



A Pittsburgh foundation is giving stressed out nonprofit leaders 3 months to recharge

By Julia Zenkevich

Staff at nonprofits often put in long hours for less money than they could earn in the private sector, leading to stress and burnout that was worsened by the pandemic. A new initiative is giving Pittsburgh-area nonprofit leaders time off to recharge.

The Richard King Mellon Foundation and McCune Foundation are giving eight nonprofits up to \$75,000 to cover executives' salaries during their three-month sabbaticals and provide professional development opportunities to the staff who will take on more leadership tasks while executives are away.

"I couldn't tell you when I had a vacation last," said René Conrad, the executive director of the New Hazlett Theater. "Maybe 2018? I don't know."

Conrad hasn't planned her sabbatical yet but is looking forward to traveling and the opportunities it will afford other New Hazlett staff.

"They are able to learn something that they want to learn, going forward for the next phase of their career," she said. "They'll be able to have access, through this program, to basically a coach who they can check in with as well, after the training has happened."

Mellon foundation director Sam Reiman said it has always been difficult to run a nonprofit organization. Many work long hours for less money than they might get from a for-profit company.

“The amount of time one has to commit, often executives have to wear multiple hats and do multiple jobs, and all of that was simply compounded during the last two years where these organizations did have to step in and do even more than they had done in the past in order to close these gaps and support the community,” he said. “That doesn’t come without consequences.”

Peggy Outon, the founder and executive director of the Bayer Center for Nonprofit Management at Robert Morris University, called the combination of stressful work and a pandemic a “prescription for burnout.”

“[Nonprofits] don’t have a lot of strategies for stress relief and for resilience,” she said, noting that many nonprofit employees often work long hours with few resources, even in non-pandemic times.

Reiman said the two foundations are seizing on an opportunity to invest in nonprofit leadership and prevent people from exiting the sector altogether.

“We want to be proactive and preventative, as opposed to responding to a crisis,” he said.

During their sabbaticals, executives will not be expected to check in, look at emails, or respond to questions. The plan is based on the McCune Foundation’s sabbatical programs for nonprofit leaders, which first launched in 2000.

“Research has shown how effective sabbaticals are in supporting leaders and the organizations they serve,” Laurel Randi, the executive director of the McCune Foundation, said in a statement.

The Los Angeles-based Durfee Foundation, which also funds sabbaticals for nonprofit leaders, found in a 2017 analysis of their programs that sabbaticals contribute to nonprofit stability and sustainability.

“Like the proverbial pebble thrown in the pond, sabbaticals quickly and organically create lasting change at the personal (attitude/perspective), structural (job descriptions changed, teams restructured), and system (leadership, mission/ impact) levels,” it reads. “Basically, sabbaticals help leaders to both rest—and see anew.”

The analysis found 70% of people surveyed “reported improvements in physical health and confidence in leadership as a result of the sabbatical.” The breaks also allowed other staff members to take on more responsibilities in the organization.

Darryl Wiley, the CEO of the FAME Fund, said he has been feeling physically and emotionally drained.

“There wasn’t time to rejuvenate,” he said. “I found myself always in the motion of trying to catch up, trying to put out fires instead of trying to think about how to build new houses.”

When Wiley takes his sabbatical next January, he plans to take a trip abroad and compete in the pro bowling season—a longtime dream of his. After he returns, he hopes he’ll be a better leader with new ideas for how the organization can continue its mission and expand.

"I think that there's this assumption that because people care and because we're passionate we can just keep going," Wiley said. "If we are really going to make an impact in the city and in the region in the way we're capable of, we have to offer these types of opportunities."

However, sabbaticals aren't common practice in the nonprofit or for-profit worlds yet.

Offering employees longer breaks "is a long-term strategy that has not been characteristic of most of the nonprofit workplaces that I have known," said Outon.

But Outon said it could be good for the staff and the organizations. Nonprofit staff often feel pressure to work around the clock

"I think that the idea of sabbaticals, with the recognition that people are spent and need a chance to really refresh and renew themselves . . . will pay business dividends," she said.

<https://www.wesa.fm/identity-community/2022-03-07/a-pittsburgh-foundation-is-giving-stressed-out-nonprofit-leaders-3-months-to-recharge>