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Creative Approaches to the Nonprofit Workforce Shortage

By: Amy Silver O'Leary

"A healthcare and mental health provider in **Maine** wrote of empty beds in their group home due to staff vacancies and a growing list of special-needs children waiting for months for access to services -- all while anticipating more vacancies in a workforce 'stressed after working so many additional hours to try and fill these gaps.' An **Oregon** human service provider has stopped taking referrals due to vacancies at three locations. A **Nebraska** education nonprofit sadly reported, 'We have stopped placing families on the waiting lists at many sites because they are unlikely to get off of it and will need to find other services.'"

The paragraph above is lifted from a new report from the National Council of Nonprofits, [The Scope and Impact of Nonprofit Workforce Shortages](#). The report portrays the impact of workforce shortages on the ability of charitable nonprofits to advance their missions. While the data are compelling, the stories are heartbreaking.

Based on a survey of more than 1,000 nonprofits across all 50 states, the new report provides meaningful policy solutions to the crisis that nonprofits, funders, and governments can work together to implement. In the meantime, in addition to advocating for large-scale policy change, nonprofit leaders are looking for shorter-

term fixes. How can we recruit and retain staff and volunteers while maintaining critical services for those we serve? How can we preserve our own physical and mental health at the same time (a real issue identified in the report)? Where nonprofits are able to increase salaries and benefits, the evidence shows that they're doing that, but when budget limits are reached, nonprofits get creative. We've curated some ideas and examples below.

Prioritize equity from the outset.

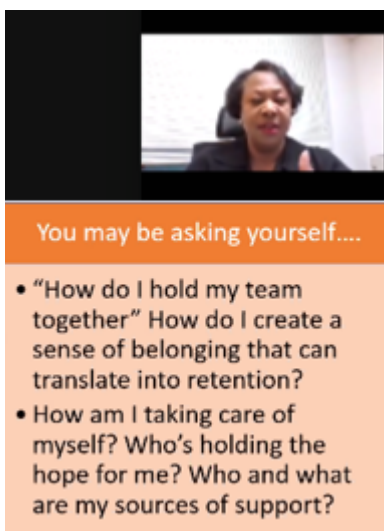
Developing a culture of safety and inclusion that supports *everyone's* wellbeing is no longer optional for nonprofits – it's required. Will the intertwined crises of the last several years help create a “[New Normal](#)” for our communities, one that is diverse, equitable, and inclusive? Sometimes positive change can emerge from negative events – such as if, as a result of the shared traumas and social upheaval of the last two years, nonprofits make real, lasting progress in building the values of equity, diversity, and inclusion into all of their operations.

- Building Movement Project's [On the Frontlines](#) report describes how leaders of color (particularly women) are on the frontlines of response and recovery efforts related to both the pandemic and the calls for systemic change. The report concludes with recommendations for policymakers, philanthropy, and nonprofits themselves (see especially page 26 of [the full report](#)).
- Fund the People's [Talent Justice Initiative](#), developed in partnership with the [Center for Urban and Racial Equity](#), offers free resources to help nonprofits eliminate bias in recruitment and hiring, create the conditions for people of color to advance in leadership, and make a compelling case to funders and board members that investing in talent is mission-critical.
- Our own page on [Why Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Matter for Nonprofits](#) offers practical pointers, inspiration, and curated resources for nonprofit employers, boards, and your own learning journey.

Dedicate time and resources for yourself, your colleagues, and your team to address stress and take care of everyone's wellbeing.

Burnout and stress were the number one issues mentioned in our recent survey. For most Americans, the last two years have been stressful at best; for many, they've been traumatic. In some places, climate disasters and violence have further traumatized communities that were already on the edge. Especially for frontline nonprofit workers, much of the stress is baked in, but some stress can be relieved or prevented by rethinking routine ways of operating. We rounded up some helpful resources that provide numerous strategies as well a sense of solidarity with others who are navigating the same challenging waters:

- Shortly after devastating tornadoes hit Kentucky in December, leaving destruction and tragedy in their wake, the [Kentucky Nonprofit Network](#) arranged a webinar with Laura van Dernoot Lipsky, the founder and director of The Trauma Stewardship Institute: [“Navigating Overwhelm ~ a practical approach to coping with disaster and transforming trauma.”](#) With expertise, compassion, and humor, Laura shared effective, efficient, inexpensive practices that can help us protect our nervous systems from the relentless stress of disasters, work pressures, political conflict, environmental threats, and pandemic life. **Viewing of this free webinar will only be available until January 24, 2022**, so if you miss it, you can find Laura’s books, free downloads, and other resources at <https://traumastewardship.com/>. Note: Laura repeatedly mentions doing things that are easy and don’t take much – or any – time! She says the last thing she wants to do is add to the “to-do” list of already overburdened people.



