



GENERAL

Nonprofit Burnout Crisis: Innovative Remedies Needed

11.03.24 | Linda J. Rosenthal, JD



Before the pandemic, “burnout” was already a major worry for the nonprofit sector. But the COVID-19 years brought an avalanche of chaos and uncertainty along with financial and operational strains as the nation’s 501(c)(3)s answered the call for extraordinary relief and assistance to their communities.

It was no surprise that individual and collective burnout had spiked dramatically in the first few years. As the crisis subsided, though, there was hope that burnout, too, would recede somewhat as a top-tier challenge. New Year’s Day 2023 came with a cautious optimism in the charitable community for a return to some sense of “normalcy.”

Nevertheless, by late spring 2023, the baseline for this problem remained at a “five-alarm” level of urgency. “The nonprofit sector has been roasted on the outside Like a hard pretzel rod on the verge of snapping in half....”

At the same time, the prestigious Center for Effective Philanthropy (CEP) conducted a survey of several hundred nonprofit executives about their ‘... staffing, finances, and relationships with funders....’ The report in late May 2024 added hard data to the anecdotal evidence that burnout remained a critical issue. See *State of Nonprofits 2023: What Funders Need to Know* (May 2023, 24 pp. PDF).

The CEP researchers listed three key “findings.” No. 2 read: “Issues related to staff—including burnout, filling staff positions, and retaining staff—are the top challenges facing nonprofit leaders.”



This report generated a great deal of sector-wide buzz as well as productive discussion and debate. See some of our real-time reporting: [New Surveys: Alarm Bells for Nonprofit Sector](#) (June 26, 2023) *FPLG Blog* and [Burnout: Nonprofits' Five-Alarm Worry](#) (July 30, 2023) *FPLG Blog*.

In the spring of 2024, CEP conducted a follow-up survey with the same respondents and similar questions. See [State of Nonprofits 2024: What Funders Need to Know](#) (May 2024, (28 pp. PDF). The new findings were discouraging but not surprising.

“The three ‘Findings’ for the [2024 Report](#) are notable because ‘burnout’ moves front and center this year – to first place: ‘Burnout – for both nonprofit staff and leadership – remains a top concern for most nonprofit leaders, with half of nonprofit leaders feeling more concerned about their own burnout than this time last year.’”

In September, 2024, we recapped the developments of the prior eighteen months. See [Burnout is Still the Story for Nonprofits in 2024](#) (September 16, 2024) *FPLG Blog* [primarily reviewing the [2023 Report](#) and the commentary about it] and [Another Long Hot Summer of Nonprofit Burnout](#) (September 27, 2024) *FPLG Blog* [focusing on the reaction to, and implications of, this newer 2024 data confirming the need for urgent attention to what is now a chronic crisis.]

We now pick up this important story, turning the focus to the sector-wide conversation about what to do.

A Chronic – and Growing – Problem

In a CEP blog post accompanying the release of the [2024 Report](#), two of the lead researchers, Christina Im & Seara Grundhoefer, framed the challenge: “...[N]onprofit leaders overwhelmingly express concern about burnout – both for themselves and their staff” See [This Year’s State of Nonprofits Highlights Mounting Concern About Burnout](#) (May 29, 2024).

“While burnout is a perennial issue in nonprofit organizations, our data indicate that nonprofit leaders’ alarm over the issue is not abating but rising.” And – of critical relevance is this comment: “...On top of this continued worry about staff burnout, nearly 90 percent of leaders note some level of concern about *their own burnout*....” (emph. added).

There’s a reason that flight attendants include a warning in the pre-takeoff instructions for adults traveling with children to put on their own oxygen masks first. They need reminding that they will be unable to assist the youngsters if they have already passed out.

This acknowledgment by “nearly 90 percent of leaders” that they, too, are suffering from extreme burnout is a dramatic and unequivocal confirmation of the now “six-alarm-fire” level of this emergency.

One more point highlighted by CEP researchers Im & Grundhoefer: “...[M]any of the assumptions about causes and solutions are not holding up well. Burnout is top of the mind for nonprofit leaders in 2024, despite relative consistency in nonprofit organizations’ finances and relationships with funders.”



Specifically, they emphasize that Finding Two of the [2024 Report](#) is noteworthy: “As in 2023, most nonprofits experienced either a balanced budget or a surplus in the most recently completed fiscal year, and the majority anticipate breaking even or having a surplus this fiscal year.”

Common wisdom has been that, with [post-pandemic] demand for services slowing as well as more stable revenue streams returning, the nonprofit burnout problem would subside, falling back to its more usual – though still worrying – level of prevalence.

That has not happened.

Search for Meaningful Solutions

“What was a five-alarm blaze in 2023,” we wrote, has not been controlled or contained. Burnout is pervasive all through modern society but, for a number of reasons, it is epidemic in the charitable community....”

So the urgent task is to confront the reality of nonprofit burnout as a distinct problem needing its own specially crafted remedial measures. Our sector’s “burnout” crisis “isn’t just about money. It’s only mostly about money.” See, e.g., [CEP’s Latest Report on Nonprofits Reveals “A Wild World” of Burnout, Raising Questions for Funders](#) (June 17, 2024) Dawn Wolfe, [insidephilanthropy.com](#). Some money has been thrown at the problem – by enlightened funders now finally understanding and accepting the need to break free from the “[Starvation Cycle](#).” But, alone, money is not the answer.

