

An Evaluation of Five Years of The California Wellness Foundation's Sabbatical Program

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Prepared by
The Center for Community Health
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The word “sabbatical” has ancient roots in many traditions, reflecting the fact that for centuries, busy humans always have needed a respite from their labors, whether they toil in fields or in cubicles. The fact that some sabbaticals take the form of commandments – such as the injunction against working on the Sabbath – suggests that throughout history, some particularly busy and dedicated humans have needed an extra nudge to take a well-deserved break.

The California Wellness Foundation (TCWF) Sabbatical Program was created in 2003 to improve the long-term effectiveness of health-focused nonprofits by providing their executives with the rest they need to continue to direct their organizations' missions. Closely modeled after the Durfee Foundation’s Sabbatical Program for nonprofit leaders in Los Angeles County, the TCWF Sabbatical Program fulfills the traditional notion of a respite from work that allows the recipient to return rested, rejuvenated, and refreshed – perhaps with some healthy reflection and insights on work and life. Yet it departs from traditional sabbaticals in two important ways. The first is that the recipients, executive directors of health-related nonprofits in California, have absolutely no obligations during their sabbaticals besides truly severing themselves from their work environments. Once their sabbaticals begin, they need not acquire a new skill, write a book, or attend a meeting; they are not asked to prove that they used their time in any particular way. They are free, often for the first time in decades, to do with their time exactly as they wish.

The other unique feature of TCWF’s Sabbatical Program is that the work environments that the executive directors so thoroughly and sometimes reluctantly leave behind – the health-related nonprofits that they led before the sabbatical – are targets of the sabbatical as well. The organizations do not experience the rest and rejuvenation that the individual executive directors do, but they are affected nonetheless. The Sabbatical’s organizational effects are an intentional and significant aspect of the Program because one goal is to improve the long-term effectiveness of health service nonprofits. The Sabbatical Program gives these organizations’ executive directors recognition and an opportunity for rest and rejuvenation that, ideally, allows them to continue their demanding leadership roles once they return. Even if they choose not to continue in their executive director roles, the sabbatical’s benefits could continue for the individual and for the organization.

About TCWF’s Sabbatical Program

TCWF’s statewide Sabbatical Program offers grants of \$35,000: \$30,000 to cover the executive director’s salary and benefits during the sabbatical, and another \$5,000 for professional development or other support that may be needed within the organization (e.g., consultants or coaches, management retreats, training, equipment, or bonuses for staff who take on added responsibilities during the executive director’s absence). Recipients must have at least six years of experience at the executive director or CEO level, with three of those years at their current nonprofits.

The Sabbatical Program application process is widely publicized each winter via the TCWF web site, e-alerts to current and former grantees and non-grantee contacts in the health field, and postcard reminders. Targeted outreach efforts ensure that a viable pool of diverse applicants is reached. In addition, TCWF hosts two conference calls for interested parties to ask questions and learn more about the Program.

Each year, eight applicants (six each in 2003 and 2004) are selected to receive awards based on the above criteria, their contributions to their communities, and geographic diversity. Once the award is announced, executive directors have up to a year to plan and begin their sabbaticals, which can last from three to six months. A minimum sabbatical of three months is required.

Evaluation: Design and Methods

In 2007, TCWF provided a grant to Group Health's Center for Community Health and Evaluation (CCHE) to assess the Sabbatical Program's first five years and to explore whether it was achieving its goals. Working closely with TCWF, the CCHE team collected and analyzed data to address five key questions:

1. To what extent did the Sabbatical Program provide respite to executive directors to help mitigate high stress and burnout?
2. How did the outlooks, leadership, and management techniques of the Sabbatical Awardees change as a result of the Program?
3. What, if any, positive and/or adverse consequences did the nonprofit organizations experience due to the participation of their executive directors in the Sabbatical Program?
4. How were the stipends reserved for the nonprofit organizations of the Sabbatical Awardees used?
5. How did the Sabbatical Program contribute to the nonprofit organizations' stability and sustainability?

The evaluation began with a review of the available literature about sabbaticals in general and the TCWF Sabbatical Program in particular. The CCHE team also interviewed key TCWF staff and consultants who were involved in developing and refining the Program.

