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Thriving Together: Cultivating Well-being & Sustainability in the Social Sector



Researched & developed in partnership with



Acknowledgments

The Institute for Nonprofit Practice (INP) and Community Science are pleased to share this report in the hope that it offers relevant, actionable ideas for practitioners and philanthropies looking to cultivate greater well-being, effectiveness, and sustainability in the social sector.

We want to extend a special thanks to the INP and Community Science team members who led the conceptualization, design, research, and development of this publication:

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We deeply appreciate the hundreds of INP alumni who contributed their time, insights, and perspectives to directly inform this report, as well as the broader community of social sector leaders who consistently drive innovation, inspire others, and create inclusive workplaces as they affect positive community change.

We are fortunate to work with numerous forward-thinking philanthropies who help make our work possible, including the Angell Foundation, whose funding bolstered our ability to integrate mindfulness and well-being practices throughout our programs long before this issue was widely understood or gained attention. This work also would not have been possible without the support of our partners at The Boston Foundation and Fidelity Charitable Catalyst Fund. Collectively, their invaluable contributions have enabled us to witness – and measure – the profound impact of investing in the well-being of leaders in service to a more effective, equitable, and sustainable sector.

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Introduction

At the Institute for Nonprofit Practice (INP), our North Star is constant: a thriving social impact sector fueled by a diverse community of skilled, adaptive, and connected leaders who are building a better world. Our proven suite of leadership development programs, community convenings, and robust alumni engagement serve social impact leaders nationwide, at all career stages, who are mobilizing solutions to some of the most pressing issues of our time.

We believe that leadership of this magnitude should not be a solitary endeavor, but rather an opportunity to collaborate, support one another, and become stronger together. Our work is grounded in the belief that the social sector's most powerful driver of progress and impact is its people – individuals and teams who are passionate about making a positive difference in the world and who care deeply about those they serve. Because a thriving, sustainable sector can only exist when fueled by a thriving, sustainable workforce, a core tenet of our approach has always been investing in the whole person, including the well-being of the leaders we serve.

Since 2020, however, the compounded effects of COVID-19, a national reckoning on racial justice, and political and economic uncertainty have significantly altered the landscape of social impact work. Social impact leaders and staff are being tasked with addressing a growing number of complex and seemingly intractable problems, all while navigating the profound challenges of burnout, turnover, and workforce shortages.

It is for this reason that, in 2023, INP initiated a more resourced and strategic endeavor to better understand the state of burnout in the sector, identify instances in which organizations are having success with well-being initiatives, and share our findings with the INP community and beyond. With funding from our partners at Fidelity Charitable Catalyst Fund and The Boston Foundation, and supported by the research and evaluation expertise of Community Science, we launched our Well-being Initiative, a three-year endeavor that comprises three pillars:

Learn

We aim to learn as much as we can about the current state of well-being in the social impact sector at large, and among INP alumni specifically, to identify the types of support that employees need to flourish.

Teach

We will use our learnings to augment and enhance our curricula and alumni programming with new content and best practices designed to offer greater well-being support for our students and alumni.

Lead

We will share our findings with the broader social impact community and partner with other organizations to promote ideas and practices that foster greater well-being and sustainability across the field.

This report, a product of INP's Well-being Initiative, is divided into three main sections:

First, we examine the state of burnout in the nonprofit sector, through a comprehensive review of the research on both the factors that seem to create or exacerbate chronic, unmanaged workplace stress, as well as some of the promising practices that appear to bolster well-being at the individual and organizational levels.

Second, we describe the extent to which INP alumni have experienced burnout themselves while sharing key strategies they are using to integrate well-being into their organizational practices, policies, and culture. We believe that sharing emerging findings from our alumni – leaders working across all career levels and issue areas in the social impact sector – provides important context and dimension to our emerging understanding of the challenges and opportunities ahead.

In the third and final section of this report, we share a call to action and highlight a number of steps that leaders and funders can take to address the current needs of the nonprofit workforce. We provide a number of recommendations for how the following four audiences can take action: 1) executive leaders, 2) managers, 3) human resources and talent development professionals, and 4) funders.

It is our sincere hope that this report will serve as a useful resource for continued dialogue, action, and innovation in the field – equipping our workforce to forge a future where we can thrive together in service of our communities.

DEFINITIONS

For the purposes of this report, we adhere to the following definitions:

Burnout: *The World Health Organization classifies burnout as a syndrome “resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed, [and] characterized by feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job; and reduced professional efficacy.”*³⁴

Well-being: *We concur with The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s definition of well-being as a multi-dimensional concept that encompasses “people’s physical, mental, and social health, and the opportunities they have to create meaningful futures. It considers basic needs...social and emotional needs...[and is] tightly linked with the well-being of our communities, our environment, and our planet.”*⁴²

Social Impact Sector vs. Nonprofit Sector

It is worth noting that in this report we use the term “social impact sector” to refer to the broad span of work that takes place across mission-driven nonprofit, public sector, and social enterprise organizations. While most of our research is centered on the nonprofit experience specifically, INP’s programs serve leaders across the full spectrum of social impact work. Our alumni survey and focus groups included social impact leaders who provided invaluable insights that not only validated the existing literature, but also contributed novel insights to our understanding of burnout and well-being. We sought to include recommendations in this report that would apply to leaders in the social impact space broadly, and where research is focused solely on the nonprofit sector, that is indicated.

Executive Summary

WORKFORCE SHORTAGES, BURNOUT & WELL-BEING IN THE NONPROFIT SECTOR

The American workforce is facing unprecedented levels of burnout, quiet quitting, and turnover.

More U.S. employees reported experiencing burnout in 2023 than at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ The issue remains so widespread that workplace well-being and mental health have become a top priority of the U.S. Surgeon General.^{2, 3} Meanwhile, persistent high-stress work environments — a known contributor to burnout — cost employers an estimated \$154 billion per year in stress-related absenteeism.²

More U.S. employees are experiencing burnout now than during the height of the pandemic.¹

Nonprofit leaders and organizations are disproportionately impacted by some factors proven to cause burnout.

Nonprofit leaders have long raised burnout as a pervasive issue affecting them and their organizations.⁴ While these concerns are not new, they have been exacerbated by COVID-19, financial uncertainty, and inflationary pressures⁴ and they disproportionately impact younger generations, women, nonbinary individuals, caregivers, and historically marginalized groups.^{5, 22, 68} Left unaddressed, we risk losing some of the sector's most talented and proximate changemakers, preventing emerging leaders from pursuing careers in the sector, and backsliding on hard-earned progress across all spheres of social impact.

Research revealed that well-being practices that focus solely on individual employees are insufficient.

Burnout can manifest within organizations in many ways, including through low productivity, high turnover, low employee engagement, poor service delivery, stifled innovation and creativity, and tangible impacts on employees' bodies and minds.^{6, 7, 8} However, interventions that focus solely on individual employees miss crucial opportunities to address organizational norms, practices, and managerial structures that may be fueling burnout in the first place.⁹

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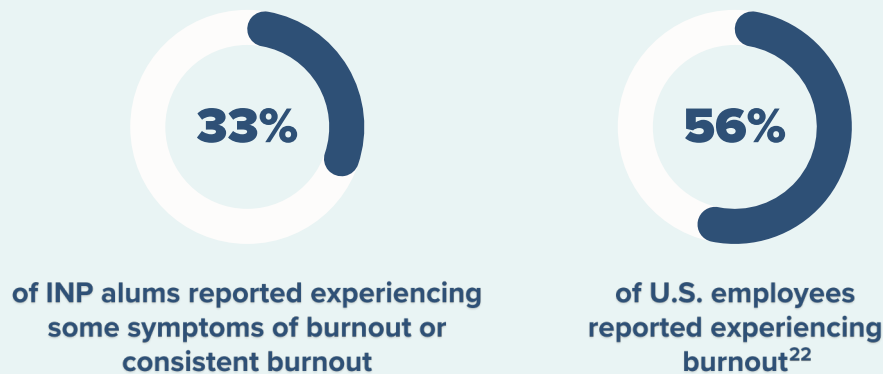
Factors contributing to workforce burnout in the nonprofit sector include:

- ▼ **Increased demands on a chronically under-resourced sector.** Service demands surged to unprecedented highs during COVID-19 while the workforce dwindled.^{12, 13, 14} Meanwhile, there has been a decline in both small and large donor participation for the third consecutive year,¹⁰ as nonprofits continue to “do more with less.”
- ▼ **Inflationary pressures affecting nonprofit budgets.** Inflation, while cooling over the past year, continues to prove challenging for many nonprofits following a two-year period when rising prices for goods and services overrode any increase in funding. Inflation was 8% in 2022, contributing to an 8.4% decrease in giving that year, one of the sharpest declines on record, according to Giving USA. And in 2023, while inflation hovered at just over 4%, that rate was high enough to cancel out any gains in giving.¹⁶
- ▼ **Increased workloads and low compensation.** Even before the pandemic, many nonprofits paid staff below the cost of living and struggled to offer competitive salaries.^{18, 11} Even highly dedicated employees with great passion for their missions often quit to pursue other job opportunities when salaries, benefits, and workloads don’t meet their needs. As a consequence, those employees who remain may feel compelled to work longer and harder as waitlists grow or programs get cut, leaving growing gaps in community safety nets.
- ▼ **Poor management that exacerbates burnout and dissatisfaction.** A majority of U.S. employees cite their manager as the main reason for leaving their workplace.¹⁹ By and large, employees believe their managers have some responsibility for their well-being, yet less than half of managers engage in well-being practices (such as ensuring reasonable workloads and encouraging breaks) or model healthy behaviors.²⁰ As managers struggle to maintain their own well-being they, in turn, experience the highest percentage of burnout,²¹ with many citing rigid company policies, heavy workloads, and other organizational factors that impede their ability to adequately support themselves and their staff.²⁰



PRACTICES CONDUCTIVE TO FOSTERING WELL-BEING

Our research reveals that there are a number of evidence-informed actions that nonprofit and philanthropic leaders can take to invest in the nonprofit workforce, ameliorate burnout, and cultivate greater workforce well-being. These findings were complemented by a formal survey of INP alumni across all career stages, combined with a series of alumni focus groups, that further dimensionalized these themes.



It is worth noting that INP alumni burnout rates are significantly lower than the national average, with only 12% of alumni experiencing consistent burnout and an additional 21% indicating some symptoms of burnout (i.e., 33% in total) compared to 56% of U.S. employees overall who reported experiencing the same conditions.²² While further research is warranted, we suspect that the durable and tight-knit community formed as part of the INP cohort learning experience plays a role, as does the proactive mindset that led alumni to seek out such leadership development and community-building spaces in the first place.

The report details a set of interventions for four key audiences within the social sector:

- 1 Executive Leaders
- 2 Managers
- 3 HR & Talent Development Professionals
- 4 Funders



EXECUTIVE LEADERS

Chief executives play a vital role in creating work environments where staff feel engaged and have a sense of agency over their position, tasks, and outcomes.^{7, 12, 14, 24} Establishing, investing in, and embodying core organizational values rooted in organizational and workforce health, employee wellness, and integrated and effective diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) strategies can help foster a culture of inclusion and belonging for all employees, while supporting managers as they carry out well-being commitments within and across teams.

MANAGERS

A strong manager can have an outsized positive effect on employee well-being, with a 2023 study by The Workforce Institute finding that one's manager has as much impact on well-being as one's spouse or partner.²⁵ Managers and organizational leaders should strive to ensure that employees are provided with professional and career development opportunities, participatory and accountable decision-making processes, flexible work arrangements, and manageable workloads, in an environment where leadership is encouraged to be transparent and authentic.^{7, 9, 11, 12, 18, 19, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28}

HUMAN RESOURCES & TALENT DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS

Because inadequate financial compensation can contribute to burnout, employers should aim to increase salaries to meet competitive market rates when possible. If that is not an option, as is the case for many organizations, employers can consider other benefits such as: flexible hours, remote work options, bonuses, increased leadership development or career advancement opportunities, and access to Public Service Loan Forgiveness and similar programs.^{4, 11, 18} Employee Assistance Plans (EAPs), adequate behavioral health coverage, and a workplace culture that prioritizes well-being can also support employees' holistic well-being.^{7, 14, 24, 29} However, these types of individualized benefits work best when part of a coherent, well-resourced and well-communicated commitment to intra-organizational trust-building and DEIB.

