

A Smart Way for Philanthropy Ideas to Spread Fast: Change Social Norms

By [Howard Husock](#)

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VOLUNTEERS IN MEDICINE

Volunteers in Medicine started as a free clinic in South Carolina, based on the idea that everyone should have access to health care, and has inspired 110 others across the country.

Sean Parker of Facebook fortune fame has now joined other Silicon Valley tech billionaires such as Bill Gates and Jeff Skoll in urging the new generation of tech entrepreneurs to bet big on philanthropy — but to do so in ways that mark a break from the model of foundations established in perpetuity, such as Ford and Carnegie.

Writing in *The Wall Street Journal* last month, Mr. Parker urges [a new generation of donors](#) to take on problems that are “ready to be solved,” he cites, in his own case, cancer immunotherapy.

Most notably, however, Mr. Parker joins the chorus of people in philanthropy aimed at “leveraging” large-scale change: the term of art, of course, is scale.

Writes Mr. Parker: “The trouble for hackers venturing into the field of philanthropy is one of scale. How do these individuals, accustomed to unleashing massive social changes that span the globe, make a lasting contribution in their charitable lives and find satisfaction in doing so?”

In this, Mr. Parker joins what can be called a current philanthropic consensus that scale — and measurable results of interventions — must be self-consciously sought and is the gold standard of philanthropic success.

Scaling has captured the imaginations of prominent voices such as [Bridgespan's Jeffrey Bradach and Abe Grindle](#) and organizations like [Social Impact Exchange](#), whose mission statement — “dedicated to building a capital marketplace that scales proven solutions to improve the lives of millions” — says much about the scaling movement: Substantial growth, it's implied, depends on capital, planning, and strategic choices.

One must, Mr. Bradach suggests (in a way that Mr. Parker would seem to like) be a sharp investor.

Mr. Bradach writes of “nine approaches that hold real promise for addressing at a transformative scale a number of major social problems” — including partnerships with existing organizations, as the Y has undertaken to fight diabetes and promote good health, to influencing government to fund national programs, as the Nurse-Family Partnership has done.

But what might be called the professionalization of scaling need not be the only way or even the best way for good new approaches to social problems to gain reach. There is another way that’s just as powerful, especially when it comes to spreading good ideas and healthy individual choices. Call it an approach based on influencing social norms.

Consider the following example.

Some 15 years ago, a group of neighbors in Boston’s Beacon Hill neighborhood had an original observation. In the middle-class apartment buildings, not far but a world away from nearby mansions like John Kerry’s, clusters of middle-aged and elderly residents wanted to continue to live independently but needed modest help to do so. Thus was born both Beacon Hill Village and what has come to be called the village movement.

Here’s how it works: Local organizations use a combination of a small number of paid staff members and volunteers, supported by a combination of foundation grants and especially user fees, to assist residents of what have come to be called naturally occurring retirement communities.

Members of the village can get help with shopping, laundry, home repairs, getting to medical appointments, and organizing book clubs and entertainment. The growth of such organizations in the years since has been staggering.

As recently as 2006, *The New York Times* portrayed Beacon Hill Village as a novelty, helping a few hundred Bostonians. Today an estimated 150 such organizations exist across the country, with 120 more in the works. They serve some 25,000 members in 39 states. A national conference is planned for Seattle in October, and continued growth seems inevitable.

The village movement, in other words, has managed to go to scale. Beacon Hill Village took formal steps to seed its self-supporting, self-governing model elsewhere — offering advice to those seeking to start their own versions of a village. In that effort, it's been supported by a combination of grants and revenue from the sale of materials on how to establish and structure a village effort.

But it's important to focus on why the village movement has spread — and a key dimension that explains why a select few philanthropic and advocacy efforts do more than just reach more individuals: They but gain national influence.

The village movement, by promoting and enabling the idea of aging in place, found a way to do something powerful: establish a new cultural norm: The attention it received fired the imaginations of others, who, like the village founders, wanted to find ways to help a new generation of elderly avoid institutional living and remain linked to their neighbors and communities.