The documents and initial interviews were used to develop structured interview questions about the Sabbatical Program's effects on executive directors and their organizations. Thirty-three of the 36 executive directors who participated in TCWF's Sabbatical Program between 2003 and 2007 were interviewed for this evaluation. Nine executive directors also participated in a focus group that delved more deeply into their experiences. In addition to executive directors, the CCHE team interviewed staff and board representatives from grantee

organizations. Data from the interviews and focus group were analyzed using qualitative analysis software (*Atlas.ti*) to develop the findings summarized below.

Why Take a Sabbatical?

Executive directors applied for a sabbatical for many different reasons, both personal and professional, but virtually all mentioned some type of stress, burnout, or “just needing a break.” Some wanted a chance to physically remove themselves from the day-to-day operations of their organization so that they could better reflect on their role, leadership style, and/or organizational growth opportunities. Other executive directors talked about the sabbatical as an opportunity to “test” their organization. This testing included giving staff, particularly the executive leadership team, an opportunity to run the organization and engage in succession planning.

Respite

Burnout is an occupational hazard for many in leadership positions. For nonprofit executive directors, the hazard may be exacerbated by protracted struggles to secure funding and a heightened sense of responsibility to communities and their most vulnerable residents. Among the executive directors who participated in TCWF’s Sabbatical Program, many also had founded their organizations, presiding proudly but sometimes wearily over decades of growth and challenges.

Against this backdrop, the Sabbatical Program’s combination of time and no-strings-attached funding created a luxurious space in executive directors’ lives. Many were able to travel, pursue long-neglected hobbies or interests, or reconnect with families and friends.

No matter how the time was used, the Sabbatical Program overwhelmingly achieved its rest, rejuvenation, and respite goals. In some cases, it took days or weeks to adjust to the change in pace, but each of the executive directors was able to do so. Several noted how difficult it was, particularly at first, to resist the temptation to check in with colleagues or even to drop by unannounced.

Many observed that their rest and rejuvenation had a physical manifestation – especially in terms of overcoming sheer fatigue. One reported sleeping away the first month; another noticed, with glee, how good it felt to do without an alarm clock for months at a time. Some simply did not realize how truly tired they were until they had a chance to rest. They were healthier, sleeping and exercising more, and experiencing less stress. Some felt much more energetic – so much so that one staff member teasingly complained, when their leader returned, because the executive director’s high energy level was a mismatch for the staff’s worn-out selves.

Organizational representatives observed that the re-entry process was possibly the most difficult aspect of the sabbaticals, something they had not anticipated. While many had prepared extensively for the executive directors’ departures by planning scenarios and clarifying roles with board members and staff, they had spent less time concentrating on

details of the transition at the other end of the sabbatical. Upon their return, executive directors learned that new staff had been hired, new routines had been established, staff had become accustomed to a different leader and leadership style, and some of the executive directors' old ways of doing things had been re-examined. Because the challenges of returning from sabbatical were often unanticipated, organizational representatives came to realize that preparation for re-entry was as important as planning to leave.

Outlooks, Leadership, and Management Styles

While some executive directors stepped comfortably back into their former roles and styles, others reported using their sabbatical to reflect and deliberately change the ways they interacted with colleagues and their work environments. Changing work habits to reflect a newly-appreciated work-life balance was one common change (e.g., no longer being the first to arrive at work and the last to leave). Executive directors who made these types of changes did so not only for themselves, but for others, encouraging colleagues to leave work at a reasonable time and maintain a balance between their work and their personal lives.

A key organizational effect was to give other staff within the organization an opportunity to try new roles and gain new skills. Another effect for executive directors after they returned was to delegate more than they had before the sabbatical. The reminder – and concrete evidence – that they did not, in fact, need to write every grant, attend every meeting, or negotiate every contract changed the way some executive directors organized their own work. This was especially true of several who characterized themselves as “micromanagers” and recognized that their hovering was not universally appreciated. With renewed confidence in colleagues, some executive directors returned to a job that had changed – one that allowed them to play to their strengths by concentrating on more strategic thinking and visioning, rather than the nuts and bolts of day-to-day operations.