FUNDERS

Our research suggests that nonprofit leaders believe that funders can contribute to greater workforce well-being by embracing trust-based philanthropy practices. They cite the need for less-burdensome application and reporting processes; alternative funding approaches; and more multiyear, unrestricted funding that supports well-being and workforce investment strategies, meets grantees' full operating and program costs, and accounts for inflationary pressures.^{4, 11, 17, 18, 30} Funders might also consider providing legal support and other pro bono resources that can help nonprofits navigate increasingly tenuous political landscapes that directly impact their ability to fund and fulfill their missions, particularly among communities of color, women, and LGBTQ+ communities.

PART

1



BURNOUT
and
NONPROFITS



Nonprofits are an essential thread in the fabric of American society, delivering a broad array of vital benefits, including health care, higher education, human services, and access to arts and culture, to people across the country. As a nation, we depend upon these institutions to strengthen, support, and enrich our communities. From urban centers to rural areas, nonprofits provide everything from urgently needed healthcare to recovery from natural disasters, filling in the gaps where federal services leave off.¹⁰

Yet the nonprofit sector currently faces a host of deepening challenges.

Nonprofit leaders consistently list burnout as one of the top challenges affecting their organizations.⁴ This concern is far from new, but it has been significantly exacerbated in recent years by COVID-19, economic uncertainty, fraying social fabrics, and inflationary pressures⁴ — with burnout trends being more pronounced among younger generations, women, nonbinary individuals, caregivers, and historically marginalized groups.^{5,22}

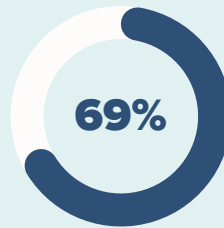
QUICK TAKE



of nonprofit CEOs are concerned about burnout rates, and more than one-third are “very much” concerned



of employees say stress negatively impacts their work performance



of employees report their managers had the greatest impact on their mental health

Source: National Council of Nonprofits

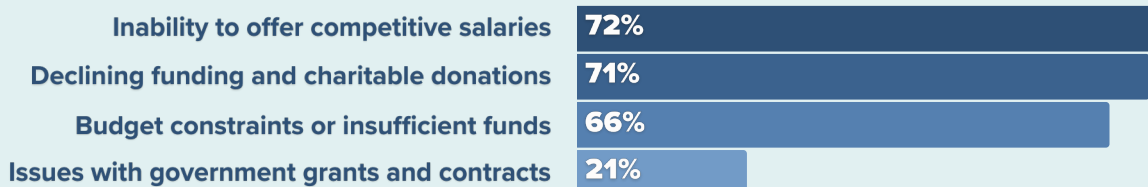
At the same time, **net charitable contributions (both large and small donor gifts) have decreased over the last three consecutive years**, even as costs have risen.¹⁰ Donor resources dwindled during the economic recession caused by COVID-19, but even as the pandemic waned, economic volatility and rising interest rates continued to affect philanthropic investments. Further straining nonprofits, many funders are requesting more complex outcome reporting, seeking to demonstrate the impact of their funding.

Meanwhile, in the wake of the pandemic, **nonprofits have struggled to hire and retain enough staff to provide critical services, resulting in what is being called a “workforce shortage crisis”**. U.S. nonprofits lost over 1.5 million workers since the start of the pandemic,¹² and, according to the National Council of Nonprofits’ 2023 Nonprofit Workforce Survey, the effect of this extends beyond nonprofit organizations and ripples throughout the community, often resulting in diminished access to food, shelter, behavioral healthcare, and other vital services.¹¹

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In response, nonprofits and their leaders have endeavored to increase fundraising and donor relationship capacities and invest in technology to help staff deliver core services.³² While these efforts are admirable, they are not enough to overcome systemic barriers to success. Most nonprofits cite the inability to offer competitive salaries (72%), declining funding and charitable donations (71%), budget constraints or insufficient funds (66%), and issues with government grants and contracts (21%) as major factors perpetuating the workforce shortage.¹¹ These factors notably intensify stress and burnout among nonprofit leaders and staff.

MAJOR FACTORS: WORKFORCE SHORTAGE



Source: National Council of Nonprofits

A system-level shift is needed, not just in our daily organizational practices but also in how we frame the challenges and opportunities ahead. Self-care and stress management habits alone — however well-intentioned — will not suffice. We need creative strategies at the individual, organizational, and systemic levels and true partnership with the philanthropic sector.

Defining Burnout & Why It Matters

The psychotherapist H.J. Freudenberger first coined the term “burnout” in the mid-1970s, articulating a definition that still rings true today: “becoming exhausted [as a result of one’s professional life] by making excessive demands on energy, strength, or resources”.³³ Our understanding of burnout has evolved over time, with the World Health Organization recently defining burnout as a syndrome “resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed, [and] characterized by feelings of energy depletion or exhaustion; increased mental distance from one’s job, or feelings of negativism or cynicism related to one’s job; and reduced professional efficacy.”³⁴

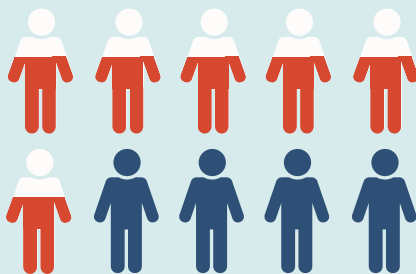
Burnout:

a syndrome “resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed”³⁴

Today, burnout is a significant issue in *all* sectors. More U.S. employees experienced burnout in 2023 than at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, with nearly six out of ten employees reporting at least moderate levels of burnout.¹ In 2022, the U.S. Surgeon General named workplace well-being as one of the most pressing public health issues of our time, and the following year declared an epidemic of loneliness and isolation, a phenomenon likely linked with increased burnout rates.^{2, 3}

Furthermore, a global survey of employees by The Workforce Institute at UKG revealed alarming statistics, indicating that 71% of respondents believed work-related stress adversely affected their home life, 64% felt it diminished their overall well-being, and 62% reported that it negatively impacted their relationships.³¹ Increasingly, there are calls for employers to acknowledge this pervasive problem and invest in measures to reduce employee stress and burnout, with the understanding that our workplaces can either support or impede overall well-being.

Nearly **6 in 10** employees in the U.S. report at least moderate levels of burnout.¹



Burnout is an organizational and an individual challenge. Stress-related absenteeism costs employers an estimated \$154 billion per year in the United States alone.² Burnout is closely correlated with increased stress and can impact both the body and mind while leading to low productivity, high turnover, low employee engagement, poor quality of service, reduced innovation and creativity, and unhealthy organizational cultures.^{6, 7, 8} At the individual level, it can produce physical symptoms such as fatigue, insomnia, headaches, shortness of breath, and gastrointestinal issues, as well as psychological symptoms such as depression, irritability, addiction, and cynicism.^{3, 4, 7}

Burnout has compounding negative impacts on nonprofit organizations, their leaders and staff, and the communities they serve, and is exacerbated by low wages, limited or unpredictable budgets, and high stress. If this phenomenon is not addressed, the sector will continue to see high turnover, workforce shortages, and a loss of leadership, ultimately impacting the communities that depend on the myriad services that nonprofits offer.^{4, 10} Data from the National Council of Nonprofits (2023) and others show that along with increased demand, there are now longer waiting lists for services as well as degraded, or even eradicated, service provision.¹¹

Driving Causes of Burnout in the Nonprofit Sector

LIMITED FUNDING AND BURDENSOME FUNDER PRACTICES



To a great extent, the nonprofit sector relies on philanthropy to serve its mission, yet many common funder practices can contribute to burnout.^{4, 11} These practices include: long application or renewal processes; short grant periods; frequent and cumbersome reporting; not covering the full cost for services including overhead and administrative costs; not aligning giving with the economic realities of rising costs; expecting either new projects or highly tested approaches for every application; imposing overly extensive metrics requirements; delaying payment; and other bureaucratic or administrative burdens.^{4, 10, 11} According to BDO's 2023 *Nonprofit Standards Benchmarking Survey*, 82% of nonprofit executives surveyed felt they lacked the human resources for the data collection and analysis required from funders and donors eager to see the impact of charitable giving.³²

These issues can be particularly prominent for nonprofit organizations led by BIPOC leaders, who often encounter structural barriers and systemic bias in their efforts to fundraise and often receive smaller, restricted grants with more stringent requirements.^{11, 35} These burdensome practices extend across philanthropic funding streams, with the National Council of Nonprofits reporting in 2023 that 20% of surveyed nonprofits cited challenges with government grants and contracts as a key cause for their diminishing workforce. When the organization served predominantly BIPOC communities or people with disabilities, that figure was significantly higher.¹¹

INCREASED DEMANDS ON A CHRONICALLY UNDER-RESOURCED SECTOR



Some burnout in the nonprofit sector can be attributed to the perpetual need to fulfill high service demands amidst chronic underfunding and limited resources — a phenomenon commonly referred to as **“the nonprofit starvation cycle.”**³⁶ As noted, COVID-19 exacerbated burnout rates, as service demands surged to unprecedented highs while revenue fell and the workforce dwindled.^{12, 13, 14}

The *2023 Nonprofit Workforce Survey* reports that more than half of nonprofits attribute stress and burnout to ongoing struggles with workforce shortages,¹¹ with some experts asserting that budget cuts to human services in the public sector have further intensified nonprofit service demands in recent years.¹⁸ And while some larger foundations raised their annual payout rates during the height of the pandemic, it appears that the majority of funders did not: Candid has consistently reported a median payout of 5% since 2020.^{15, 37} As described earlier, giving data also indicates a decline in both small and large donor participation for the third consecutive year,¹⁰ suggesting that far too many nonprofits continue to strive to do more with less.

MANY FUNDERS LACK INSIGHT INTO THE IMPACT OF INFLATIONARY PRESSURES AND RISING COSTS ON NONPROFIT BUDGETS



Inflation, while cooling over the past year, continues to prove challenging for many nonprofits following a two-year period when rising prices for goods and services overrode any increase in funding. Inflation was 8% in 2022, contributing to an 8.4% decrease in giving that year, one of the sharpest declines on record, according to Giving USA.⁴¹ And in 2023, while inflation hovered at just over 4%, that rate was high enough to cancel out any gains in giving: In current dollars, giving inched up from \$547 billion in 2022 to \$557 billion in 2023, a 1.9% gain that translates into a 2.1% drop after adjusting for inflation. Due to these inflationary pressures, the necessary costs associated with the day-to-day running of an organization have increased, posing significant challenges to budgeting and cash-flow management and limiting nonprofits' ability to offer competitive salaries.^{4, 11}

Many donors are unaccustomed to adjusting for inflation because they have not faced such steep and sustained increases at any other point in their careers. Some have reduced their giving in response to inflationary pressures, deeply impacting nonprofits that are themselves grappling with rising costs. According to Candid's *2022 Foundation Giving Forecast Survey*, for example, about 1 in 5 funders reported that inflation impacted their grantmaking plans,¹⁵ with individual donors citing inflation as a major reason for their expected drop in giving.

About **1 in 5** funders reported that inflation impacted their grantmaking plans, with individual donors citing inflation as a major reason for their ¹⁵ expected drop in giving.

MANAGER EFFECT ON STAFF WELL-BEING AND RETENTION



Research illuminates the substantial influence managers have in shaping an employee's experience through what is called the "manager effect." According to a 2023 global survey conducted by the Workforce Institute, nearly 70% of respondents stated that their manager had the greatest effect on their mental health – on par with the effect of their partner and almost 30 percentage points higher than that of a therapist.²⁵ In a 2019 survey by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), a majority of U.S. employees cited their manager as the main reason for leaving their workplace, affirming the adage that "employees leave managers, not companies."¹⁹ At the time, SHRM estimated that the staggering \$223 billion in employee turnover costs from the preceding five years could largely be attributed to ineffective managers.

Deloitte's *2023 Well-being at Work Survey* discovered that a striking 94% of employees believed their managers should assume some responsibility for their well-being, a sentiment shared by 96% of managers themselves.²⁰ However, in both global and U.S. surveys, 1 in 3 employees expressed dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of their managers in addressing their well-being.^{20, 25} Less than half of managers engaged in well-being practices such as checking in with employees, ensuring reasonable workloads, and encouraging breaks.²⁰ Even fewer managers encouraged their employees to utilize well-being benefits and paid time off, modeled healthy behaviors, or led well-being activities (such as time for reflective journaling or beginning meetings with a mindfulness exercise) or discussions (e.g., about slowing the pace of work or incorporating greater well-being throughout the work day) with their teams.²⁰ This underscores the need to close the gap between managers' intentions and their actions.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES OFTEN INHIBIT FOCUS ON WELL-BEING PRACTICES



As discussed above, managers play a pivotal role in shaping workplace culture, exerting considerable power in either fostering or impeding a culture of well-being within an organization.³⁸ However, they need more support from their organizations and research shows that managers are also struggling to maintain their own well-being.

