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Nonprofit Leaders Need a Break. Will More Funders Start Backing Sabbaticals?

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After the past 16 months of pandemic and political unrest, one thing is certain: Most of us need an extended vacation, if not a full-blown sabbatical.

Post-COVID worker burnout in the U.S. [has been widely documented](#) in both mainstream and [business media](#). Some corporations have [responded to the need](#) for rest by providing extended time off. On the nonprofit side of the equation, the Delaware Alliance for Nonprofit Advancement [reported early this year](#) that burnout is among the greatest challenges employees at the 114 surveyed organizations are facing.

For nonprofit leaders, the good news is that there are a handful of funders across the U.S. that fund sabbaticals. There's also some evidence that more may follow.

The *bad* news is that there are only a handful of such funders—13 that I was able to identify. And a few funders within that group have experienced setbacks in their programs due to COVID—one organization even had to evacuate a sabbatical awardee from Spain just as the rolling worldwide lockdowns began last year. At least to date, no funders we're aware of provide sabbaticals for nonprofit staff—only organization leaders are eligible—though some nonprofits do offer such programs.

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organization's next round of sabbaticals "were the most compelling and urgent that we've seen." That's saying something, given that Durfee [began its sabbatical program](#) in 1997.

Responding to the need for rest

Earlier this month, Durfee announced that it had more than doubled the number of awardees of its 2021–2022 sabbatical fellowship. Thirteen nonprofit leaders and their organizations will take part in the next round of the program, which awards \$50,000 to chosen leaders and \$10,000 to support the organizations while the leaders are on three-month leave.

A few other sabbatical-offering funders are making similar increases to their programs, either in response to post-COVID need or because their programs were suspended in the wake of the pandemic. Colorado Health Foundation, for example, is adding an additional sabbatical grant in 2021, and will add another in 2022. The Virginia G. Piper Charitable Trust in Phoenix may add more fellowships after being forced to pause their program in 2020, according to its team. FieldStone Leadership Network and Clare Rose Foundation reported they will award an additional sabbatical this year, bringing their total to three—but will be supporting seven people on sabbatical over the next year, including last year's participant, the one who had to be evacuated from Spain.

Alaska's Rasmuson Foundation and Z. Smith Reynolds told IP they won't be expanding their programs,

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There is also some evidence that more funders may join the sabbatical party. While most of the funders we spoke with (we heard back from six organizations) noted that the number of inquiries about their programs has remained steady, Durfee and Virginia G. Piper said that they've noticed an increase in funders getting in touch with them to learn more about how to support sabbaticals.

Help may also be on the way for nonprofit staffers. Peeps said she has been contacted by funders interested in creating smaller grant programs to support “staff renewal.”

Though still relatively small, the current number of sabbatical funders, and the interest Durfee and others reported receiving from other foundations, also marks a slight but welcome change in funder attitudes about these programs.

As Durfee's Peeps told me, when her foundation started funding sabbaticals 25 years ago, it wasn't uncommon for her industry peers to look askance at Durfee. “They thought if leaders saw the light of day, they'd quit their jobs and wouldn't come back. That has never happened,” she said.

Want your funder to support sabbaticals? Try leading by example

Peeps and Carrie Avery, Durfee's president, agreed that even the upheaval caused by the pandemic and current evidence of a “[great resignation](#)” the past year hasn't shifted the balance of opinion enough to make it

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“It’s really up to funders to create a culture [that allows for sabbaticals], because we’ve created this culture” that abets overworking nonprofit leaders and staff, Avery said.

On the other hand, she said, “I do think that nonprofits can share the responsibility for changing the culture to carry this forward, and not sit back and wait for the magic funder to give them the award.”

One way to do this is to lead by example. “We’re seeing more and more applicants who come to us and they already have a sabbatical program in place at their organization.” One of Durfee’s nonprofit awardees, she said, has a budget of under \$1 million. That hasn’t stopped them from creating a robust sabbatical program within their organization.

Peeps added that while nonprofits with larger budgets may not qualify for a Durfee sabbatical grant, after receiving permission from the applicants from those organizations, Durfee has called the chair of their boards on a number of occasions to suggest the board make sabbaticals happen for their staff. Peeps said she tells the board members at such organizations, “We think that you might be able to have the resources to do this, and we’d encourage you to think about it. It’s a good practice, and you would have a feather in your cap for being progressive.”

That strategy has been successful on several occasions, she said.

It can help to put the sabbatical time frame in a longer

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we're all used to managing when people are away for maternity leave," Peeps said.

It also helps that Durfee practices what they preach. The organization has a policy to award sabbaticals at seven years of employment. Both Peeps and Avery have taken sabbaticals, and between them, report that the time away led to significant benefits for their work, their personal lives and relationships, and Durfee itself. Durfee also takes it further, including reminding staff to take their vacations, providing (and encouraging staff to use) comp days for overtime, and providing \$1,500 a year for professional development.

No need to reinvent the wheel

Funders who want to alleviate the post-pandemic burnout are in luck, because this wheel has already been invented and continuously improved. Durfee hasn't just been providing sabbaticals for more than two decades; the foundation has also created [a wealth of information](#) on the practice, including a "[Funders' Guide to Creating a Sabbatical Program](#)" and a [2019 report](#) demonstrating the benefits that sabbaticals offer not just to individual nonprofit leaders, but to their organizations, as well.

Further, Avery described the Durfee team as "evangelists" who have presented at conferences all over the country and are always willing to help new funders join in.

Avery and Peeps also offered some quick advice.

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support,” said Peeps, including helping awardees plan their time away and supporting the interim leaders who will be filling the awardee’s role. Nonprofit leaders who take part in the Durfee program have up to a year to plan their sabbaticals.

“I would say that probably the best preparation for a funder to do a sabbatical program is to look at trust-based philanthropy and engage in those practices,” Avery said. On the process side, there may be additional paperwork and other requirements, because the IRS categorizes sabbatical grants as gifts to the individual leaders.

Yes, creating and administering a sabbatical program is a lot of work. But, as Avery puts it, the alternative is impractical. People are the capital of nonprofit organizations, she said, and “working people hard and grinding them out and not paying them well and suffering turnover is not sensible. It’s neither kind nor sensible.”

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