For many executive directors, the sabbatical pulled back the curtain on problems that had been simmering unresolved for some time. In these situations, the distance and reflection that the sabbatical offered allowed executive directors and their boards to see staff configurations and other issues from a different perspective – and to become more comfortable with addressing them before they worsened. In one case, the executive director's absence left enough of a vacuum that the organization did not function well and several key staff left the organization. However, the executive director and board found this difficult situation to be instructive because it revealed some real problems that needed to be addressed but might not have been otherwise. Today, the organization is in a much stronger and more stable position.

Some executive directors changed their outlooks so significantly during their sabbaticals that they concluded that they no longer wanted to function in the same role. Five executive directors either resigned or retired, and several others accelerated existing retirement plans – in part because they realized that their organizations could be effective without them, given how well staff functioned during the sabbatical.

Impact on the Organizations

By removing an organization's executive director for several months and doing so with plenty of warning, the sabbaticals gave nonprofits a perfect opportunity to test their systems, management teams, and succession planning without going through an unexpected crisis. Executive directors, staff, and board members described how their organizations "stepped up" to the challenge of an absent leader and how this experience instilled confidence, trust, and appreciation of each other.

Staff members gained confidence in their skills, developed new relationships with board members and the organization's partners, and communicated more deliberately with one another and management teams. Board members appreciated the opportunity to learn more about the organization and to interact with staff beyond the executive director. Interim directors got a taste of the executive director role – some relishing it and others concluding that it wasn't for them. In general, for organizations that had planned and prepared well for the sabbatical, surviving the executive director's absence was a vote of confidence that the organization could run smoothly for at least a short period of time, if necessary, without the executive director at the helm.

While the sabbatical was an opportunity for organizations to rise to the occasion, the planning process that preceded the sabbatical also was important. In many organizations, planning for the executive director's absence was a revelation because it showed how few systems or procedures were captured in writing, or how concentrated some kinds of institutional knowledge were in just one person – the executive director. Prompted by the approaching sabbatical, organizations initiated strategic planning, clarified staff roles, altered chains of command, and developed contingency plans for various scenarios – all of which were useful and might not have occurred as thoroughly or quickly without the sabbatical.

Five organizations had a formal succession plan in place before their executive directors were selected for the Sabbatical Program. Others reported that they did not have a formal succession plan and did not necessarily realize the significance of this gap until the sabbatical forced them to do so. The sabbaticals helped some boards and executive directors broach the uncomfortable subject of "What if ...?" Succession planning became more urgent for other organizations, whose executive directors decided, upon reflection during their sabbaticals, that they no longer wanted to serve in that role.

The sabbaticals were such a positive experience for so many executive directors and their organizations that many recipients have tried to find ways to incorporate similar benefits into their organizations' routines – providing mini-sabbaticals for other staff, encouraging staff to take vacations and other breaks, and making a deliberate effort to voice recognition and appreciation.

Beyond the benefits to individual organizations, the sabbaticals indirectly contributed to capacity building in the nonprofit health sector. In addition to the executive directors, hundreds of staff and board members within these organizations took advantage of planning exercises, coaching, consulting, training, and other capacity-building activities that were

funded and/or stimulated by the sabbaticals. Each of these, in turn, helped staff gain skills that they can use as they move into leadership roles within their current organizations, or as they move to other nonprofits throughout their careers. Board members, too, reported greater attention to important and sometimes neglected aspects of their roles, such as succession planning. At least one board member was already applying insights from the sabbatical to another board on which he served.

Use of Organizations' Stipends

Sabbatical grants included \$5,000 designated for professional development and/or organizational support before or during the executive director's absence. Just as executive directors used their grant dollars for a wide variety of sabbatical experiences, their organizations demonstrated unique approaches in using their professional development funds – holding staff retreats, building teams, and addressing organizational strengths and weaknesses. These professional development funds also helped organizations train staff in administrative and financial management and in grant development. Several organizations used the stipends for skill building for the person selected as interim director. Organizations also used the extra resources to engage consultants and coaches. Finally, professional development funds were used to award staff bonuses for extra effort and to increase the interim director's salary to that of executive director during the sabbatical.