According to a 2021 Gallup poll, managers experienced the highest percentage of burnout, with between 33% and 35% reporting they feel burned out "very often" or "always."³⁹

Deloitte's *2023 Well-being at Work Survey* further revealed that 70% of managers cited organizational barriers, including rigid company policies, heavy workloads, a lack of a supportive culture, and a lack of necessary skills as impeding their ability to adequately support their staff.²⁰ As a result, less than half of managers surveyed felt "completely" empowered and capable of fulfilling their organization's well-being commitments. Intentionally or not, manager behavior is often reflective of the larger organizational structure or culture, putting them in the role of culture gatekeeper.

INCREASED WORK PLUS LOW COMPENSATION EQUALS A HIGH-STRESS ENVIRONMENT



Numerous reports indicated that low compensation may contribute to burnout for nonprofit employees.^{4, 11, 18} Recent research by the social scientists Robichau, Sandberg, and Russo confirmed that retaining employees requires more than “psychic income,” the notion that the satisfaction derived from meaningful work can compensate for low wages.¹² Their study shows that social sector employees increasingly value financial stability, flexible work arrangements, and work-life balance.

At the same time, it is extremely difficult for many nonprofits to offer competitive salaries, especially in the era of pandemic recovery, with decreasing philanthropic giving, economic recession, market competition, and inflationary pressures. Even before COVID-19, many nonprofit employees were paid below the cost of living.^{11, 18} In 2023, the Center for Effective Philanthropy found that three out of four nonprofit leaders struggled to fill vacancies; one leader explained, “hiring and retaining engaged and future-oriented employees [is difficult] when the applicant pool is limited, and our pay scales cannot compete with the private or public wage scale”.⁴

The National Council of Nonprofits’ *2023 Nonprofit Workforce Survey* helps complete the picture, finding program and service delivery positions that interact with the public as the most commonly unfilled.¹¹ These reports highlight associated workforce trends, including employees expecting more from their employers following the onset of COVID-19 and the new generation of young professionals that is more willing to vocalize the need for work-life balance and diversity, equity, and inclusion.⁴

FOCUS ON COMPLEX, HIGH-STAKES PROBLEMS CAN CREATE SECONDARY TRAUMA



Another reason social sector employees are at increased risk for burnout is because repeated exposure to entrenched social problems like poverty, racism, homelessness, and violence, and serving people and communities who are experiencing those complex social problems in urgent, high-stakes situations can produce secondary trauma, moral injury, or “wounded healers”.^{7, 8, 9, 40} Secondary trauma can elicit symptoms comparable to those from direct trauma, and can contribute to burnout.⁹ Moral injury, the feeling of violating one’s values, can also contribute to burnout, as social sector employees may be required to accept limited or short-term interventions or to work within damaging, oppressive systems.^{7, 9}

Further, the prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) is substantially higher among nonprofit employees than among for-profit and government employees.⁸ The literature also suggests that nonprofit employees are frequently attracted to their jobs because their lived experiences and social identities align with the work and clients served.⁸ While certainly not all employees who identify with their clients fall into this category, researchers refer to these employees as “wounded healers” and find that they may be at greater risk of burnout due to their high emotional investment and re-exposure to trauma.⁴⁰ The exposure to secondary trauma, moral injury, or being a “wounded healer” may also explain why service delivery and entry-level positions are the most difficult to fill and retain.¹¹

If we as a sector value a thriving and diverse workforce that reflects the lived experience of the communities we serve, then it is absolutely essential that we prioritize the well-being of those staff who are most often exposed to these burnout and trauma inducing situations.

How Well-Being Can Mitigate Burnout

Despite all the sobering statistics, it's not all bad news. Research shows that employee well-being can serve as both a protective factor and a remedy to burnout.^{24, 42}

Traditionally, burnout interventions are aimed at promoting well-being on the individual level, leaving staff to navigate underlying systemic inequities with little to no support. Focusing on individual-level solutions ignores – and may even reinforce – the organizational and societal structures that often cause burnout.⁹

Scholars and practitioners within the social sector have called for a narrative shift to center well-being within broader social change efforts, leading with the interconnection between people and the planet, and centering equity, justice, and dignity.⁴² A series of frameworks have emerged to address this narrative shift; we offer three of the most notable here, each of which emphasizes the imperative transition towards prioritizing well-being rooted in equity within organizations.

Loretta Pyles's "**Healing Justice**" framework seeks to address historical and internalized oppression and trauma through organizational transformation.⁹ Key elements include mindfulness, compassion, curiosity, effort, equanimity, and a sense of critical inquiry that continually questions and challenges the systemic conditions that perpetuate burnout.

Donna Hicks' "**Dignity Model**" outlines how attention to dignity can be a key lever for resolving conflict, strengthening relationships, fostering productive dialogue, and ultimately making organizations more successful.⁴⁴



Well-being:

A multi-dimensional concept that encompasses “people’s physical, mental, and social health, and the opportunities they have to create meaningful futures. It considers basic needs...social and emotional needs...[and is] tightly linked with the well-being of our communities, our environment, and our planet.”⁴²

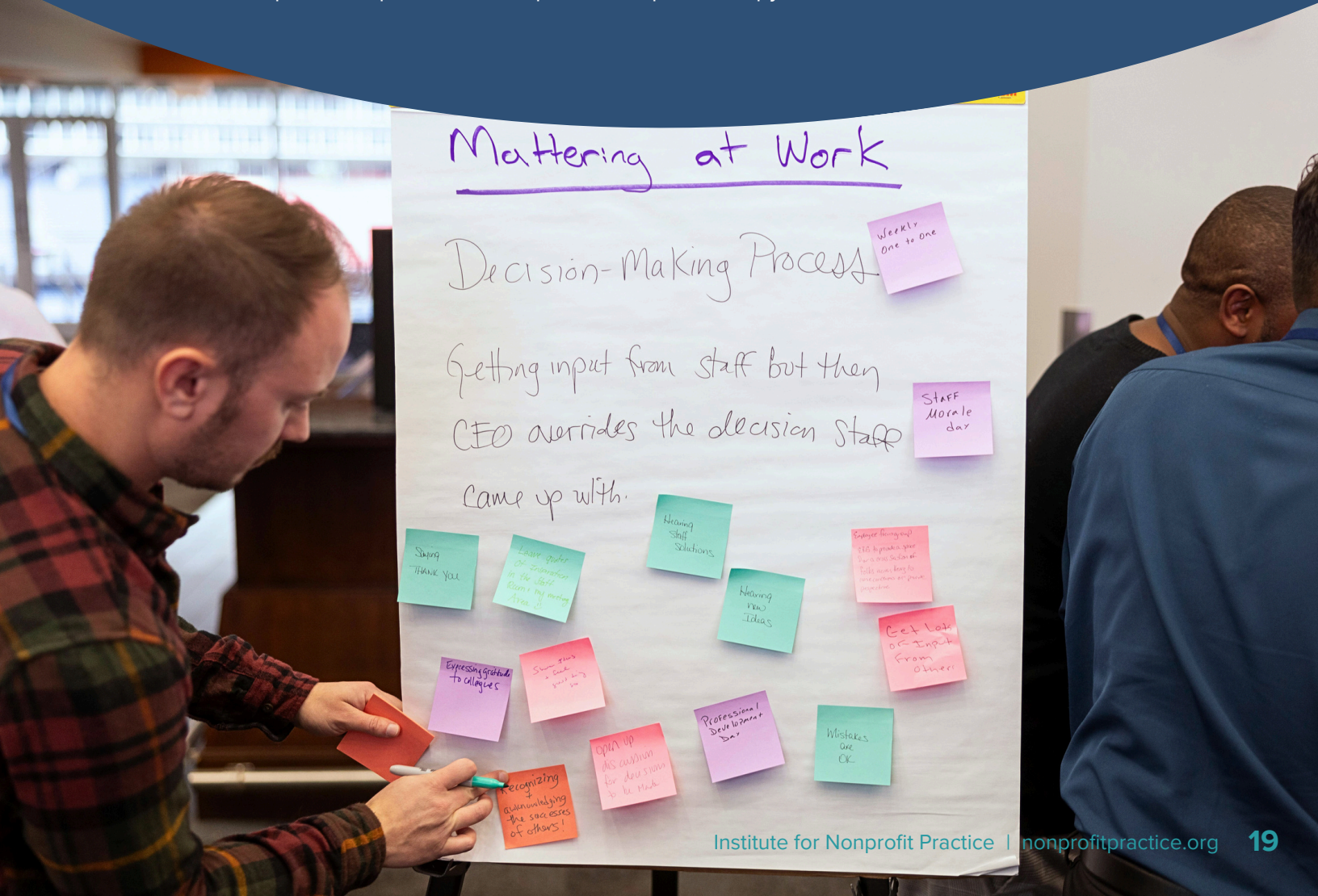
Lastly, The U.S. Surgeon General's "Framework for Mental Health and Well-being in the Workplace" focuses on five essential components:

- ▲ Diversity, Equity, Inclusion & Accessibility
- ▲ Work-life harmony
- ▲ Mattering at work
- ▲ Connection and community
- ▲ Opportunity for growth

It advocates for collaborative planning with all workers to promote mental health, well-being, and equity.⁴⁵

Employee well-being and organizational sustainability are mutually indispensable, with well-being contributing to sustainability, and vice versa. Beyond improving retention,⁴³ Forbes reported that higher levels of well-being enable employees to feel energized at work and committed to their organization.³¹ In another study, Gallup found that when employees perceived that their employers cared about their overall well-being, they were five times more likely to trust leadership and 36% more likely to thrive in their overall lives.⁴³ A caring employer also improved employee engagement and created a high-performance work environment.

In short, well-being is in many ways a silver bullet for mitigating burnout, increasing retention and productivity, and ultimately aiding organizations in being more effective and financially stable. The challenge, of course, is that there is no shortcut. Fostering a thriving workforce will require true systemic shifts and consistent, ongoing efforts and resources. But with the right investment in people, and effective partnership between nonprofits and philanthropy, the solution is within reach.



Research-Based Strategies & Practices for Promoting Well-Being

The literature asserts that individual and organizational interventions are most effective and sustainable when concurrently implemented.⁴⁶

AGENCY, MASTERY & PURPOSE

Employee well-being is strongly associated with a sense of **agency**, **mastery** over one's position, and a sense of **purpose**.^{7, 12, 14, 24}

In other words, employees experience greater happiness and reduced burnout when they perceive themselves as having control over their work environment, tasks, and outcomes, and when they can derive meaning from their work. Research shows that leaders and organizations can promote employee well-being by providing their staff professional and career development opportunities (e.g., training, mentorship, continuing education), participatory and accountable decision-making processes (e.g., opportunities to identify and solve workplace issues), flexible work arrangements, a manageable and varied workload, and transparent and authentic leadership that generates trust.^{7, 9, 11, 12, 18, 19, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28}



DEEPER ENGAGEMENT, MANAGEMENT SUPPORT & A STRENGTHS-BASED MINDSET

In a 2020 report entitled *Gallup's Perspective on Employee Burnout: Causes and Cures*,⁴⁷ Gallup identifies three strategic interventions that drastically reduce burnout and improve productivity across different types of work environments.

As they detail, employees are least likely to experience burnout:

- 1 When they feel engaged at work.** The manager is critical to this, with 70% of respondents citing manager involvement as a critical factor in their degree of engagement.
- 2 When they feel their organization actively supports their well-being.** Employees who strongly agree that their employer cares about their overall well-being are three times more engaged and 71% less likely to report experiencing burnout.
- 3 When they feel like their organizational culture celebrates each person's strengths.** Workplaces that incorporate a strengths-based mindset are six times more likely to have employees who feel engaged and are 7.8% more productive than employers who do not embrace this mindset.