You may be asking yourself....

- “How do I hold my team together” How do I create a sense of belonging that can translate into retention?
- How am I taking care of myself? Who’s holding the hope for me? Who and what are my sources of support?

In a recent webinar hosted by Washington Nonprofits, [Making Space for Nonprofit Wellness](#), Danie Eagleton, CEO of Seattle Counseling Services, shared a wide range of wisdom accompanied by down-to-earth, practical suggestions. We are grateful to Danie and to [Washington Nonprofits](#) for making the [recording](#) available to all at no cost. If you don't have an extra hour to view the webinar, a December blog post from Washington Nonprofits' Executive Director Laura Pierce, [Prioritizing Mental Health and Wellness for Nonprofit Staff and Volunteers](#), shares a wealth of resources as well as Laura's own wisdom.

- The Maine Association of Nonprofits [gathered ideas from the field in this post](#), including creating a flexible, partially remote work schedule, having a designated “no meetings day” each week, and actively modeling work-life balance.
- Just reading this [post from Nicole Cammaert](#) from the Community Sector Council of Nova Scotia will give your wellbeing a boost. (Thanks to the [North Carolina Center for Nonprofits](#), which provides resources for battling burnout to members, for sharing Nicole's post.)
- Digital inclusion and managing hybrid workplaces can help staff feel connected and included. Beth Kanter has posted [5 Tips to Create a Happy, Healthy Nonprofit Hybrid Workplace](#), each tip linked to additional resources. For that matter, [Beth's Blog](#) contains all kinds of great guidance on work/life balance and avoiding virtual meeting fatigue.
- The [Pennsylvania Association of Nonprofit Organizations](#) (PANO) has been providing “mindfulness, movement, and music” breaks at their virtual conferences. PANO's free 20-minute sessions with Denina Bautti are posted publicly: [October 14, 2021](#) | [October 19, 2021](#). While previewing resources for this article, Denina's sessions alerted me to the restorative value of dancing around my kitchen alone while my lunch was in the microwave.
- For funders reading this article: can you help your grantees deal with growing demands and shrinking staff hours by giving multi-year, flexible funding and simplifying the required paperwork? One funder we spoke with recently applies many of the practices and principles of [Trust-Based Philanthropy](#). “In our program, if folks want to do a verbal report, they can do that. If they want to schedule a call, that's what we do,” she said. “Something else my team is doing this year: when we're asking for general operating proposals, we just ask for one they sent to another funder. We tell our grantees, ‘If you're going to be spending time on things, we don't want it to be on us.’”

Discover, nurture, and develop talent in nontraditional ways.

Americans have just lived through what Danie Eagleton called the “collective trauma” of the pandemic and related economic crisis. Combined with new forms of awareness and activism, both racial and otherwise, these forces have led many Americans to reevaluate the terms under which their work lives have been organized. What some have called [The Great Resignation](#) is also known as The Great Reassessment. Economists explain that many factors are producing our current “seller’s market” for labor, in which employers are raising salaries, benefits, and other attractors to compete for a diminished and choosier labor pool.

Nonprofit employers are being squeezed by this increased competition, as discussed in the Council of Nonprofits’ [workforce shortage report](#) described earlier. But the competitive pressure also creates an opportunity - to find staff and leaders in new places and through new pathways. These might include reaching out to communities who have been historically excluded, often based on racial and ethnic diversity, geographic diversity, diversity of educational background or physical ability. It might mean investing more in professional development, or exploring “non-compensation strategies” like more flexible hours, hybrid onsite/offsite work, or facilitating student loan forgiveness programs.