Organizational Stability and Sustainability

Not surprisingly, succession planning suddenly became much more relevant to organizations, since the sabbatical experience revolved around their executive director's extended planned absence. A few organizations already had formal succession plans, but most had done little or no succession planning prior to receiving the sabbatical award. The award stimulated thinking about the future and about succession planning either formally through the board, or informally through discussions with staff members.

Whether succession planning was formal or informal, organizations commented on the benefits – both individually and organizationally – of thinking beyond the current day-to-day operations and challenges. It gave them an opportunity to move important topics critical to the survival of the organization “off the back burner,” as one staff person described it, and to begin to plan in a more thoughtful, strategic way.

For organizations that had actively engaged in succession planning prior to the sabbatical, the experience provided an opportunity to “test” leadership skills – to see how well the organization could function during the executive director's absence. Among organizations that had not addressed longer-term transition issues, participating in the Sabbatical Program stimulated a greater sense of urgency to begin figuring out how the organization could survive in the long term and determining its staffing and infrastructure needs. Examples of specific future-focused outcomes included securing an insurance policy on the executive director, adopting a strategic planning process, focusing more attention on development of new managers, and cross training mid-level staff to prepare them for assuming new responsibilities.

Board members reported that the sabbatical gave their organizations a chance to think seriously about the long term and was viewed by almost all of them as having a positive impact on the organization.

Conclusions

The nonprofit leaders selected for TCWF's Sabbatical Program during its first five years were extraordinary individuals. Each of them had a remarkable personal and professional story, each left indelible imprints on their communities and organizations long before the sabbatical process began, and each of them will continue to do so.

Considering the perseverance and passion represented in this group, it is no small claim to say that TCWF provided them with life-changing experiences. The luxury of time to rest, reflect, and rejuvenate was, for most, long overdue. Also important was another "R" – recognition. That recognition accrued not only to these deserving individuals, but also to the organizations they had founded or helped build.

TCWF's Sabbatical Program meets an immediate need by helping executive directors escape the burdens of their professional roles for a few months. In most cases, they return as intended – refreshed, energized, and healthier mentally and physically. Even if they personally "relapse" into old habits – arriving at work at the crack of dawn, sending e-mails to staff at midnight – the sabbatical's benefits will continue. TCWF has made its Sabbatical Program unique by attending not only to the executive director's needs, but to his or her organization's as well. The Program can be considered a success on many different levels – individually, organizationally, and, potentially, across the entire sector of health-related nonprofit organizations in California.

By recognizing and investing in the organizations they leave behind, TCWF is paying the greatest tribute possible to the executive directors who have given so much to these organizations: ensuring that their organizations have the capacity to survive and thrive well into the future, no matter who is at the helm. In their heart of hearts, executive directors want a successful organization to be their legacy. It is certainly flattering to be indispensable – up to a point. They know, egos aside, that a sabbatical is a preview of whether what they have built will survive without them, even if their departure is far on the horizon. They know that, even though the Sabbatical Program's outward emphasis and funding may highlight the executive director's role, its lasting contributions may lie instead with the organizations themselves. These unique features are what sets TCWF's Sabbatical Program apart and what makes its potential for building capacity so great.

An Evaluation of Five Years of The California Wellness Foundation's Sabbatical Program

I. INTRODUCTION

The California Wellness Foundation (TCWF) Sabbatical Program was created in 2003 to improve the long-term effectiveness of health-focused nonprofits by providing their executives with the rest they need to continue to direct their organizations' missions.

Community-based nonprofits demand a great deal from their executive directors, who are highly talented, energetic and dedicated individuals. Executive directors must lead their organizations in adapting to unexpected changes in their communities, their funding environments, and their human resources. Stress and burnout often result, leading to reduced executive director effectiveness, attrition and negative impacts on their health and well being.

TCWF provided a grant to Group Health's Center for Community Health and Evaluation (CCHE) to evaluate the Sabbatical Program's first five years in order to assess its success in providing rest and rejuvenation to recipient executive directors. CCHE team members visited grantee organizations and interviewed executive directors, individuals who replaced them during the sabbatical period (interim directors), representatives of governing bodies, and other staff members about their sabbatical experiences. In addition, TCWF staff and consultants as well as another sabbatical funder were interviewed to elicit their thoughts and insights.