In Gallup's survey, 70% of respondents stated that manager involvement is a critical factor in their degree of engagement.⁴⁷



Gallup's research indicated that how people experience their workload has a stronger influence on burnout than the actual number of hours worked.⁴⁸ In essence, it is not just the hours worked, but how those hours are managed.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Employees also continue to view their workplace as a source of **community** and **connection**, even as more shift to remote work. In a 2024 survey on workplace mental health, Headspace found that nearly half of employees, regardless of generation, believed that the workplace helped them to build connection and lessen loneliness.⁴⁹ Organizations can cultivate connection through community building activities, retreats, development of peer networks, and mentorships. These initiatives have been shown to bolster well-being and alleviate burnout.^{7, 9, 12, 24} Half of employees also reported that the workplace improved their well-being by helping them find people with similar lived experiences.⁴⁹

HOW MANAGERS SUPPORT WELL-BEING: A CRITICAL STEP

Managers are often the first source of support for struggling employees²⁵ and as mentioned above, they play a significant role in avoiding burnout and improving well-being among their employees. The *Gallup-Sharecare Well-Being Index* reaffirms this, illustrating that managers can actively provide and support well-being opportunities and serve as a conduit to information and resources.

A key first step is for managers to encourage, without enforcing, employee participation in well-being practices,⁵¹ such as prompting their staff to take mental health days or use vacation days and assisting employees in navigating their benefits to access support. Further, they can strengthen employee well-being by providing flexibility with schedules or projects to accommodate employees' needs.⁴⁹ Perhaps most importantly, managers should avoid penalizing or creating obstacles for employees who are thoughtfully engaging in practices that support their well-being.⁵¹ As mentioned earlier, managers can further promote employee well-being by attending to their staff's ongoing professional development, i.e., through continued learning, professional, and career development opportunities.^{7, 9, 11, 12, 18, 19, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28}



Rachel Montañez, an expert on burnout and self-advocacy who has collaborated with several Fortune 500 companies, also underscores the importance of allocating time in meetings for non-work-related topics, and providing team members with meaningful recognition for their work.⁵² By modeling these behaviors and encouraging their employees to set well-being goals, managers can support employees' shifting their behavior in ways that boost their mental and physical health.⁵¹ When managers are "thriving in well-being," their teams are more likely to do the same.⁵¹



CLARIFYING GOALS & EXPECTATIONS

Finally, part of developing a culture of well-being includes leaders collaborating with staff to define what is required for success in their roles, setting clear and achievable objectives, and monitoring well-being over time.⁴² Taken together, these mechanisms can contribute to employees feeling more agency and actively contributing to the shared vision of their organization.

RESEARCH-BASED PRACTICES FOR NONPROFIT LEADERS & STAFF

Overall Compensation

Research stresses the importance of increasing salary and compensation to bring them in line with current market rates in reducing burnout and promoting well-being.^{4, 11} In the 2023 National Council of Nonprofits survey, for example, nonprofits reported that salary competition was the most significant factor affecting recruitment and retention.¹¹ In response, 66% of surveyed nonprofits reported that they had raised employee salaries and 41% expanded benefits.¹¹ However, many other nonprofits were already working with limited resources and unable to offer competitive salaries. Some of these organizations found success in implementing other forms of compensation including flexible hours, remote work options, one-time bonuses, increased leadership and career advancement opportunities, and the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program.^{11, 18}

Nonprofits have reported that salary competition was the most significant factor affecting recruitment and retention.¹¹

Employee Assistance Plans, Establishing Cultural Norms, and Implementing Wellness Programs

As mentioned previously, social sector employees report disproportionately higher levels of Adverse Childhood Experiences. Employee benefit programs such as Employee Assistance Plans (EAPs) and wellness programs that provide referrals to support agencies, counseling services, and other mental health interventions have been shown to reduce symptoms of burnout, including turnover and absenteeism, and can improve overall employee well-being.^{8, 11, 14} Additionally, establishing a culture of self-care through policies of taking breaks, avoiding long hours, and using vacation time can promote well-being.^{9, 14, 24} Other elements of successful wellness programs can include offering four-day work weeks, opportunities for additional or flexible time off, and paid sabbaticals for longtime employees.¹¹

Individual Well-being Practices

While much needs to be addressed on the systemic and organizational level, there is value for individual action in the work of avoiding burnout. The literature indicates that providing employees with ongoing opportunities to strengthen their awareness and practice of self-care, empathy, and self-compassion is important to improving well-being and reducing burnout.^{7, 14, 24, 29} Mindfulness interventions, such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), are associated with higher productivity, work engagement, and reduced burnout.^{9, 53} Some organizations have found success creating spaces for mindfulness or meditation practices for those who desire them.⁹ Other practices, such as creating opportunities for individual and collective processing through journaling or reflection sessions, can help alleviate stress and promote well-being as well.

We want to acknowledge that there are evolving strategies to address workplace well-being that involve supporting employees in ways that typically fall beyond the scope of what employers can offer (i.e., healing circles). While they may be beneficial, we would caution leaders to work closely with their HR colleagues, EAPs, and even legal counsel in some cases, before adopting them wholesale. Successfully implementing such practices in the context of work requires a deliberate, intentional approach led by experienced HR practitioners who know how to facilitate such opportunities in a way that maintains personal and professional boundaries and mitigates harm to the employee and risk to the organization.

RESEARCH-BASED PRACTICES FOR DONORS

Many funders recognize the value of investing in burnout prevention and well-being but refrain from acting because they believe it is too costly,⁵⁴ and this hesitation has only become more pronounced since the onset of COVID-19. However, the trust-based philanthropy movement, that gained traction in recent years, has pushed for funders to engage in true partnership with grantees, guided by a set of values based on “advancing equity, shifting power, and building mutually accountable relationships.”⁵⁵ Our literature review revealed that trust-based grantmaking practices and similar equity-based practices, such as providing multiyear unrestricted funding, reducing administrative burdens, and providing other forms of support beyond direct funding (e.g., pro bono or legal support), all play an important role in reducing burnout and promoting well-being in the social sector.

Multiyear unrestricted funding offers benefits beyond the dollars given.

Multiyear unrestricted funding allows grantees to allocate funds as they see fit to best meet the needs of their beneficiaries and staff.^{4, 18, 56, 58} It allows the space for nonprofits to develop or refine their strategy, mission, goals, internal initiatives, and external programming,^{59, 60} and in some cases, to fund well-being initiatives directly. There may also be a need for funders to establish dedicated well-being funds, such as those explicitly intended for boosting salaries and compensation.^{11, 18} As previously noted, some research has shown that BIPOC-led organizations, especially those led by Black leaders, often receive smaller, restricted grants with more stringent requirements.⁵⁷ This underscores the imperative for funders to closely assess their giving to ensure equity across their portfolio and consider granting more multiyear, unrestricted grants with reduced requirements as a means of mitigating burnout. However, some reports suggest that nonprofits may feel uncomfortable using general operating funds to expand their payrolls, worrying that this will be negatively perceived by funders. Funders can help by being explicit about their desire for organizations to use funds for whatever is needed to sustain the health of the organization – even if it seems implied or obvious.

Increase giving amounts to adjust for inflationary pressures.

Because nonprofits are limited when it comes to adjusting their budgets for rising prices, they are often forced to make tradeoffs and difficult decisions to curtail vital resources and services.¹⁷ In response, some major funders have increased grant amounts (including some by double-digit percentages) to existing partners, extended grant periods over multiple years, and offered additional resources (e.g., access to organizational capacity technical support and convenings).¹⁵ Other funders have awarded new grantees larger, multiyear general operating grants that are inflation-conscious and adjust future payments to account for cost increases.¹⁵

Reduce burdensome, overly complex reporting.

There is great value in funders simplifying and streamlining cumbersome applications, onerous reporting requirements and renewal processes, and other administrative burdens which play a significant role in contributing to staff burnout and attrition in the nonprofit sector.^{4, 11} Funders can further alleviate duplicative actions and reduce fundraisers’ workloads by establishing document vaults to retain documents and reduce paperwork redundancies as well as the adoption of common grant applications among funders.^{11, 61}

The New York City-based Robert Sterling Clark Foundation is a leader in trust-based philanthropy, and this commitment to easing the burden on grantees and fostering greater trust and true partnership is reflected in a number of the Foundation's processes. In addition to a very streamlined application process that encourages grantseekers to submit grant proposals they've written for other funders, the Foundation leverages what they call a "[Check In Analysis Tool](#)" (CHAT), essentially a meeting with their grantees in lieu of narrative reports or site visits. The CHAT helps the Foundation "learn about and support grantees in their work while also assessing the foundation's own grantmaking effectiveness. The CHAT [questions are] shared ahead of the meeting for transparency and with a clear message: please don't prepare anything." Another example of easing the burden on nonprofits comes from Chicago Beyond, a foundation which works to reduce the amount of writing required of grantseekers by collaborating closely with them and writing funding proposals on their behalf.⁶²

Consider the unintended consequences of asking communities to recount trauma or share personal information within grant requirements.

Shruti Jayaraman, the Chief Investments Officer at Chicago Beyond, argues that traditional grantmaking processes may inadvertently incentivize the "best worst story" and promote "performance of trauma and competition,"⁶² which in turn may contribute to moral injury and burnout among both staff and beneficiaries. Funders should explore alternatives to capturing impact within application and reporting processes: For example, Jayaraman suggests shifting impact beyond just raw numbers that can be "measured at a distance" to also encompass systems change frameworks and collaborative efforts among community leaders.

There is also a growing dialogue about the pressures that leaders from historically marginalized communities face as they are increasingly being asked to share personal information about their own, their staff's, and their board of directors' identities with funders and, in some cases, on websites where this data is made available for public consumption. In some cases, this has been framed as a requisite for funding. While this growing practice is intended to move us in the direction of disrupting systemic inequities to foster greater representation in leadership while also moving financial capital into historically under-resourced communities, it is worth exploring the unintended consequences of gathering and sharing this type of information.

Offer supplemental funding, resources, or legal support to nonprofits navigating complex political contexts.

Legislative changes increasingly impede on the ability of many nonprofits to deliver programs and services, especially to communities of color, women, and LGBTQ+ communities.¹¹ Nonprofits in the 2023 National Council of Nonprofits survey reported "fatigue, fear, and frustration" stemming from the passing of explicitly oppressive and discriminatory legislation as well as their community's rampant racism and homophobia.¹¹ Funders might consider providing legal support and resources to aid these nonprofits in effectively navigating difficult political landscapes that directly impact their ability to serve their communities. We also encourage funders who are concerned about any possible legal ramifications of supporting such DEIB efforts to prioritize understanding the nuances of these new rulings before making decisions to defer or decrease funding, as doing so can cause true economic distress for organizations on the front lines of these causes. We have included resources to help funders understand the ramifications of these rulings in the appendix on Page 51.



LEARNINGS
from the
INP ALUMNI
NETWORK

PART

2

INP Alumni Survey & Focus Group Findings

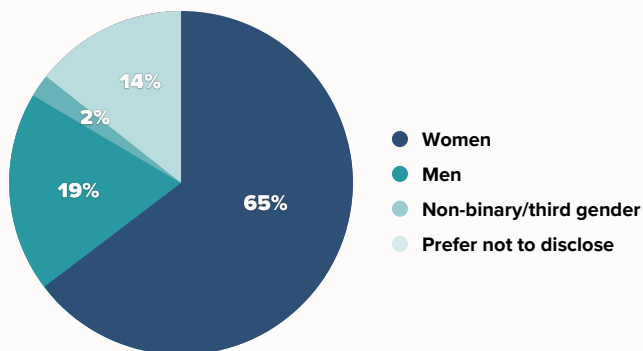
In this section we will explore promising practices implemented by INP alumni to promote workplace well-being that emerged through our alumni survey and focus groups. We first analyze the burnout rates among INP alumni, as well as the primary factors contributing to that burnout, in order to illustrate the array of diverse experiences within the social sector. We then explore the solutions and strategies employed by alumni, showcasing those who have been most successful in addressing burnout as well as identifying ongoing challenges that warrant further exploration and research.

Findings from this group not only validated the existing literature, but also contributed novel insights to our understanding of burnout and well-being. In sharing their stories, our alumni illuminated a potential path forward, where commitment to well-being is rooted in equity and transformative action.

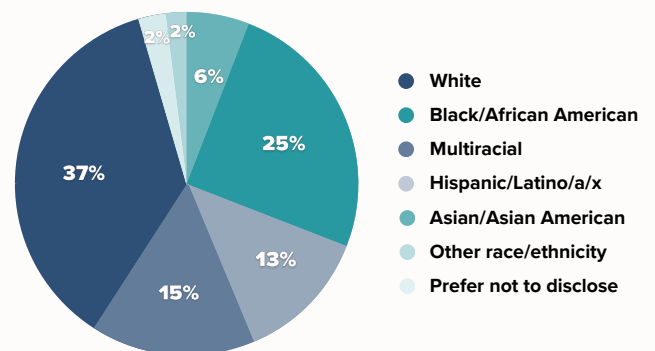
INP ALUMNI SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUPS

To better understand how INP alumni are navigating the national burnout crisis, INP surveyed our ever-growing alumni network in the spring of 2023.

