (and in some cases grade) variation across states in areas of key concern to the public and policy makers—from education and corrections to fiscal health and effective government management.

As problems become serious, states begin to explore policy solutions, tackling issues in different ways. Here, the center identifies problems affecting multiple states and the places where innovation is emerging. Using a variety of approaches, from in-depth research to convening, it will highlight the different policy directions states take on particular issues and the impact of those decisions.

What we'll find here is that some approaches work, and some do not. When we have solid evidence that a policy approach is both feasible and effective, the center may support broad public education and advocacy efforts funded by the Trusts and others to encourage states to move forward.

Throughout the policy process, the

center has an array of tools at its disposal: issue tracking, research and analysis, surveys that gauge public support for change, publications—from policy briefs to report cards—policy academies and other convenings, technical assistance and communications.

All the center's efforts are nonpartisan, highly credible, timely and policy-relevant. And no matter what the issue, the center will always help bring new voices into the public debate, seeking out partners whose members, expertise or interests can help states move in positive directions.

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**Q:** The states are where the action is?

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**Urahn:** Yes, whether the states are acting by taking the initiative or reacting to the tone set by other states or the federal government. They are making critical policy decisions that affect every aspect of our lives.

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**Q:** For example?

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**Urahn:** In the 1990s, Wisconsin's reform of its welfare system became the model for sweeping changes at the federal level. More recently, California and Michigan have experimented with eliminating minority preferences in college admissions, and that has sparked a national debate on the issue. Georgia and Oklahoma make pre-school available to virtually all of their four-year-olds, and other states are following suit. The list of examples is long, and it's growing.

Even when the federal government takes the lead, states are still pivotal. For instance, Congress passed No Child Left Behind and the Help America Vote Act, but the ultimate fate of both laws rests in the hands of states.

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**Q:** The Trusts is known for its work at the national level.

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**Urahn:** Absolutely. Our state-based efforts began when we recognized

the influence of state policy on issues of national importance, and our early initiatives built on the expertise first developed in the national arena.

**Q:** And what are the important differences?

**Urahn:** At the federal level, it's one arena. With states, you have issues of national importance playing out in 50 different environments. The states and state policy makers are also closer to the ground. They have to balance their budgets—and that means making tough choices.

**Q:** You're dealing with 50 states—how do you focus the center's efforts?

**Urahn:** Well, we've compiled five principles that have grown out of our experience in state policy and now guide that work. The particulars go like this:

- *States embrace good ideas.* They pay attention to what other states do. There are regional and demographic differences, and solutions always must be tailored, but state officials are interested in understanding what policy approaches have proven effective elsewhere—and why.
- *Less is more.* Addressing a particular policy challenge in each and every state would be daunting, if not impossible. Fortunately, a 50-state effort is not required for a meaningful impact. A few states tend to have a consistent bellwether influence because of their size, demographics, regional importance or other factors, so changes there often generate momentum elsewhere. Or helping a few states which have fallen well behind on a particular issue and are trying to close the gap could have a tremendous multiplier effect nationally. The center can bring national visibility to successes in a handful

of states and tip the balance across the country.

- *The issues are different, but the tools to advance sound policy are the same.* Always: start with good research. Objective, credible information on different options and their costs and benefits, information that is relevant and useful to policy debates and provided in a timely way.

Some approaches are important regardless of the problem—for example, public education campaigns that raise awareness of problems, attract broad public interest, and generate support for solutions among diverse and often new stakeholders. And creating national visibility for issues while the work continues within a set of states helps generate momentum for widespread change.

- *The state policy arena has a range of actors.* Policy makers are not the only ones who affect the policy agendas. Many important constituencies—the business community, for example, along with national associations and organizations—also have significant influence. The center will tap into these networks, gather intelligence and help the Trusts and other funders assess who the best partners might be to identify policy options and advance policy solutions at the state level.
- *Finally, states want assistance.* State officials need to make well-informed policy decisions across a wide range of issues, and they often do so very quickly. So they welcome research, analysis and information about potential solutions—as long as it's credible, trustworthy, tailored to their own state's needs and interests, and respectful of the leadership and expertise within the state.

**Q:** What does it mean to be an “operating unit” of the Trusts?

**Urahn:** It means the center is part of the Trusts—one of the benefits of the institution's change to a public charity last year. Center staff are based in our Washington, D.C., office. Having the center in-house helps us both design and carry out our state policy work more efficiently and effectively.

We also are better equipped to bring the Trusts' hallmark strengths to bear in the state policy arena: focusing national attention on important, emerging public-policy problems, putting highly regarded experts to work conducting research and creating fact-based options, and locating common ground among diverse stakeholders.

**Q:** You mentioned partners.

**Urahn:** There are many people who can help us understand, navigate and succeed at the state level. With so much at stake on important issues, we want to make sure that we engage all the key players. We plan to reach out to universities, nonprofits, business, government and many others who are interested in state issues—experts to work with us on research and public education, for example.

We also want to partner with other funders who care about issues that matter at the state level. The center is designed to provide a cost-efficient infrastructure that can help them work more effectively and provide the advantages I described earlier—for instance, the ability to scan the field quickly, highlight what works and what doesn't and create linkages between issues and important constituencies that can lead to positive changes. ■

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