A. Sabbatical Programs

Sabbatical programs are best known as features of colleges and universities, whose faculty traditionally are eligible to receive a break every seven years. In addition, teachers and leaders of K-12 educational institutions and theological seminarians have opportunities for sabbaticals, although these are somewhat less common. Academic sabbaticals are designed as opportunities for educators to enhance their professional roles and require approval of the educators' proposed activities by their academic institutions or departments. Academic sabbaticals typically involve time to focus on travel, research, writing, visiting other institutions, or lecturing as guests at other universities.

More recently, the term "sabbatical" has been used to describe business strategies for retaining employees as an alternative to lay-offs or other reductions in the labor force. The term also has been used to describe a break in routine from such high-profile individuals as athletes, actors, and musicians for the purpose of pursuing other professional interests.

Finally, over the past decade, there has been a trend among funders to create opportunities for a third type of sabbatical that is much closer to the original meaning of the term.

B. Nonprofit Sabbatical Programs

The term ‘*sabbatical*’ comes from the Middle English *sabat*, the Latin *sabbatum*, the Greek *sabbaton*, and the Hebrew *shabbāth*, all meaning, literally, rest or a time of rest. In recent years, programs specifically aimed at providing a new type of sabbatical for nonprofit leaders have emerged – highlighting such efforts as a way to strengthen and support the nonprofit sector by allowing executive directors to take a break from work.

Funding for nonprofit organizations tends to be variable and often is inadequate. Initiating, retaining, and managing critical community relationships puts additional stress on executive directors. In addition, leaders and staff of nonprofits often receive lower pay and less internal support than their counterparts in the public and private sectors.

Stress, inadequate funding, and the challenges of meeting their constituents’ needs put nonprofit executive directors at a heightened risk of burnout. Those experiencing burnout may feel that their jobs are too demanding and that continuing in them would exact an unacceptable personal cost. Burnout is a strong predictor of staff turnover across a broad range of human services personnel, particularly among community-based nonprofits. Attrition of executive directors from nonprofit organizations and from the nonprofit sector results in loss of vital resources necessary for organizational achievement and sustainability.

Interventions to alleviate stress and burnout in high-risk professions have included modifying the work environment, providing access to individual-level coaching, and counseling. Reduced burnout has been shown to result from efforts to provide personal recognition, promotion, skill development opportunities, staffing, funding, and redistribution of job-related duties.¹

Sabbatical programs for nonprofit leaders are designed to prevent burnout by providing time away from a stressful job. Specifically, sabbaticals give individuals the opportunity to relax and recover energy and commitment in any way they choose, as long as it is not work-related. About a dozen U.S. and Canadian foundations, notably the Durfee Foundation (Durfee), have pioneered sabbatical programs in the nonprofit sector.

Since 1997, Durfee has funded sabbaticals for nonprofit executive directors and senior managers in the Los Angeles area with the objective “to replenish the stores of energy and inspiration for the community’s most gifted leaders to travel, reflect, and otherwise renew themselves in whatever manner they propose.” In contrast to academic sabbaticals, the Durfee Program permits significant latitude in defining individual objectives. Other foundations with similar programs include the Virginia C. Piper Charitable Trust, the Chicago Community Trust, and the Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation.

¹ Graber JE, et al. Predicting Changes in Staff Morale and Burnout at Community Health Centers Participating in the Health Disparities Collaboratives. *Health Services Research* 43(3), 1403-1423.

C. The TCWF Sabbatical Program

The California Wellness Foundation (TCWF) Sabbatical Program seeks to improve the long-term effectiveness of health-related nonprofits by 1) recognizing their executives, 2) providing them with an opportunity for rest and rejuvenation, and 3) enabling them to continue to successfully direct their organizations' missions. Closely modeled after the Durfee Sabbatical Program and with significant assistance and guidance from Durfee staff, the TCWF Sabbatical Program was developed and managed for the first two years by CompassPoint, a Bay Area nonprofit consulting firm, through a grant from TCWF. Since 2005, the Program has been managed by TCWF staff.

