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Violence -
Foundations

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As Social Policy Action Shifts to the States, So Does OSI's Grantmaking

On many matters of social policy with which the Open Society Institute's U.S. Programs are concerned, the critical decisions at the close of the 1990s are being made at the state, not the federal level. As a result, OSI's grantmaking programs both respond to and reflect this political reality.

In general, OSI expresses no judgment on the wisdom or desirability of this devolutionary trend. Indeed, it appears that two contradictory impulses are at work. In some cases, as with campaign finance or drug policy reform, it can advance a positive agenda. Referenda results in the last two election cycles have shown that the public—frustrated by the lack of meaningful action by Congress and other federal government actors—is hungrier for change and common-sense approaches than their elected representatives have yet acknowledged. In other areas, as with the massive shift of

responsibility for safety net programs from the federal government to the states, devolution reminds some of the regressive "states' rights" approach that long stymied civil rights gains, and seems heedless of the hardship that could be visited on poor families and children. But like it or not, devolution is here, and is likely to remain the trend for some time. What should a foundation do to respond?

Several of the articles in this edition of *U.S. Program Notes* attempt to answer this question. We seek not to derail devolution or worship it as a panacea, but, with apologies to the Wizard of

Oz, to give it a brain, a heart, and some courage.

In 1996, when Congress acted on welfare reform, OSI's U.S. Programs were new and had played no role in the inadequate public debate that preceded that momentous step. At that time, in addition to launching the Emma Lazarus Fund to deal with the injustices spawned by the termination of benefits for legal immigrants, George Soros asked the staff to explore what other steps OSI might take to respond to welfare reform. We consulted widely, and determined that the most urgent need was to assure that the perspectives of low-income people and their advocates were represented in decision-making at the state level about the redesign of safety net programs.

Happily, three respected Washington-based organizations with strong ties to grassroots policy and organizing groups, the Center for Community

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