



How Nonprofits Are Helping Workers Cope With Pandemic Fatigue

A year into the pandemic, nonprofit workers are struggling. Here's what leaders and foundations can do to help.

Over the past year, charities have responded to the historic crisis, reinventing themselves overnight and providing desperately needed services. But the people in those organizations — leaders and staff alike — have struggled to keep up, to balance their passion with the stress, trauma, and exhaustion brought on by the changes the pandemic has wrought. And many are steeling themselves for even more work ahead as they administer vaccines and shift to meet ever-growing demand with new in-person and hybrid programming.

For other organizations, like many arts groups, the stress is very different. Revenues evaporated, buildings closed, and layoffs have been commonplace, leaving those left behind to agonize about their employment and finances.

One survey of Florida nonprofits found that two-thirds of groups reported that their staffs are suffering from fear, frustration, and exhaustion. A survey of Arkansas nonprofits found that three-quarters of groups needed help managing staff stress and anxiety. In Arizona, a survey of 500 nonprofits found that they had lost a combined total of 30,000 volunteers, leaving overwhelmed staff to fill in the gaps. Nationally, about a third of arts groups have laid off employees.

Some grant makers are taking steps to help organizations make things better for employees, in some cases providing flexible money to pay for counseling, raises, or other measures.

The stakes go far beyond the many individual crises that employees are suffering at nonprofits across the country, says Anne Marie Burgoyne, managing director for social innovation at the Emerson Collective.

"It has implications for what might happen at an organization and the sector at large — high levels of turnover, difficulty inspiring new talent to join, and people unable to do their best work, which ultimately impacts the communities being served."

Hazard Pay

Leaders set the tone for how their organizations navigate anxiety. Right now that's hard because leaders are stretched so thin themselves.

They're working furiously to keep employees and clients safe, manage new and unforeseen problems, and keep their organizations solvent. On top of that, staff often expect guidance from them, even when there are no clear answers.

During the first months of the pandemic, employees at the Ali Forney Center, which provides housing and services for homeless LGBTQ youths in New York City, worked around the clock. The group even paid for a hotel room for one staff member so she could be readily available to fill in at any of the group's centers around the city — it would have taken her too long to commute from New Jersey. Everyone was on and available all the time. Over the course of the year, seven clients died.

The exhaustion, trauma, and grief took its toll on everyone. That includes Alex Roque, the organization's executive director.

"People look at me for answers," he says. "Our team looks at me. Our senior directors look at me."

Roque says that learning to listen to staff express their concerns without always having a solution hasn't been easy, but that over time, he's learned to stay calm. Many staff were fearful because some residents refused to wear masks, thinking that Covid wouldn't affect them. After listening to their concerns, Roque made the very hard decision to find different accommodations for clients who wouldn't wear masks in residential facilities.

Leaders need to be vulnerable and open in ways that may make them uncomfortable, says consultant Mary Morten. Her company has been working with leaders of several Ford Foundation grantees this past year to help them navigate the pandemic.

"You learn through professional development that you are always the strong one. You are always the one with all the answers," she says. "It is really important for your team to understand that that may not be the case and that that's OK. It's not possible to be all things to all people at all times."

To help its staff, the Ali Forney Center offered group therapy and more recently one-on-one counseling sessions. It also set up internal support groups so workers could talk with each other about the pressures they face. The organization has done what it can to encourage people to take some time off, including allowing them to roll vacation days over from last year. Given the financial strains that some are under, the center

provided hazard pay to all employees through July, until it stopped getting reimbursed for it. It was able to provide increased pay for some essential employees after that.

A Change of Clothes

Even small gestures can help. They've been lifesavers for the staff at Kalamazoo Loaves and Fishes. The organization reinvented its entire operation in a day last March when it lost more than 300 volunteers who ran 30 food pantries. The group centralized its work and set up delivery systems, and its 19 staff began taking on the work of hundreds.

For 10 hours a day, Greta Faworski, the organization's resource-development director, unloaded food and packed groceries for people in need. When she got home, she would catch up on her development work, write grant proposals, and try to reach out to the group's 1,800 new donors. She kept a change of clothes in a bag under her desk so she could always help with food.