Each year, TCWF provides selected organizations with a \$35,000 grant. The majority of each grant (\$30,000) is directed towards the executive director's salary, benefits, and expenses during the sabbatical; \$5,000 is allocated for the professional development of managers and staff who assumed extra responsibilities during the absence of their leaders.

Successful applicants must have held the position of executive director for a minimum of six years and served as executive director with their current organizations for at least three years. In addition, an organization must be a 501c(3) nonprofit organization in California that addresses the health needs of historically underserved populations (low-income residents, people of color, youth, and rural communities). Criteria also include the organization's demonstrated 1) ability to maintain the executive director's medical and other benefits, and 2) readiness to function without its leader during the sabbatical.

The Sabbatical Program application process is announced each winter on the TCWF web site and through a mailing of the brochure/application to a list that includes 1) all current and former TCWF grantees; 2) non-grantee contacts in the TCWF database of clinic consortia, community-based health organizations, health advocates, and health philanthropy colleagues; and 3) key elected and appointed officials. In addition to the mailings, an e-alert is sent to over 1,000 addresses directing organizations and individuals to TCWF's web site, where a downloadable version of the application and *Frequently Asked Questions* are available. A postcard reminder is mailed prior to the application deadline to all current and former grantees and other strategic audiences.

TCWF's Communications Department works annually to ensure the receipt of a viable pool of diverse applicants from throughout the state by conducting targeted outreach to 1) regional nonprofit associations, 2) local United Ways, 3) health and philanthropic affinity groups and regional associations, 4) ethnic media, and 5) minority business groups and ethnic chambers of commerce. Interested applicants are given approximately six weeks to submit an application, and a dedicated phone number and e-mail address are included in the application materials to allow for inquiries regarding the Program. TCWF also hosts two conference calls for interested applicants to ask questions and learn more about the Program. The application elicits information regarding 1) the organization's scope of work, 2) its organizational budget, 3) management and staffing structure, 4) impact on the community served, and details related to 5) the executive directors' last significant leave, 6) why they are applying for a sabbatical, and 7) what they plan to do during their sabbaticals.

TCWF staff and a hired consultant screen applications and narrow the applicant pool. The consultant interviews the short list of applicants and their references and summarizes findings for final selection by a committee of TCWF staff. Eight applicants (six each in 2003 and 2004) are selected to receive awards based on the above criteria as well as their contributions to their communities and geographic diversity. These are recommended to the TCWF Board for final approval.

The TCWF Sabbatical Program differs from most sabbatical programs in academia, industry and other nonprofits in two distinct ways: 1) a focus on the organization for which the individual works, and 2) the lack of any requirement for a specific accomplishment or product to be delivered at the conclusion of the sabbatical. There also are no requirements for meetings, peer networking, or lengthy reporting. Sabbaticals have been used for travel, home improvement, pursuing hobbies, or just relaxing. It is entirely up to the individual to decide how to use the time.

The \$5,000 of each sabbatical award that is designated for support of the organization may be used to hire additional personnel or consultants/coaches, pay for additional time worked by current staff, conduct trainings, buy equipment, or otherwise strengthen the organization.

Awards are made each fall at a ceremony preceded by an orientation session that provides technical assistance, tips for success, and best practices to help individuals succeed. Criteria for success are determined by the executive directors and organizations.

II. EVALUATION DESIGN AND METHODS

The evaluation was designed using a participatory approach that included CCHE staff, TCWF staff, consultants involved in applicant selection and implementation of the Program since 2003, and an officer of another foundation's sabbatical program. Evaluation questions, data collection strategies, and interview instruments and participants were discussed with TCWF staff prior to implementation.

A. Key Questions

TCWF identified five key questions to be addressed by this evaluation. The first two focused on the Sabbatical Program's impact on individual executive directors, while the last three questions related to the organizations. The specific questions were:

1. To what extent did the Sabbatical Program provide respite to executive directors to help mitigate high stress and burnout?
2. How did the outlooks, leadership, and management techniques of the Sabbatical Awardees change as a result of the Program?

