

THE CHRONICLE OF PHILANTHROPY

Guns and Foundation Leadership: A Critique of a Chronicle Column From the California Wellness Foundation's CEO

By Judy Belk

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Judy Belk, chief executive of the California Wellness Foundation, drafted an open letter to the Chronicle columnist Pablo Eisenberg after he called on philanthropy [to do more to curb gun violence](#) and criticized a [letter](#) signed by dozens of foundation executives asking people to share stories of hope in their communities to counteract the “feelings of sorrow and discord” resulting from recent killings of both citizens and police officers. Her letter follows:

Dear Pablo,

We've known each other a long time. I've always appreciated your willingness to push all of us in philanthropy to be courageous, raise our voices and take a stand against injustice.

That's why I was surprised by your *Chronicle* piece, “[Grant Makers Could Help Push Gun Control to Forefront of Public Policy](#),” which criticized a campaign by 39 foundation leaders, including myself, that leveraged our institutional voices to spotlight hardworking nonprofits in communities across the country. I proudly signed on to this collective effort. You must have known your response would catch my attention. I wish you'd given me a call as you were thinking it through.

So, here's my take — some personal reflections and some food for thought:

1. You misunderstood our #ReasonsForHope. True, newspaper ads and a social media campaign can't replace the important, on-the-ground work that foundations support with grant making dollars. But foundations can do more than write checks. The campaign aims to shift the public discourse to spotlight ideas that are working — not only what needs to be fixed — and to do it by uplifting those very organizations on the front lines of change.

You of all people know how extraordinary it is to get 39 foundation presidents to agree on a public statement. The #ReasonsForHope campaign shows foundations can come together to speak out and stand beside our community partners, even in turbulent times.

2. Your review of the gun violence issue was incomplete. Thank you for focusing attention on the scourge of gun violence that plagues our nation. But you missed some important work that's making a meaningful difference — work that *The Chronicle* highlighted in January in the article ["Foundations Applaud White House Gun-Violence Actions."](#)

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Yes, Michael Bloomberg deserves the recognition you gave him for supporting the fantastic work of Everytown for Gun Safety, and you gave due credit to early advocacy efforts in the 1980s and '90s — but you completely overlooked institutions like the Joyce Foundation, the David Bohnett Foundation, and others that have carried the torch over the last two decades. Joyce in particular has been a consistent, persistent force in the gun violence prevention movement, funding policy advocacy, research, and public education and engagement.

Since 1993, the California Wellness Foundation, where I'm CEO, has invested more than \$133 million in gun violence prevention, including advocacy and community organizing. Efforts in California have paid off: Over the last 25 years, the state has seen a 50 percent reduction in injuries and homicides related to gun violence, according the California Department of Public Health.

And now we're rallying donors and others to invest in gun violence prevention: Joyce has set up the Fund for a Safer Future to address gun violence nationally, and Cal Wellness is helping to launch Hope and Heal, a donor collaborative fund to stop gun

violence in California — both housed at the New Venture Fund and both with the potential for attracting new partners and resources.

Sure, there's a lot more work to be done, but please put forward the full story before offering a critique.

3. You can continue to help. Kudos to you and *The Chronicle* for both showcasing what works and inviting discussion on how we can do better. Your contributions are critical to our collective success. But when you write without all the facts in place, you run the risk of discouraging potential partners from helping us wrestle with controversial issues — and we need them. I hope you'll continue to spotlight ongoing, deeply challenging issues like gun violence, even when they're not making national headlines.

Pablo, I've long admired your commitment to social justice and your willingness to take folks to task when we fall short. Please continue to hold us foundations accountable and push us to do better. But please also acknowledge when we're moving in the right direction.