Meanwhile, her 11- and 14-year-old children were at home doing school online, leaving her wracked with guilt. And she feels alone — no one else she knows outside of the food bank is working like this. "It's just this weird feeling about not really fitting in with everybody else during this time."

The small things her organization has been able to provide for the staff have made a big difference. During the first few months of the pandemic, the board and some donors paid to have lunch brought in every day. Now that things are quieter, the group has free sodas in the break room and the basics needed to make lunch. "It's a comfort thing," she says. "They know that someone cares."

A few Fridays a month, when there are no scheduled food deliveries, the group gives most staff paid time off in the afternoons. "Having a long weekend has really meant everything," says Jennifer Johnson, the group's executive director. "I realized after a while that just having those breaks allowed people to get themselves together. And when they came back, they were fresh."

Other nonprofits have helped without spending any money. Youth Advocate Programs, which operates in 30 states, created a committee of essential workers and senior staff that comes together to talk about their experiences and to discuss needs within the group. One employee, who is a yoga teacher, offers online classes for other staff. The organization has a weekly wellness group that just finished a walking competition.

Susan Henderson, executive director of the Disability Rights, Education and Defense Fund, started writing weekly postcards to her board members and 20 employees to try

to raise spirits. “You think of each person as you’re writing a postcard to them,” she says. “It builds a connection for me.”

The National Alliance for Hispanic Health has adapted some office traditions to the virtual environment. In the past, it had an office-door decorating competition. The staff put money on the best decorated door, and the funds went to buy coats for children in need. This year the organization encouraged people to decorate doors at home and send in pictures. The contest brought people together, gave them something fun to focus on — and raised money for kids.

Foundation Help

Some foundations have recognized the extraordinary circumstances in which their grantees are working and tried to help.

Over the past year, workers at many nonprofits have been exposed to the traumatic experiences of their clients and have suffered trauma themselves through the pandemic, says Veyom Bahl, a managing director at Robin Hood, the New York City grant maker.

“It can be very difficult for nonprofit staff who have committed themselves to fight injustice to do anything that is perceived as sitting on the sidelines or taking care of themselves right now,” says Bahl. “Dealing with personal trauma and feeling the extraordinary pressure of being able to respond to the moment is really complicated to navigate.”

The problem is so prevalent that his group is connecting grantees with consultants that examine organizations’ culture and policies about time off, mental-health resources, and training. The goal is to hear from both staff and leaders to make sure changes are effective, he says. Some groups are rethinking those internal policies and practices, others are just focusing on health-care policies, some are trying out bringing puppies into the office. The real challenge has been freeing up time at these groups to do this work in the midst of the ongoing crisis.

Many foundations have removed restrictions on the grants they have made and are giving more general operating support. The Stryker Johnston Foundation has long provided multiyear funding and has been very flexible about how organizations use the money. Yolonda Lavender, a grant program manager at Stryker Johnston, wants the groups she works with to be honest about their needs and to stop the cycle of doing more with less — especially now that groups and staff are struggling.

How Leaders Can Help Employees Cope

- Speak with employees individually to better understand the stresses they face.

- Be open with employees, even about difficult topics like the nonprofit's finances.
- When people don't get regular updates, they make up what they don't know.
- Don't be afraid to say you don't know the answer to a question.
- Find safe ways for staff to interact socially to bolster morale.
- Small gestures, like extra time off or a surprise food delivery, can make employees feel like their work is recognized and valued.
- Remember that workers follow your lead.
- If the CEO sends an email at 2 a.m., employees will think they're expected to work at all hours, too.
- Take care of yourself. That includes taking time off.

Prevention Works, a Michigan group that aims to prevent substance abuse, raised salaries, thanks to flexible support it received from the foundation as part of a collaborative of groups it work with.

This year, the group's programs moved online, and many employees were shaken by the police violence that sparked racial-justice demonstrations over the summer, says Danielle Sielatycki, CEO of Prevention Works. In addition, some employees were living close to the poverty line. Others were never able to save any money. That financial stress — often heightened by the economic fallout of the pandemic and subsequent restrictions — combined with work and family needs was problematic.

Sielatycki hired a consultant to help her adjust the salaries of her staff to meet those of similar jobs at for-profit companies. With people in the nonprofit world making so much less, the difference was immense for some. One person got a \$20,000 raise.