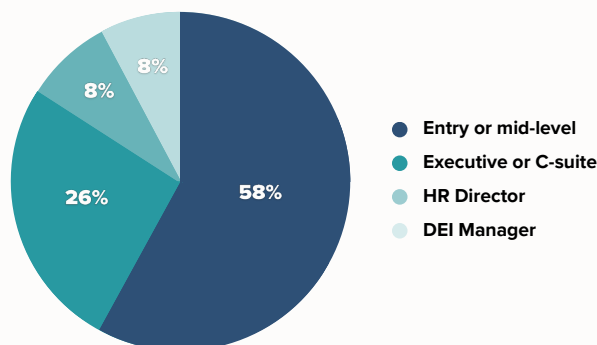
SURVEY PARTICIPANTS: GENDER



SURVEY PARTICIPANTS: RACE/ETHNICITY



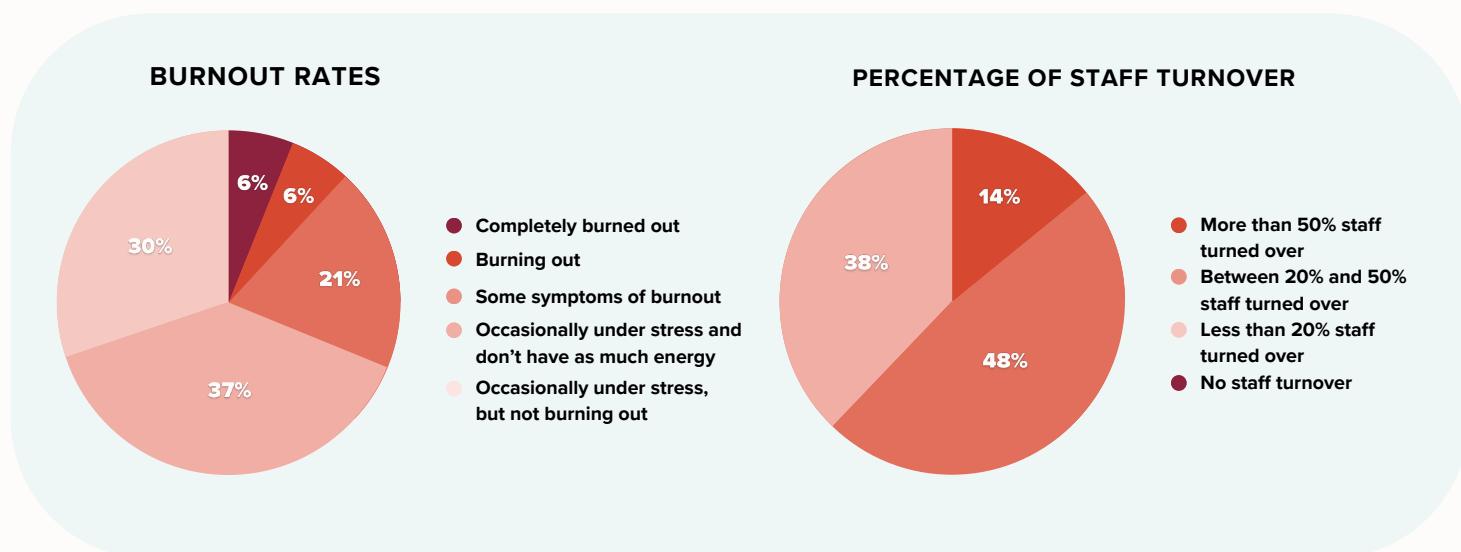
FOCUS GROUP: ROLES



In total, 605 INP alumni participated in our survey, representing 27% of our active alumni. INP also hosted focus groups with alumni to better augment our understanding of their experiences and the challenges they face. Participating alumni from across the country reflected a diverse spectrum of career stages while representing social impact organizations of varying sizes and causes.

INP ALUMNI BURNOUT RATES

Only 12% of INP alumni reported feeling they were “burning out” or feeling “completely burned out.” Even if you include an additional 21% of alumni who report feeling “some symptoms of burnout,” these results show that INP alumni are faring much better than peers across the sector. To place this in greater context, a 2011 pre-pandemic report discovered that 30% of nonprofit employees experienced burnout,⁶⁴ but that number had almost doubled by 2021 with 56% of U.S. nonprofit employees reporting they were experiencing burnout.²² Two years later, another regional 2023 study showed that 61% of Northeast social service providers were still experiencing burnout.²³



WORKFORCE DIMINISHMENT

INP alumni reported encountering substantial staff turnover within their organizations: Almost half of surveyed INP alumni disclosed losing between 20% to 50% of their workforce, while nearly one-sixth reported losing more than half of their workforce, since 2020. While we could not identify exact figures to compare these findings to the broader social sector, there have been several reports of substantial trends in turnover within the nonprofit sector. For example, data from the National Council of Nonprofits (2023) revealed that more than half of surveyed nonprofit organizations (51.7%) currently faced an increased number of job vacancies compared to pre-pandemic levels;¹¹ about one-third (33.8%) had 20% or more of their positions unfilled, and another third (32.7%) reported 10% to 19% of their positions unfilled. Furthermore, some alumni focus group participants shared that they too have left their organizations, or even the nonprofit sector, due to burnout.

TOP CONTRIBUTORS TO BURNOUT

While INP alumni experienced lower levels of burnout compared to the broader workforce, they still faced familiar challenges. The top factors contributing to burnout for alumni respondents were: unreasonable expectations (48%), screen fatigue (42%), long hours (39%), the emotional toll of the work (34%), and a lack of time for personal well-being (29%). These top burnout contributors closely paralleled those discovered in our literature review.

WHAT IS CONTRIBUTING TO BURNOUT?



48%

UNREASONABLE
EXPECTATIONS

42%

SCREEN
FATIGUE

39%

LONG
HOURS

34%

EMOTIONAL
TOLL OF
WORK

**TOP 4 FACTORS
CONTRIBUTING TO BURNOUT**

Our focus groups further revealed that unreasonable expectations are a primary concern among all staff, but may manifest in different ways depending on one's level and role within an organization:

Early and mid-career alumni shared that unreasonable expectations can be preventable. Most often this was due to managers or leadership not fully appreciating the time needed to accomplish work outcomes or not being willing to make investments in staff capacity. These issues in turn led to unreasonable deadlines and job scoping, longer hours, and additional stress. This was especially a problem for mid-level managers, women, and women of color who recounted instances where requests for accommodations were met with distrust and pressure to persevere.

“You are set up for failure because you are not given what you need to do your job efficiently and effectively.”

-INP Alumni Focus Group Participant

Alumni who identify as **executives** expressed the dual pressure of fulfilling their organization's mission while also retaining staff. They acknowledged that their organizations were anchored to unreasonable goals, especially since COVID-19 had disrupted so many best-laid plans, but they struggled to understand how to recalibrate and meet these new and growing needs. As they sought to pivot, leaders felt incapable of focusing on employee well-being with so many other immediate issues competing for their attention.

They also understood that their employees, especially younger staff, expected more from them as leaders, creating pressure to quickly adapt and evolve into more effective executives. Not all surveyed or interviewed leaders were sure how to respond to these new sets of challenges, and they understood that this uncertainty could well be leading to increased burnout.

“Employer expectations are much higher than I have ever seen. [Employers are expected to address] DEIB, antiracism, work-life balance, inflation, etc.”

- INP Alumni Focus Group Participant



In addition to the factors highlighted by surveyed alumni, focus group participants also reinforced that burnout is fueled by low compensation; uneven work tempos, especially since the advent of COVID-19; and a lack of follow-through on DEIB efforts.

- ▼ **Low compensation.** Although low compensation is mentioned by only 16% of respondents in the alumni survey, this issue came up much more frequently from C-suite and executives in focus groups. INP alumni in executive roles highlighted that low compensation is a significant factor contributing to burnout, as reported by their staff. As a result, leaders explored alternative ways to provide competitive salaries and benefits, including strengthening well-being policies, minimizing pay gaps, and downsizing if needed.
- ▼ **Uneven work tempos.** Alumni generally agreed that COVID-19 had led to significant turnover and created massive disruptions to their work. Executive respondents further reported that the people their organizations served also faced similar stressors and had rapidly evolving needs, leading to greater and more unique work demands at a time when staffing was already challenging.
- ▼ **Failure to follow through on DEIB commitments.** Most alumni, especially BIPOC leaders, expressed that a larger failure to follow through on DEIB commitments had exacerbated feelings of burnout and frustration within their organizations. Following the racial reckoning of 2020, many nonprofits made extensive commitments, including releasing public statements, to enhance DEIB within their organization. However, our surveyed alumni recounted that they have not witnessed these commitments translating into tangible changes or systemic shifts as they had hoped.

**“We are helping others,
but we are not helping
ourselves.”**

**- INP Alumni Focus
Group Participant**

**“Life is showing up more in the
workplace now, in a more visible
way, and in a way that folks are
asking for [employers] to respect
and respond to.”**

**- INP Alumni Focus Group
Participant**

Solutions & Strategies

We are endeavoring to understand what may be helping to inoculate INP alumni from higher rates of burnout and hypothesize that there are at least two factors involved:

- 1** First, we must acknowledge a likely **self-selection bias**. INP alumni identified that professional development was important to them and then took the step of enrolling in an INP program. In doing so, they prioritized making time for an investment in their own professional development and well-being.
- 2** More broadly, data suggests there are many **benefits to participating in cohort-based learning communities** like those at INP. Several studies from 2011 to 2022 make it clear that fostering strong, supportive relationships through community-building activities, retreats, development of peer networks, and mentorships can boost well-being and mitigate burnout.^{7, 9, 12, 24} In short, there is solid evidence that cohort-based leadership development programs do make a difference to the effectiveness, confidence, and sense of community for participants during and after their participation.

Further, as we face a growing loneliness epidemic in the country, we know that community-building is a profound asset in mitigating the isolation that feeds burnout and mental health challenges. After training thousands of leaders over almost 20 years, INP has learned that deliberately breaking down silos and creating bridges between leaders of all backgrounds and organization types helps connect leaders in ways that make them feel part of a larger and stronger community. Indeed, our alumni survey also revealed that **70% of INP alumni continue to stay in touch** with peers after graduating and **42% report that they have collaborated with fellow INP alumni on work projects**. INP alumni seem to know they are not alone – that they have a community of practice to keep coming back to whenever they need it.

However, this approach should not be taken as a magic bullet to solving a vast sector-wide crisis: Although INP alumni levels of burnout were lower than their peers across the sector, the participants in our four focus groups unanimously agreed that burnout remained a top issue within their organizations. And we were curious to understand what actions alumni organizations were taking to address this issue.

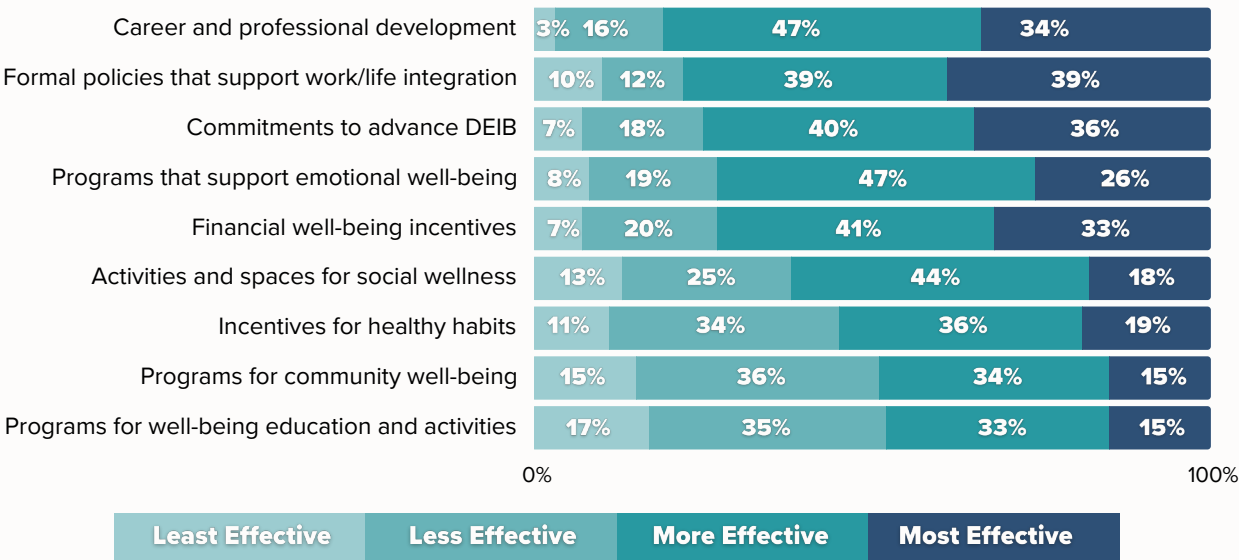
UNDERSTANDING THE BIGGER PICTURE

We began by asking our alumni to rate the effectiveness (from “least effective” to “most effective”) of various actions aimed at improving well-being in order to better understand their perceived impact. The actions that rated highest generally aligned with the best practices identified in our literature review.

