



## **Engaging Non-Traditional Allies: Nurses**

In its effort to raise awareness of environmental health hazards - and mobilize support for policy reform - the Beldon Fund sought to engage new allies from outside the traditional environmental community. After initially casting a wide net, Beldon found particular traction among nurses. Several factors affected its decision to invest in this constituency: Nurses are committed to promoting prevention of illness; have high credibility and influence among the public and policy makers; and they are organized and politically active. Prior to Beldon's funding, most nursing organizations were not involved in environmental health issues, particularly the dangers posed by toxic chemicals

### **Strategy**

By making grants to nursing organizations directly rather than supporting environmental grantees to reach out to this constituency, Beldon was able to engage nurses as full partners. Direct funding also allowed nurses to define environmental health issues through their own lens, and led to a deeper commitment and greater sense of ownership among nursing organizations.

The goal was to educate – and then activate - this constituency. Through support to the Environmental Health Education Center at the University of Maryland School of Nursing and Health Care Without Harm, Beldon reached nurses in educational and workplace settings. Funding to the American Nurses Foundation bolstered an advocacy infrastructure that could mobilize nurses at the state and national levels.

### **Challenges**

Engaging nurses took time, both to build their knowledge of the issue and to broker their relationships with environmental advocates. Working with nursing organizations presented a particular set of challenges. Infighting and competition among different groups, the layers of bureaucracy, and competing priorities often created difficulties that frustrated environmental advocates. At the same time, many nurses felt environmentalists did not understand how they worked and made unrealistic demands. Beldon played an important role bringing both groups together to help them work through the rough spots and develop a more productive collaboration.

### **Results**

While still a work in progress, the participation of nurses has already made a difference by:

- Helping to raise the profile of environmental health issues.
- Contributing to several state and national policy victories.
- Influencing the profession itself - the American Nurses Association made environmental health a priority issue.
- Leading to the creation of nurse-led environmental health initiatives in communities and hospitals in 24 states.
- Motivating nurse member associations in 12 states to establish environmental health task forces.

Nationally, nurse organizations are taking public stands on environmental issues such as toxic chemicals, energy, and climate change. In 2008, nurses included chemical policy reform as a priority issue in their candidate education. Plans are underway to form a professional society of nurses committed to environmental health.

At the state level, nurses are speaking to legislators, writing letters, and engaging in other advocacy actions. Nurses have participated in [SAFER's](#) multi-state work to ban toxic flame retardants and other harmful chemicals, and in the [Campaign for Safe Cosmetics](#). Beldon's success bringing other funders on board, and the lessons learned in the first phase of this work, will help strengthen the engagement of nurse advocates going forward.