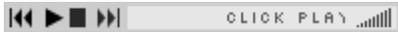




# Local Views

## Relief bill asks too much

Data-tracking AB 624 is intrusive and divisive



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By **SUSHMA RAMAN**

When the next major earthquake hits California, relief agencies will be asking each client seeking food, shelter and other relief to identify his or her sexual orientation.

A corporate executive serving on the board of a youth mentoring program must fill out paperwork tracking gender, ethnicity, race and sexual orientation. A homeless teen who calls a suicide-prevention hot line will be required to answer similar questions.

Sound problematic? It is. Sound unlikely? We hope so, but a bill moving through the California Legislature would mandate these scenarios -- and countless similar ones -- in schools, legal-aid organizations, soup kitchens, museums, universities and or other nonprofits near you.

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2005/AP Photo

New Orleans evacuees find shelter at Houston's Astrodome. Under AB 624, Californians in trouble could be asked by relief agencies about sexual orientation, invading their privacy. The bill also uses faulty notions of how people care for each other.

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The bill in question, AB 624, would require large philanthropic foundations in the state, and the nonprofits they support, to track and disclose data on race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation with respect to their boards, staff members, foundation contracts and individuals served through grants.

If you think this won't affect you or someone you know, think again. Foundation support is playing an increasingly critical role in underwriting a range of much-needed programs and services, from medical research, after-school programs and museums to health care clinics, colleges, universities and parks.

In an era of declining government resources, and more importantly, a decline in the government's will to meet the needs of our communities, one would think that government would facilitate the work of philanthropy and nonprofits instead of coming up with legislation of this nature.

Don't get me wrong. Ensuring that diverse and low-income communities are served is critical to the success of the philanthropic and charitable sector. That's why California foundations have focused on increasing diversity in recent years, with tangible results.

Many major foundations in California are now headed by women and people of color. Many foundations explicitly include initiatives focused on low-income and minority communities in their mandates. Our own regional association of grant makers is governed by a diverse board and staffed by a diverse group of talented and committed individuals.

### **Amorphous Targets**

But a government mandate that such data be tracked and disclosed is inappropriate, burdensome and a violation of the privacy rights of all individuals. What's more, in an era when nonprofits are increasingly challenged with growing needs and declining resources, they will have to channel limited staff and volunteer time to completing paperwork.

The bill fails to recognize another major issue. While significant philanthropic resources go to health care and education, many institutions choose to focus on issues close to their mission -- such as climate change, the arts, educational reform and affordable housing.

While these issues have clear benefits to all communities, including those of color, it is difficult to track who are the beneficiaries by race, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation. The implicit assumption that all philanthropic dollars can be neatly divided among different groups is an erroneous one.

### **Limited Vision**

Another problem with the bill is the underlying premise that one must be of a particular race, gender, ethnicity or sexual orientation in order to care about and effectively serve that particular group. We can reflect upon the seminal role played by Gandhi's vision in the freedom struggle in South Africa and, more recently, the inspiration drawn from the U.S. civil-rights movement by low-caste communities in India in their struggle for justice.

Closer to home, the farmworkers' movement in California, the rights of undocumented migrants fleeing human-rights violations in Central America and the building of alliances between black and brown communities are all issues that have found resonance among a broader community, including churches and synagogues, student groups, labor unions, the entertainment industry, social-service providers and nonprofit advocacy organizations.

History has demonstrated that successful social movements are often supported by partnerships and coalitions of groups based upon common interests and a shared vision for a better future.

AB 624 is a step in the wrong direction for all Californians.

Sushma Raman is president of Southern California Grantmakers, an association of foundations, corporations and individual philanthropists.

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