These included:

- 1 Career and professional development** (e.g., leadership development, career-building tools, mentoring, coaching)
- 2 Formal policies to support work-life integration** (e.g., paid time off, parental leave, flexible work arrangements)
- 3 Advancing diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging** (e.g., defining an organizational DEIB philosophy, equitable hiring/interviewing practices)
- 4 Financial well-being initiatives** (e.g., financial education, tuition reimbursement)
- 5 Programs for supporting emotional well-being** (e.g., mental health resources, employee assistance programs, compensated mental health or self-care days)

ACTIONS FOR IMPROVING WELL-BEING



81%

rated professional development effective

78%

rated integrated work/life policies effective

TOP ACTIONS FOR IMPROVING WELL-BEING

WHAT IS WORKING: EFFECTIVE WELL-BEING PRACTICES

INP alumni cited the need to increase compensation levels and wages for existing positions to bring them in line with current market rates, as well as adopt better work-life policies across the board. There was a unanimous feeling in our focus group discussions that workforce shortage and retention issues were adding additional stress to organizations already feeling under-capacity. While compensation level analysis was outside the scope of our survey and focus group study, alumni did offer a range of work-life policy ideas to mitigate some of these pressures.

Alumni surfaced ideas like the following: flexible time off, flexible working hours, dedicated “no meeting” days, more floating holidays, broadening both the duration and the circumstances for taking bereavement leave (including the loss of a pet or non-nuclear family member), and adding additional respite time off (especially after busy seasons or big events). Alumni shared that their organizations had typically employed various combinations of these types of measures, and ultimately, the right formula was contingent upon the specific culture of the organization and its workforce needs. Alumni reported that, from their perspective, implementing these policies and practices had led to a positive impact on staff well-being, resulting in decreased turnover, increased role clarity, and a positive shift in how teams engaged with each other.

Alumni strongly underscored the significance of ongoing leadership development, mentoring, and coaching in improving well-being, deeming it the most “valuable” and “number one” resource for organizations. Along with the tangible professional development they gained, alumni highlighted that these practices provided cross-team connection among staff at all levels. When organizations provide leadership development, mentorship, and coaching, staff feel valued and seen. Interestingly, some early and mid-career alumni reported that while their organizations offered sufficient access to professional development, they too often lacked opportunities for promotion, which they felt was likely a symptom of budget constraints more than any lack of commitment on the part of their leadership.



Alumni strongly underscored the significance of ongoing leadership development, mentoring, and coaching in improving well-being.

When organizations provide leadership development, mentorship, and coaching, staff feel valued and seen.

“HOW-TO” GUIDANCE

While our research found no single “paint by numbers” approach for how organizations should effectively implement well-being policies and practices, we did ask INP alumni in our focus groups to offer their best “how to” advice for how organizations could get started on this front. Here are some of the initial insights we gathered:

ESTABLISH YOUR “WHY”



INP alumni stressed that in order to ensure the effective implementation of any new policy or practice, organizations must first establish and communicate their “why” – such as a clear and compelling North Star vision and a set of resonant core values that are modeled by leaders and managers across all levels. At times of stress or change, when restructuring may be needed or teams must re-adjust their expectations for how they work together, having a clear and abiding sense of purpose, values, and norms allows employees at all levels to navigate the change with more confidence and trust.

FOCUS ON SYSTEMIC AND STRUCTURAL CHANGE



Alumni also emphasized the need to focus on systemic and structural change as part of any plan to effectively address burnout. Respondents highlighted that individual employees should not bear sole responsibility for improving their well-being while operating within a culture that does not allow them to feel safe, whole, or successful. This underscores the vital importance of tying well-being work to DEIB efforts and a strong set of organizational values.

ENGAGE STAFF IN A COMMITMENT TO CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING



Alumni highlighted that successful leadership groups frequently engaged their staff to determine their organization’s top priorities and concerns and used a range of methods, from employee engagement surveys to more direct feedback channels. They named that inclusive, transparent processes were more likely to earn and sustain staff trust and could help manage expectations within the reality of limited organizational resources. Alumni felt that no process or approach would be universally applicable given the varied needs and contexts of different types of organizations. Equally important, respondents stated that organizations should also continue monitoring well-being measures over time (e.g., “stay interviews,”⁶⁵ temperature checks, staff workload assessments, well-being audits) to spot trends and make any necessary pivots along the way.

“When you are experiencing burnout, well-being...is the last thing on your mind — you know [it’s] good for you and you want to do it but when you are burned out, the first thing that goes is yourself.”

- INP Alumni Focus Group Participant

DEVELOP A WELL-BEING PLAN



Alumni underscored the importance of organizations having a clearly defined well-being plan with trackable goals. They indicated that this plan should be easily accessible to both the staff and the board to support monitoring and assessing progress over time.

Participants whose organizations had such a plan shared that everyone in their organization understood its identified goals, often because there was a platform tracking progress on everything from compensation to professional development to DEIB-related engagement.

FOCUS ON A FEW ACTIONS AT A TIME



Alumni reported that focusing on a few actions and priorities at a time helped them “move the needle” and/or sustain momentum. In their experience, focusing on fewer actions also had the additional benefit of increasing the likelihood of concerted follow through, which in turn improved staff trust.

DOWNSIZE, RESTRUCTURE, OR RESCOPE ROLES IF AND WHEN NEEDED



Some alumni reported that their organizations made the difficult decision to downsize or restructure their organizations in order to transform them for the better. In some cases, those decisions required decreasing the overall workforce to ensure that most of their team received raises, had the opportunity to advance, or both. Alumni also shared that leaders may want to consider delaying, deferring, or even canceling select activities that are deemed less core to strategic priorities. While these types of decisions can undeniably be difficult, they can help organizations better calibrate expectations with actual capacity.

GET CREATIVE



Importantly, alumni demonstrated creativity in implementing cost-effective, yet impactful, well-being policies that aligned with their respective organizational cultures. During our focus groups, several innovative ideas came to the forefront, including the following:

- After identifying the need to expand time off, one organization implemented a company-wide time-off period to reinforce a culture of rest and rejuvenation.
- A few organizations found quick-to-implement, no-cost wins to kick off their well-being initiatives, including adopting new meeting policies (e.g., no-meeting days or restricting meetings to certain times of the day).
- When salary improvements were not feasible, some leaders turned to alternative strategies such as strengthening benefits or well-being policies, equalizing salaries across their organization to minimize pay gaps, and strategic downsizing to preserve or enhance salaries across the organization.

REMAINING BARRIERS TO ADVANCING WELL-BEING

Our alumni focus group discussions identified some persistent struggles in some domains around which additional research could be useful, including the following set of issues:

INSUFFICIENT ENGAGEMENT BY MANAGEMENT AND PEERS IN CULTURE SHIFTS



Some alumni commented that although addressing burnout can be well-modeled by top leadership, it's crucial that all staff members buy into the concept and participate thoughtfully. In some cases, members of the management team or staff in different departments continued to behave in ways that were not conducive to fostering well-being or that led to differing norms and standards across the organization. Moreover, some participants shared that leaders' perceptions of necessary shifts often did not align with — or fully reflect — the needs of frontline or junior staff.

CHANGING TOO MUCH AT ONCE



Alumni shared that some of their organizations tried to take on too many policy and operational changes in too short a period of time, with the unfortunate result of slowing or halting progress altogether. Adopting a “less is more” approach and focusing strategically on the highest points of leverage is often the best course of action.

LACK OF FOLLOW THROUGH



Some alumni expressed that despite making commitments and piloting some well-being activities, their organizations had not fully followed through and embedded these new approaches into larger cross-departmental practices.

They cited that their organizations had not yet made official policy changes or, in some cases, had reneged on prior promises, which had eroded trust among staff members.



SUSTAINING MOMENTUM



While many alumni have successfully implemented positive shifts in their organizations relative to well-being, they continue to struggle with how, or if, these efforts can be sustained. They question how to transform systems in a manner that lasts beyond a specific leader, manager, or moment in time. These concerns are especially present for alumni during challenging organizational times, when they fear that well-being activities could be the first thing sacrificed.

BOARD AWARENESS AND BUY-IN



Alumni working in C-suite and executive roles shared that all too often their boards were impeding positive progress on these fronts. While fiduciary responsibility by board members requires a healthy questioning of any and all organizational investments of time, money, and attention, some alumni shared that their boards continued to stymie efforts to implement well-being policies and practices. In some cases, this was due to a lack of clear understanding of the true extent of burnout and stress within their organizations and across the social impact sector writ large. By and large, alumni felt that educating boards on how well-being can enhance the organization's bottom line was crucial to advancing new practices in a lasting, meaningful way.

“[Staff and leaders] are grappling with so many life issues and social issues, such as climate change...[Burnout has resulted] not so much [from] the work you are doing in the organization, but more so existing in a society that is unwell.”

- INP Alumni Focus Group Participant

PART

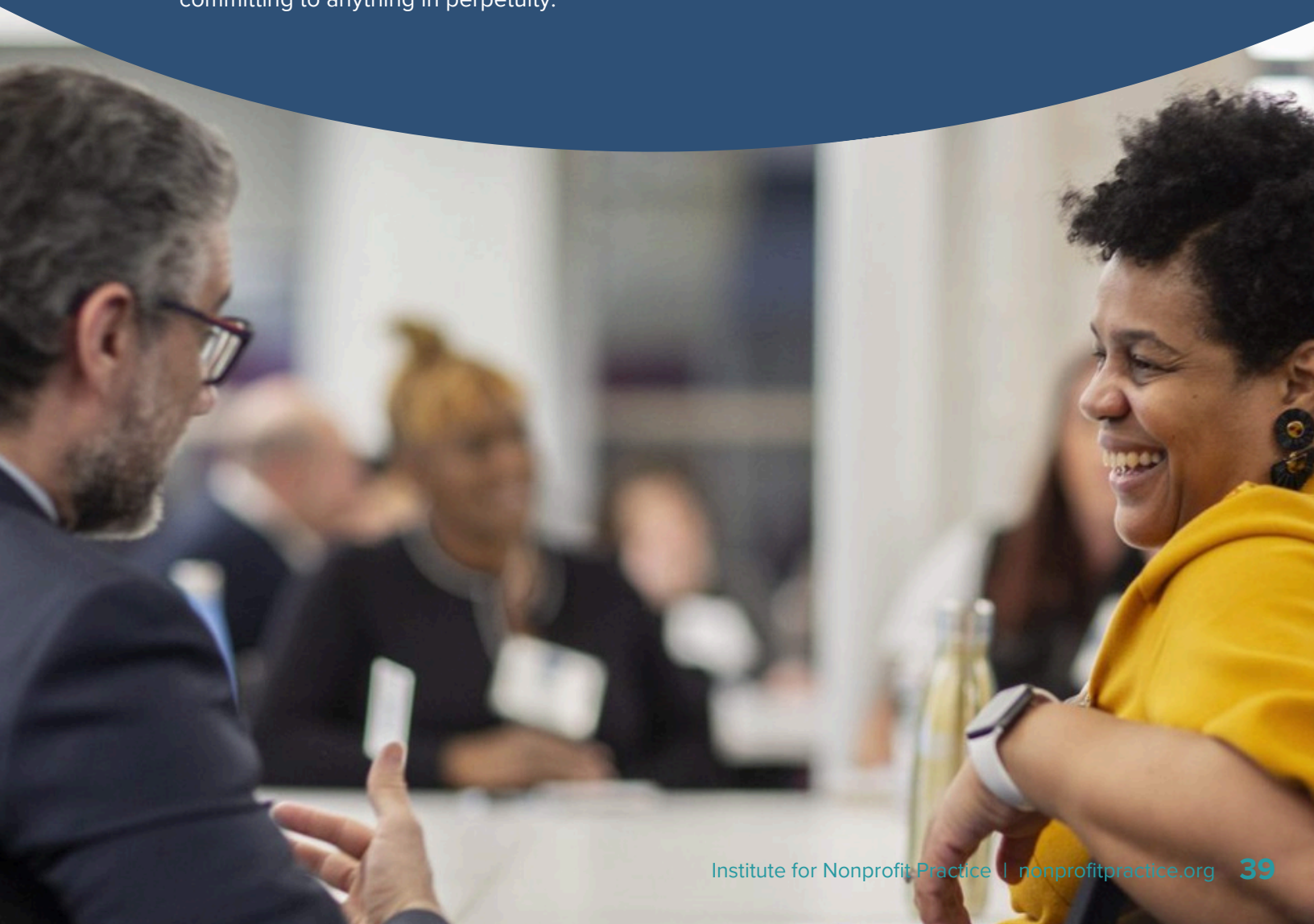
3



LEADING CHANGE
within the
SOCIAL SECTOR

Recommendations for Executive Leaders

- ▲ **Establish core organizational values that support managers to carry out well-being commitments within their teams.** Above all, invest in manager training to foster better supervision and help employees feel successful, valued, and supported. Extend and promote leadership development and mentorship opportunities and practices wherever possible.
- ▲ **Collaborate with your staff and fellow leaders to define well-being, set related objectives, and monitor progress against them.** Inclusive and transparent processes sustain staff trust in the organization and allow staff to remain pragmatic within the reality of limited organizational resources. Communicate early and often about what actions the organization is taking to ensure that well-being, equity, and organizational values are intertwined with mission delivery.
- ▲ **Review and examine whether current policies and practices promote well-being (e.g., balancing screen time with in person time, meeting norms, flexible time off).** This can serve as a good starting place for leaders to identify ways to strengthen their well-being efforts. Determine which current state practices and norms foster greater well-being and which ones seem to create more stress than they may be worth. Consider piloting one or two ideas before committing to anything in perpetuity.