The foundation's eager support of pay raises in the midst of a crisis is a departure from the way many grant makers think about crisis funding.

"Some groups are having whiplash because they have this experience with us that is so radically different from the traditional approach," Lavender says.

Struggle to Survive

Not all groups have been overwhelmed by extra work during the pandemic. Many are struggling to stay afloat. And that brings its own kind of stress for leaders desperate to secure funding and staff concerned that their jobs may evaporate any day.

YMCAs across the country lost billions in revenue, and local groups have laid off as much as 80 percent of their staff. Even some human-service organizations where needs may be high but services cannot move to virtual platforms have suffered. These groups are often paid on a fee-for-service model, and many of them had to stop offering services when the pandemic struck, leading to layoffs and cratering revenue.

Nearly 8 percent of nonprofit jobs have been lost in the past year, and recovery could take two years, according to an analysis by Candid.

Layoff announcements can seem abstract — 25 jobs eliminated or a 30 percent reduction in staff. But there's hardship and a very real human story behind each layoff. Some of these people may leave the nonprofit world entirely.

When the pandemic lockdowns began last March, L.J., who had worked at a North Carolina youth-services group for three years, was told to keep busy cleaning the building. She asked that the *Chronicle* use her nickname and not name the organization so she could speak freely about her experience.

The group started a day care center for essential employees, and she got one of those coveted jobs. She was asked to supervise 10 children from age 5 through eighth grade on her own with few activities and little guidance on safety protocols. The children couldn't even use the playground because of Covid restrictions. She was scheduled for five to seven shifts a week. Then, shortly after the program began, she was furloughed along with 25 percent of the staff.

L.J. says she had already been working for less than a living wage and was frustrated with the low pay. She started getting unemployment. In May, she was told that she would be brought back on to run a summer camp. Then shortly afterward, she was told that wouldn't happen. She says the group hired seasonal workers rather than bringing back full-time staff.

"It really did make me feel that my service had not been valued," L.J. says. "The way they handled everything, it made me want to take a long break from the nonprofit world." She has done just that, with a new job at a company.

Even when groups don't have layoffs, the struggle to survive can be overwhelming.

When the Cleo Parker Robinson Dance group in Colorado, which takes an inclusive, cross-cultural approach to creative work, closed its doors last year, it let go about 75 contractors. The organization has been able to keep its 23 full-time staff on board, in part because it was allowed to redirect money it had received to put on a conference that ended up being canceled and a capital grant from the Mellon Foundation. But many employees who supplemented their salaries by contracting with the group to teach classes lost income. It has been a struggle for everyone, says Malik Robinson, the group's executive director.

The organization has lost nearly all of its earned revenue, which made up about 45 percent of its budget. And while it has doubled its reach in some areas with virtual programs, they bring in very little money.

Even those online efforts have been complicated. When they were rehearsing remotely, many dancers had tiny home spaces to perform in, increasing the risk of injury. Another layer of uncertainty: Robinson, his wife, son, and father-in-law all contracted Covid. His father-in-law was hospitalized for four days. While Robinson was battling the virus, all he could think about was getting his Paycheck Protection Program loan application in on time. Some of this staff have lost family members to Covid.

"It's just it's a lot of death," he says. "That weighs you down."

Robinson has been upfront with staff about the financial situation. He is working on the 2021 budget and is about 80 percent of the way to being fully funded.

It's important for leaders to let staff know that they have a plan and to update them often, says Morten, the management consultant. "When people don't have information in a timely manner, they will simply make up what they don't know."

Uncertainty Remains

The pandemic is far from over, and it's not clear what the coming months will bring. At the Family Health Centers of San Diego, 2021 has brought more work. As the group rolls out the vaccine, employees' workloads have spiked, says Butler-Cohen. They are excited and happy about the vaccine's potential. It will stem the flow of sick and dying clients and eventually lighten their workload. But for now, work is more intense than ever.

For the Kalamazoo food bank, the vaccine rollout presented a moment of hope that the worst of the pandemic would be over. But that was quickly followed by the realization that it won't revert to normal overnight. The group will have to keep working the way it is now for an indeterminate amount of time.

"Everybody's like, 'What are we going to do next?'" says CEO Jennifer Johnson. "We didn't have answers. And I still don't have all the answers."

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