- From [Maine](#) to [Missouri](#) to [Montana](#), professional associations like the [Young Nonprofit Professionals Network](#) and [state associations of nonprofits](#) offer programs for emerging leaders, Executive Directors, leadership transitions, and professional development of all kinds and at reasonable or no cost.
- A recent webinar on “[Diverse Recruitment and Hiring Strategies](#)” presented by the Alliance of Arizona Nonprofits with Inclusion Strategist & Consultant Viva Asmelash covers step-by-step recruitment strategies and processes, including “scrubbing” resumes and cover letters to prevent unconscious bias, equity and accessibility in job postings, the “journey to the hire,” onboarding, and much more. The recording is free for Alliance members and affordable for non-members at \$29.
- For jobs requiring college degrees, make sure your recruiting materials tout the benefits of the [public service loan forgiveness](#) (PSLF) program. For many employees with college debt, this program means 10 years of student loan payments versus 20 or 25 years of payments for those working in the for-profit

world. If you can, help your employees navigate the program. See [Equal Justice Works' monthly webinar series](#) covering recent changes to PSLF for more information. CalNonprofits' [Nonprofit Student Debt Project](#) offers excellent resources including a free Student Debt Toolkit for Nonprofits. The Toolkit was developed several years ago, so some of the program details aren't completely current, but it might give you some good ideas about how to communicate with staff about PSLF. [Our web page on the PSLF program](#) offers additional information and resources.

- [Nonprofit HR's](#) 2021 and 2022 Talent Management survey reports include numerous creative ideas for the talent pipeline, leadership development, and staff support. One respondent noted, "We have generous PTO, increased trainings and professional development, flexibility, and compassion. Because of COVID, we've been struggling to make these benefits more visible and available." Others mentioned flexible schedules, "home growing" staff to rise through the ranks, and focusing on organizational culture. In the 2022 report, 91 percent of the 400+ respondents (a third of which had 25 or fewer employees) said that they were prioritizing culture and employee engagement in 2022.
- [Public Allies](#) places young interns in 10-month positions at 25 locations across the country. Nonprofit hosts contribute a portion of the AmeriCorps stipend for these "Allies." The organization intentionally recruits "young leaders whose promise and potential are too frequently overlooked, dismissed, or ignored, including young adults aging out of the foster care system; our brothers and sisters who must remake their lives following incarceration; and single mothers seeking a bridge from GED to college and career." Public Allies also offers trainings, networking, collaboration, and special events that build community.
- Build your employer brand. Take note of what current and former employees are saying on [Glassdoor](#). Review your organization page on LinkedIn. Are your values posted publicly, and would employees say your nonprofit lives those values? Can you help your employees participate in a retirement savings program, perhaps [through a PEO](#) if your nonprofit is small?
- Are you following best practices in salary transparency? Across the country, new salary [transparency mandates are being put in place](#) to promote workplace equity and overcome pay disparities. Anonymized or "[blind](#)" [hiring practices](#) can also reduce gender and racial bias in hiring, helping to increase equity, strengthen your workforce, and expand the pool of qualified applicants. Whether or not your state requires salary transparency in job postings, the

evidence suggests that it not only reduces the gender and racial wage gap, but [helps with recruitment and retention](#), and it's [the right thing to do](#).

Laurie Wolf of Alaska's Foraker Group closed out 2021 with [a thoughtful post](#) about how nonprofits might move from the Great Resignation, through the Great Reassessment, to an era of "Reimagining the Workplace," with hybrid work, collective collaborative systems, a strengths-based approach, and more. We hope you find ideas, inspiration, and a sense of community in all the resources we've shared in this post.

Our Series on Creative Approaches to the Nonprofit Workforce Shortage Crisis

This article is part of [a series describing creative, practical approaches to the workforce shortage crisis](#) that can elevate equity, address burnout and stress, and discover, nurture, and develop talent in nontraditional ways.

One of our five [core values](#) at the National Council of Nonprofits is "Honoring the Nonprofit Workforce," which reflects our deeply held belief that "Nonprofits and their employees should have the respect and the resources needed to get their work done."

That core value shapes our work creating and curating information to assist frontline nonprofits with their operations and capacity-building. It also drives much of [our advocacy work](#) promoting public policy solutions at the federal, state, and local levels to get more funds to nonprofits stretched by the combination of growing needs, decreasing revenue, increasing costs, and rising salaries.