- ▲ **Ensure your organization's compensation strategies are competitive by benchmarking salaries based on market data and industry standards.** This is not an easy task and likely will need to be addressed over more than one budget cycle as it requires compensation analysis of your pay rates relative to peers in your applicable markets. We recommend hiring an experienced consulting firm to run this process. Because this can be a costly endeavor, we strongly recommend you engage your funders in this effort. With your comparative salary analysis in hand, you may then need more than one year to reach your target compensation levels. An aspiration for high performing organizations, for example, is to set compensation targets at the 75th percentile of market rates (or at least the 50th percentile). Funders committed to your well-being goals and long-term sustainability can help by covering some or all of these costs – not just the salary analysis, but also the subsequent compensation adjustments made to retain your staff over time.
- ▲ **Ensure roles, responsibilities, and priorities are appropriate for the capacity you have.** A good rule of thumb is to ensure that the primary duties required for any job description comprise no more than 60-70% of an employee's time to leave room for other duties and/or unforeseen work. We know this practice is not the typical norm in our sector, especially due to all the headwinds outlined in this report. Still, leaders do have a role in ensuring that their teams have achievable goals and sufficient time and resources to accomplish them. We recommend organizational leaders conduct regular reviews of priorities and adapt where needed to delay, defer, or even cancel work that is not absolutely core to their most urgent and strategic goals. You can always return to deferred projects later when resources become more available.
- ▲ **Focus on a few key well-being actions at a time.** Concentrate on a limited number of actions to ensure follow-through and sustain staff trust. To get started, focus on actions that can be “easy wins” or that do not require major decision-making processes in order to garner or sustain staff momentum and buy-in.
- ▲ **Engage your board by leveraging burnout and well-being data.** Incorporate insights from the research presented in this report, along with your organization's data, to communicate the importance of investing in well-being for sustaining the organization's workforce and bottom line.



Above all, invest in manager training to foster better supervision and help employees feel successful, valued, and supported.

Recommendations for Managers

- ▲ **Manage with transparency and authenticity (i.e., behaving in alignment with organizational values) to build mutual trust within your team.** Provide regular communication and feedback, set clear performance expectations, and clarify expectations for how to work together. To the degree possible, involve team members not only in selecting their own projects but also in determining deadlines and how they carry out a given task.
- ▲ **Check in with your team members regularly on their workloads.** This is particularly important for frontline staff and those engaged in emotionally demanding work, as their workloads may appear relatively light but require tremendous energy. Managers can proactively address burnout and foster well-being by actively monitoring staff workload and acknowledging the demands of their respective roles.
- ▲ **Encourage your team members to engage in well-being practices.** This can include regular breaks, taking mental health or vacation days, and utilizing any other well-being benefits available to them. Providing flexibility with schedules or projects to accommodate employee needs is also strongly encouraged wherever possible.
- ▲ **Role model and openly discuss well-being with your team.** Allocate time in meetings for non-work-related topics, encourage your employees to set well-being goals for themselves, and lead well-being activities and discussions with your team. Be vulnerable and honest about ways you are seeking to build better practices in this area to model that it is okay to not have all the answers in hand. Managers can create a culture where well-being is valued as much as productivity by role modeling healthy well-being behaviors and actively encouraging their team to do the same.
- ▲ **Model, scaffold, coach.** This approach borrows from cognitive development pedagogical theory popularized by Jerome Bruner but is applicable to how people at all levels learn best. Especially when managing junior staff members, consider ways to model how to do the work so that they see firsthand what the standard really should be. Once that is clear, then you can move to “scaffolded collaboration and partnership” where you perform some of the work alongside your direct report (e.g., a joint presentation). This allows you time to talk through a myriad of details, offer suggestions and tips, and build trust through collaboration. Once employees demonstrate the requisite skill and confidence to execute the work, managers can then step back and “coach from behind.”

This approach is similar to the **“I Do–We Do–You Do”** approach popular in many organizations. Too often, managers do not spend this time up front with their staff and they miss the opportunity to foster greater well-being, confidence, and effectiveness because of it.



Recommendations for Human Resources & Talent Development Professionals

- ▲ **Expand professional development opportunities and clearly articulate the pathways for advancement within your organization.** Effective professional development opportunities may include training, continuing education, opportunities to take on stretch projects, and 1-to-1 mentoring and coaching. By providing transparent pathways for leadership and career advancement (e.g., clear promotion timelines and job descriptions), along with concrete initiatives to increase internal advancement, you can demonstrate to staff a tangible commitment to their development.
- ▲ **Beyond augmenting compensation strategies, work to provide increased overall benefits to your staff.** If expanding salaries and wages is not feasible, consider other forms of compensation such as flexible work arrangements (e.g., flexible hours or remote options), four-day work weeks, sabbaticals, one-time bonuses, quick promotion timelines, and expanded employee benefits, including resources such as EAPs or the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program.
- ▲ **Consider expanding paid time off and leave policies to promote a more harmonious work-life balance.** For example, explore establishing a flexible time off (FTO) policy, respite days for staff to recover from emotionally demanding work, a company-wide time-off period during a time of low productivity in the year (e.g., holiday periods), floating holidays, and/or broadening bereavement leave eligibility beyond immediate family members.
- ▲ **Prioritize community-building across all workplaces, whether in person, remote, or hybrid.** Organize regular community-building activities aimed at fostering connection and community, such as retreats, peer networks, and mentorship programs. To combat screen fatigue among remote workers in particular, also consider implementing “no-meeting” days or “walk and talk” calls in lieu of virtual meetings. Ultimately, you want to cultivate a culture that enables thoughtful, strategic breaks away from screens throughout the workday and week.



Effective professional development opportunities may include training, continuing education, opportunities to take on stretch projects, and 1-to-1 mentoring and coaching.

Recommendations for Funders

- ▲ **Provide multiyear general operations funding that covers grantees' administrative and operational needs,** in addition to direct programming costs, to reduce burnout and promote well-being. Also consider providing funds that are explicitly set aside for well-being initiatives, as nonprofits may hesitate to use their general operating support for internal well-being initiatives without specifically earmarked funds. Dedicated well-being funds could support actions such as compensation benchmarking and increases, increasing staffing, or providing training and resources to strengthen capacity.
- ▲ **Increase giving amounts to adjust for inflation rates.** Funders can play a significant role by reevaluating their standard donation levels to keep pace with inflation and the escalating costs of service delivery. Moreover, increasing grant periods to span multiple years and adjusting future payments to accommodate rising expenses can provide much-needed stability and support to grantees.
- ▲ **Commit to trust-based philanthropy practices that promote well-being and result in a more effective and efficient distribution of funds.** Practices include simplified application and reporting requirements, document vaults and common grant applications to reduce redundancies, providing up-front costs rather than reimbursements, and quick renewal processes. Consider the unintended consequences of asking communities to recount trauma or share personal identity information within application and reporting requirements and consider removing the writing burden altogether.
- ▲ **For every grant made, couple it with a talent investment in your grantee's people.** Whether it is specifically an investment in grantee well-being or compensation levels, or, more generally, an investment in training and development of staff, consider “funding the people behind the cause” for every grant you make. Not only will this help ensure that the organization has the capacity to deliver against the impact you are supporting, but it also communicates to grantees that you value their talent development efforts.
- ▲ **Invest in well-being research and collaborations within the social sector.** These efforts can influence and help policymakers and organizations to gain a deeper understanding of the specific factors and practices that promote well-being and a space to collaborate on specific, cross-sector commitments to reduce burnout across the nonprofit workforce.
- ▲ **Advocate for federal philanthropy reforms or other policy changes affecting nonprofits and their staff (e.g., student loans, affordable housing).** Reconsider the 5% minimum foundation payout requirement as a starting point, rather than as a self-imposed limit, in order to expand the pool of available grant dollars.⁶¹



Needs for Further Research & Evaluation

In developing this report, our objective was to review existing literature, highlight insights from INP alumni, and produce evidence-based guidance for leaders, HR and talent development professionals, and funders in the social sector who are working to adopt sustainable well-being practices. Despite this effort, further research is essential to deepen our collective understanding of burnout and well-being in this field. At a minimum, we see the following areas as highly promising for further analysis:

Continue to research the unique factors that influence well-being in the social sector. Much of the existing research focuses on the for-profit sector or on organizational culture as a whole. But because the social sector, and the nonprofit workforce more specifically, faces unique challenges, such as working with high demands and limited resources, it is essential to better understand the myriad ways in which these challenges require innovative solutions tailored to the sector's distinctive needs.

Explore the external impact of well-being initiatives on the communities that nonprofits serve. This might include examining such outcomes as service satisfaction, total people reached, community engagement, and organizational mission fulfillment. By assessing these external impacts, we can help ensure that the well-being initiatives we champion and adopt also effectively align with and advance our organizational missions.

Continue evaluating specific well-being practices at the organizational level over time to better assess efficacy in addressing well-being concerns, as well as the realistic time commitments required to implement these practices. By understanding the time required and benefits of specific interventions, organizations can better understand the relative value of different approaches.

Investigate how to foster well-being while navigating the complex contexts, such as increased polarization and legislative changes, that many employees in the social impact sector face. In particular, sector leaders should develop evidence-informed guidance on how to address burnout and prepare for a political landscape that increasingly threatens nonprofits serving or led by communities of color, women, and people who identify as LGBTQ+, including taking into account decreases in funding and threats to physical and psychological safety. Efforts should also be made to understand how to address well-being in different geographic contexts – from large metropolitan hubs to rural areas and small towns across the country.

GAPS IN RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

We also identified **gaps in current data and practice** that warrant further exploration:

Impact on Organizational Outcomes

Though there is some data, referenced above, that suggests burnout leads to negative impacts on the greater community, the research did not thoroughly examine additional organizational outcomes such as beneficiary satisfaction, community engagement, or other common key performance indicators. Future research should further explore how the results of well-being initiatives internally impact the communities served and missions nonprofits aim to fulfill.

Methodological Rigor

Second, the reviewed literature predominantly relied on survey research and self-assessment methodologies, posing methodological limitations. While these approaches offer valuable insights, the use of more robust methodologies – such as case studies to describe how organizations are implementing their strategies and experimental or quasi-experimental designs – would offer more conclusive evidence on the effectiveness of well-being initiatives and interventions.