In [Readings on Nonprofit Burnout](#) (August 2, 2023) *FPLG Blog*, we told you about some important articles published a few months earlier in a major research initiative of global consulting giant McKinsey & Co. and the McKinsey Health Institute. The focus: the special stresses of nonprofit organizations, particularly since the beginning of the pandemic, across 15 nations including the United States.

One of the four items is [Supporting resilience and preventing burnout in nonprofits](#) (April 11, 2023) *Social Sector Insights*, [mckinsey.com](#) – with four co-authors including Dr. Jemma King, a psychology research fellow at the University of Queensland.

Dr. King skillfully explained what’s “more concerning” to her than the sky-high levels of burnout reported by nonprofit leaders. It’s how many respondents indicated they’ve “felt like this for extended periods of time – many months on end.”

She sees time spent at or near burnout “... as analogous to” the problem of deep-sea divers. “We know when divers spend time at depth, it is a matter of science that they must spend a predetermined amount of time in a decompression chamber to avoid the bends.... “ For deep-sea divers, there are “protocols” that cannot be skipped or ignored.

But we’re wholly ignoring the nature and (and intensity) of trauma and emotional distress that has been present in the nonprofit sector for years now. It needs to be addressed with fresh thinking and out-of-the-box protocols directed towards the “decompression” needs of dedicated nonprofit personnel. Quick fixes or band-aid remedies will not do.



“From among the available reference materials on nonprofit burnout,” we wrote in [our August 2, 2023, post](#), “McKinsey’s recent publications stand out as particularly helpful. They take advantage of important (and developing) research, including psychological findings, on the causes and impact of burnout, and how it may best be addressed....While some of these titles indicate research is from a locale outside the United States, McKinsey’s global focus supports confidence that the conclusions are broadly transferable....”

See the three additional McKinsey articles listed and linked in [Readings on Nonprofit Burnout](#).

More Expert Commentary

Just after the publication of the [2024 Report](#), Chloe Heskett, CEP’s Senior Writer, Editor & Content Strategist, reached out to a number of key people in the charitable community. See [Burnout and Well-Being in Grantee Organizations: A CEP Blog Series](#) (August 15, 2024). “...[W]e invited leaders from nonprofits and foundations to respond to the findings....” Eight seasoned nonprofit veterans provide “responses, reflections, and analysis of the data” focusing “largely on the related topics of burnout and well-being in grantee organizations....”

CEP’s [purpose](#) is to “improve the performance of philanthropic funders” to aid the nation’s nonprofit organizations to fulfill their own missions. These eight articles written by representatives of nonprofit organizations as well as the foundations and philanthropists who fund them, “...[unsurprisingly](#) ... focus largely on the conditions that have contributed to burnout as a top concern for nonprofit leaders, the implications of burnout for both nonprofits and their funders, and the steps funders can take to mitigate it and support well-being in the sector.”

The eight experts’ articles are:

- [To Ensure Nonprofit Well-Being, Invest in Wages, Workload, and Working Condition](#) (June 6, 2024) Rusty Stahl, Founder, President & CEO, Fund the People, *CEP Blog*
- [Enhancing Grantee Well-Being Leads to Long-Term Impact](#) (June 11, 2024) Linda Bell Grdina, Research Elder, The Wellbeing Project, *CEP Blog*
- [Funders: Let’s Stop Making Nonprofits Choose Between Balanced Budgets and Burnout](#) (June 18, 2024) Jmie Allison, Executive Director, Walter & Elise Haas Fund, *CEP Blog*
- [Adopting a Mental Health Mindset Will Help Both Funders and Nonprofits Thrive](#) (June 20, 2024) Beth Brown, Managing Director, Mental Health and Well-Being, Arthur M. Blank Family Foundation, *CEP Blog*
- [Let’s Go Beyond ‘One Foundation’: The Promise of Changing Practices in Philanthropy](#) (June 25, 2024) Claire Poelking, Program Officer, MacArthur Foundation, *CEP Blog*
- [Four ‘T’s for Better Funding Relationships and Healthier Nonprofits](#) (July 18, 2024) Matt Stephenson, CEO and Cofounder, Code2College, *CEP Blog*
- [The Whole Leader: A Call for Self-Care in Social Impact](#) (July 22, 2024) Carolina García Jayaram, CEO, Elevate Prize Foundation, *CEP Blog*
- [Keeping the Spark Alive: How One Funder Invests in Grantee Well-Being](#) (August 1, 2024) Kara Doyle, Analyst, Assessment and Advisory Services, CEP; Jennifer Oakley, Program Partner, Imago Dei Fund; and Emily Nielsen Jones, Co-founder and Trustee, Imago Dei Fund, *CEP Blog*.



There are valuable insights in each of these eight selections; the authors clearly “get” that we’re dealing with a problem that must be approached in radically new ways.

Conclusion

This “burnout” conversation will undoubtedly continue in earnest in the coming weeks and months. We’ll follow it and share the insights.

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