The village movement, in other words, attracted local champions from across the country not because of big philanthropy or, for that matter, big government but because of the power of its idea.

It is no coincidence that in the new book [*Being Mortal*](#), Beacon Hill Village won praise from New Yorker writer and physician Atul Gawande, not for its organizational success but for its core idea. In the context of a book that focuses on the inappropriateness of institutional life for many elderly Americans, he writes of a neighbor of his parents in Athens, Ohio, who read about “the Boston program that created neighborhood support for the aged to stay in their homes, and she was inspired.”

When ideas inspire, they spread — even without massive philanthropic capital, even without government funding.

Examples of philanthropy and nonprofits that “scale” by establishing new norms are not common, of course, but are memorable and well known. Historically, the settlement-house movement — which began bringing social services to new immigrants at the dawn of the 20th century — started with a single institution (Chicago's Hull House) and within two decades included more than 400 similar locally led and funded organizations across the country, offering English classes, music lessons, and fresh-air camps.

Like the village movement, the settlement-house movement had a national trade organization. But its power, too, lay in its core idea: that new immigrants deserved help in their quest for upward mobility and, indeed, Americanization. It was an idea, in other words, that inspired support from local leaders across the country.

Similarly, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, although it has gone on to become a national organization with policy objectives, arguably had its greatest influence simply by establishing a new norm: the designated driver.

Teach for America's going to scale was helped by federal funding that complemented philanthropic support, but it arguably had its greatest influence simply by promoting an idea: that our best and brightest should consider teaching and join the crusade for improving public education.

A lesser-known but extremely successful organization in the Beacon Hill Village mold is Volunteers in Medicine, whose roots lie in a free medical clinic in South Carolina and has inspired — and provided guidance for — some 110 such clinics across the country. All are led and funded in their own localities, each inspired by the idea that in the United States our norm should be that any resident, even those not qualified for government assistance, should have access to medical care.

As a group, they raise some \$45 million in local operating funds annually and take no government funding. All are led by a local champion “who thinks this is a great idea,” says Amy Hamlin, executive director of the group's small national office.

It's even possible that influencing a cultural norm may not require an extensive organization or widespread replication — imaginative philanthropy may do so. Think of the venture capitalist and philanthropist Peter Thiel, whose 2010 announcement that he would offer \$100,000 fellowships to prospective for-profit and social entrepreneurs who would agree to drop out of college to pursue their ideas, has called into question the much larger idea of whether a college education is worth it — and, if so, for whom? (Making his case against college on [60 Minutes](#) certainly helped.) Public acceptance of the idea that a college education may not be right for everyone has since emerged as a new cultural norm.

To be sure, philanthropy and nonprofits are hardly the only institutions that influence norms.

One would be hard-pressed to identify an organization that has shaped modern America any more than the oral contraceptive or, more recently, Sean Parker-funded social media.

It is so often left, however, to philanthropy to address the social problems that even largely beneficial change can introduce. One hopes, for instance, for ways to encourage fathers, especially low-income fathers, to play ongoing roles in the lives of their children. (I had hoped that a short-lived Brooklyn organization called Marry Your Baby Momma might “scale,” but that’s not happened yet.) One suspects that in the wake of marijuana legalization (a new norm, to be sure), we will need to find ways of reintroducing the norm of self-restraint when it comes to drugs. (That was certainly the goal of “just say no.”) Influencing norms for the better is no easy task and may indeed simply have to happen spontaneously. The village movement began as a very local organization and spread without benefit of the federal Social Innovation Fund or major philanthropy.

Once, on a visit to Hong Kong, I was briefed on its social-welfare system, in which nonprofit social-service providers rely almost entirely on government support, or “subventions,” in British parlance. I inquired as to how social problems that the government had not anticipated might be handled and was told there was no problem in that regard: “Nonsubvented organizations” often emerged to address such problems.

The United States has a tradition of such nonsubvented organizations. They are the backbone of our civil society, and even without Silicon Valley’s billions, they continue to emerge.

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