Equity in Well-being Initiatives

Third, some of the reviewed research did not adequately test whether practices were effective, or how experiences might differ among diverse populations. This gap highlights the need for more research to examine the effectiveness of well-being initiatives, especially as more organizations, such as the American Psychological Association, commit to improving well-being rooted in equity.⁶³

Opportunities to Keep Learning from INP's Cohort-Based Approach

As we share research findings and lessons learned that can help inform broader, ongoing discussion, we are also paying attention to the following aspects of INP programming that seem to offer promising burnout mitigation and well-being supports:

Strong cohort model and alumni network: INP offers a distinct, comprehensive suite of equity-focused, cohort-based leadership development programs, coupled with an engaged, ever-growing alumni network. The net effect helps generate a sense of community and psychological safety for leaders at all levels of their careers and an environment that is conducive to proactively addressing burnout and stress. Access to safe, supportive networks like those offered by INP can be particularly beneficial for social sector practitioners.

Management tools and resources: INP provides essential tools and resources to augment skills across key management domains while equipping leaders at all career stages with the business acumen, confidence, and network to navigate professional challenges, address burnout, and promote well-being within their organizations. INP programs go beyond teaching theory and best practice to support leaders as they deeply examine embedded assumptions and biases, apply learnings, and expand their practice. In particular, tools like Appreciative Inquiry and Adaptive Leadership™, both woven into the INP curricula, can help leaders propel their organizations by adapting to change and maximizing existing strengths.

Brave, nurturing, inclusive, and equitable spaces: INP classrooms foster a deeply affirming culture that serves to break down silos and enable leaders to openly build deep, trusting bonds without fear of judgment. We believe these factors are key in helping foster greater workforce well-being.

Mindfulness and self-reflection: INP incorporates mindfulness and self-reflection practices into its pedagogy and these approaches promote self-awareness and resilience, two essential skills in mitigating burnout.

Transformative coaching and mentoring: INP's model provides students and alumni with opportunities to identify and learn from experienced mentors across the INP network, which offers personalized support and guidance as practitioners navigate the complexities of advancing personal and organizational well-being.

Well-being values: INP helps leaders root their well-being intentions within a larger effort to foster greater equity and belonging within organizations. INP recognizes the pivotal role of leadership in preventing and addressing burnout within organizations and our students are consistently reminded to encourage a culture where compassion is expected, recognized, valued, and celebrated.²⁴

Next Steps

In spite of the overarching challenges, no part of American society is more resilient and dynamic than the social impact sector, and INP remains confident in the collective potential of our leaders to meet the moment.

In this report, we have endeavored to define the problem in all its complexity and highlight approaches that can help alleviate the sector's workforce crisis. It is our goal to partner with other leaders in the field to advance this conversation further. We know progress will not be easy or linear. Over the coming years, INP will continue to research burnout and well-being, integrate new research-backed practices into our programming, and disseminate our learnings to the broader sector where relevant. We look forward to joining you in efforts to advocate for thoughtful approaches to ensuring the long-term vitality, health, and effectiveness of our nonprofit workforce.

A graphic consisting of a dark blue circle with a light blue ring around it, centered on a light blue background.

APPENDIX

Additional Resources

The following section comprises a curated collection of widely circulated toolkits, guides, and other materials that are often utilized by practitioners working to address burnout or cultivate well-being in the workplace. These resources cover a broad spectrum of topics in the hope that leaders can then pinpoint which resources best align with their organization's specific needs.

ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERS AND MANAGERS

[Sustainable Jobs for Organizers: Toolkit for a Stronger Movement](#)

- Comprehensive toolkit covering 10 key areas: compensation, insurance, DEIB, supervision, employee voice, transparent communication, professional development, caring workplace conditions, hours of work, and the unique stresses of organizing.

[National Council of Nonprofits Employment & HR Resources](#)

- Tools, research, and other resources for compensation, management, and employee retention.

[“The Happy, Health Nonprofit: Strategies for Impact without Burnout”](#)

- Includes book information for Kanter and Sherman (2016) along with additional resources such as downloadable assessments.

[Case Making: Top Reasons to Invest in Nonprofit Talent](#)

- This Fund the People resource offers a set of compelling reasons why philanthropy should invest in nonprofit talent; may need to create a free account to access.

[Fund the People Toolkit](#)

- Comprehensive toolkit to improve the nonprofit workforce, including resources on case making, how-to's, “talent justice”, discussion guides, and more.

[Addressing Donor Misconduct: Advice to Boards and Leaders](#)

- Surfaces the issue of donor misconduct and harassment and how nonprofit leaders can protect themselves and their staff from such instances.

[Paid Leave Resource](#)

- Information on paid leave laws and options.

[How to Establish Salary Ranges](#)

- The Society for Human Resource Management offers a plethora of resources for all HR needs.

[Staffing the Mission: Improving Jobs In The Nonprofit Sector](#)

- Guide to help nonprofits express their values through their compensation and personnel policies.

[Model, Scaffold, Coach](#)

- Short LinkedIn post about this approach. Though prevalent in educational pedagogy, there are important parallels for managers supervising early career professionals or those learning new skills and content.

[75th Percentile Definition](#)

- Basic breakdown of what is meant by this term.

[Checklist for Mentally Healthy Workplaces](#)

- “4 A’s Checklist” to assess whether Awareness, Accommodations, Assistance, and Access are present within your workplace.

[Happiness Lab Podcast](#)

- Dr. Laurie Santos covers the brain science behind a range of topics relative to happiness, well-being and work-life balance.

[Gallup's Perspective on Employee Burnout: Causes and Cures Report](#)

- Top five causes of burnout, the harm that employee burnout does to employees and organizations, and best practices for combating burnout.

Mental Health Resources

- [Communication Toolkit for HR Teams & Employers for Supporting Mental Health](#)
 - Storytelling guide, manager checklist, internal communications guide, and more.
- [How to Create an ERG for Mental Health](#)
 - Steps to creating a mental health employee resource group (ERG).
- [Developing a Strategy for Workplace Mental Health Toolkit](#)
 - Success factors for mental health programs and a case study for implementing mental health days.

FUNDERS

[Burnout and Well-Being In Grantee Organizations: A CEP Blog Series](#)

- This Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) blog series offers a diverse range of perspectives, information, and suggestions.

[State of Nonprofits: What Funders Need to Know](#)

- CEP's 2024 study on nonprofit well-being.

[How Funders Are Supporting Grantee Staff Well-Being](#)

- Another CEP report offering a range of ways funders have supported nonprofits.

[Trust-Based Philanthropy Project's Guides & How-To's](#)

- A comprehensive collection of PDFs covering various aspects of trust-based philanthropy.

[RSCF's Check In Analysis Tool](#)

- The Robert Sterling Clark Foundation's template for supporting grantees in their work while also assessing the foundation's own grantmaking effectiveness.

[Discussion Guide for Funders](#)

- Steps that funders can take to improve jobs and staffing at the nonprofit organizations they support.

[Full Cost Project](#)

- Proposes funding model that covers the full cost for nonprofit organizations to deliver their missions sustainably over time.

[Making It Happen: A Conversation Guide](#)

- Guidance for foundations looking to start or increase multiyear general operating support grants.

RESPONDING TO DEIB BACKLASH

[Resources to Prepare and Respond to the Supreme Court's Affirmative Action Decisions](#)

- Historical context for affirmative action cases and comprehensive collection of resources both preceding and following the 2023 SCOTUS decisions.

[Racial Justice Programs Under Fire: Foundations Are Running Scared When They Should Double Down](#)

- Social sector strategies that focus on preparation, rather than concession, in the face of DEIB backlash.

[Ways Philanthropic Foundations Can Respond to Costly Attacks On DEI](#)

- Ways that foundations can collectively respond to DEI backlash.

[How to Effectively--And Legally--Use Racial Data for DEI](#)

- Five goals for data use and do's and don'ts for companies aiming to sustain DEI progress.

[Fearless Fund Amicus Brief](#)

- Amicus brief submitted by The Council on Foundations and Independent Sector in support of the Fearless Foundation, an organization led by a Black woman that is dedicated to addressing the gap in venture capital funding for women of color.

Methods

LITERATURE REVIEW

We conducted a literature review on burnout and well-being in the social sector to achieve two goals: (1) to describe the state of burnout in the social sector, and (2) to identify evidence-based best practices for addressing burnout and prioritizing well-being within organizations. To ensure methodological rigor, we developed a protocol for identifying and analyzing peer-reviewed articles, similar reviews, and other supporting materials pertaining to research, strategies, activities, and challenges related to burnout and well-being.

Our primary sources for both the academic and gray literature were DeepDyve, a subscription-based platform that works directly with academics and other publishers to make full-text publications available, Google Scholar, and Google search engine. Our search query involved the development and use of a concept table, free-text terms, Boolean operators (e.g., “AND”, “OR”), and a set of selection criteria. We also conducted a comprehensive review of notable social sector sources – including Grantmakers for Effective Organizations (GEO), the National Council of Nonprofits (NCN), and the Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) – to gather reports on burnout and well-being.

Every publication was required to be based on empirical evidence. When possible, we selected publications that took place within a U.S. context, were published recently or within the last decade, and focused directly on the social sector, especially nonprofit organizations. Our query yielded over 3,350 results, which we narrowed to about 120 publications after performing an abstract review. A full-text review and eligibility assessment based on our selection criteria produced over 70 publications that we used for our literature review.

INP ALUMNI SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUPS

Alumni Survey

In spring 2023, INP invited our alumni to participate in a survey aimed at learning about their experiences with burnout and well-being. From a total pool of 2,240 active alumni, 605 alumni completed our survey, achieving a 27% response rate. Respondents represented alumni from across multiple INP programs, including the Community Fellows Program, the Core Certificate Program, and RISE program.

Most alumni survey respondents identified as women (65%) and/or as people of color (59%). Specifically, 65% identified as women, 19% as men, and 2% as non-binary/third gender, while 14% preferred not to disclose their gender. Additionally, 59% of respondents identified as people of color — specifically, 25% Black/African American, 13% Hispanic/Latino/a/x, 15% multiracial, and 6% Asian/Asian American. Of the remainder, 37% identified as white, 2% as other/another race, and 2% opted not to disclose their race.

The survey comprised four key questions designed to explore alumni's sense of burnout, staff turnover rates, burnout factors, and organizational well-being solutions. To measure sense of burnout, we adapted the single-item measure of the Maslach Burnout Inventory⁶⁶ to capture alumni's sense of burnout. We defined burnout "as a state of emotional, mental, and often physical exhaustion brought on by chronic workplace stress."

Staff turnover rates were gauged through a close-ended, single-item question, prompting participants to select one option that best reflected their turnover rates over the preceding three years since COVID-19, spanning 2020 through 2023. In addition, we utilized two checklist question-type items to investigate burnout factors and organizational well-being solutions. In both items, alumni respondents could select multiple options from a predefined list derived from a review of relevant measures and findings on workplace burnout and well-being.

Alumni Focus Groups

In summer and fall of 2023, we conducted four focus groups with 23 INP alumni to complement and expand upon the insights gathered from the alumni survey and literature review. Alumni represented a diverse array of leaders spanning various career stages and social impact organizations of varying sizes and geographical regions. Participating alumni also represented diverse racial groups, gender identities, and ages. However, precise demographic breakdowns are withheld to ensure confidentiality.

The focus groups included seven entry or mid-level staff, 14 executive or C-suite leaders, one HR director, and one DEIB manager, totaling 23 participants. Specifically, the first focus group consisted of new to mid-career social sector staff to glean firsthand insights into their experiences with burnout and well-being. Subsequently, the second, third, and fourth focus groups consisted of executive and C-suite leaders and a few HR/DEIB personnel, aimed at understanding the strategies necessary to address burnout and foster well-being within their respective organizations.

Each focus group session began with a presentation of the findings from the alumni survey and literature review. We then employed a semi-structured focus group format, with questions designed to stimulate discussion and capture nuanced insights:

- To what extent do the trends in the literature and findings from the alumni survey resonate with your experiences?
- What are the critical actions organizations should take now to address burnout and increase well-being?
- Can you share actions or steps you or another organization have implemented to support well-being and/or reduce burnout?
- How can funders support leaders and organizations in addressing burnout?

Methodological Considerations

Our research on well-being and burnout within the social sector, while insightful, is subject to some methodological limitations. Foremost among these is the absence of disaggregated data within our survey. We did not ask participants to disclose details such as the size of their organization or their position within it (e.g., leadership, manager, or frontline). Our survey sample findings predominantly reflect the experiences of women (65%) and people of color (59%). These limitations restrict our ability to discern how these factors may influence the survey findings on burnout and well-being.

Furthermore, the pre-selection of options in the survey, though derived from existing measures or findings, might have constrained participant responses. To mitigate this limitation, we supplemented the survey with focus group data to offer additional context and depth to our findings. Acknowledging these limitations is essential for contextualizing our findings and identifying avenues for future research to address these gaps.

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Please note that accessing some references may require a subscription or account.

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