3. What, if any, positive and/or adverse consequences did the nonprofit organizations experience due to the participation of their executive directors in the Sabbatical Program?
4. How were the stipends reserved for the nonprofit organizations of the Sabbatical Awardees used?
5. How did the Sabbatical Program contribute to the nonprofit organizations' stability and sustainability?

B. Methods

Methods included: 1) a review of published literature on sabbaticals; 2) a review of internal TCWF documents related to the Sabbatical Program; 3) interviews with TCWF staff and the Program consultant as well as another sabbatical funder; 4) site visits and interviews with grantee executive directors, staff, and board members; and 5) discussions generated during a Sabbatical Program executive director alumni focus group.

1. Document/Literature Reviews and Interviews with TCWF Staff and Representatives of other Funders

Initially, CCHE conducted a review of publications pertaining to sabbaticals found in academic journals, other foundations' internal and external publications and web sites, and the popular press. While studies and reports describing traditional sabbaticals for educators and theologians were plentiful, as was information about "sabbaticals" in lieu of workforce downsizing, very little information about sabbaticals for nonprofit leaders was available. This was due primarily to the scarcity of such programs: only a dozen or so in the U.S. and Canada were identified. Some of the programs identified are described in the Durfee Foundation's Sabbatical Compendium (2007).

CCHE next obtained and reviewed documentation available from TCWF that described the purpose, objectives, scope, and scale of the initiative. This included:

- Printed materials that announced the availability of sabbatical funds and described the application process to communities and nonprofit leaders.
- Correspondence to and from TCWF staff concerning project implementation issues.
- Printed materials from the Durfee Foundation and other sabbatical programs that informed the design and implementation of TCWF's Sabbatical Program by CompassPoint during the Program's first two years of operation (2003 and 2004).
- Copies of surviving applications and other documents from years three, four, and five (2005, 2006 and 2007).

Document review was augmented by formal interviews with key TCWF staff to better understand program objectives, areas of special interest, and important topics for the review process to address. Supplemental interviews also were conducted with people involved in the Sabbatical Program during its development and management by CompassPoint. Interviewees included: 1) Judith Spiegel, TCWF consultant during the Sabbatical Program selection process and orientation; 2) Timothy Wolfred, PhD, CompassPoint manager of the Sabbatical Program during 2003-2004; 3) Claire Peeps, Executive Director of the Durfee Foundation; and 4) Ronald A. Stewart, PhD, who conducted a 2003 evaluation of the Durfee Sabbatical Program in partial fulfillment of his doctoral dissertation.

2. Site Visits/Interviews with Executive Directors, Board Members, and Staff

A comprehensive roster of all Sabbatical organizations was developed with current contact information. Each of the organizations was contacted by a letter from TCWF introducing CCHE and its role. The letter stated that the purpose of the project was to understand whether executive directors came back to their organizations recognized, rested and rejuvenated.

During site visits with executive directors, CCHE representatives used a structured interview protocol to collect information about their experiences and their organizations' operations and capacities during and after the sabbatical. (**Attachment A**). Executive directors were asked to recommend a staff and board member who were knowledgeable about the organization's operations and who also could be interviewed about the organization's experiences during and after the sabbatical. When possible, interviewees included the individual who served as the interim director.

3. Focus Group

In September of 2008, a focus group of executive director alumni was held in Oakland. Based on geography, organizational diversity, gender, ethnic diversity, and program diversity, ten executive directors were invited to participate in the focus group. Nine were able to attend. The key objective of the focus group was to gain a better understanding of executive directors' sabbatical experiences and the affect of their prolonged absences on their organizations.

4. Analysis

Data were collected and analyzed using qualitative methods that focused on identifying recurring themes arising from the five key questions. Further analysis was performed using the qualitative analysis software package *Atlas.ti*. Individual themes, groupings of themes, and relationships among individual themes and groupings were constructed. CCHE team discussions regarding summarized data led to the identification of key findings.

III. FINDINGS

A. Description of Funded Organizations

Executive directors from 36 California health nonprofits were awarded grants in the first five years of the TCWF Sabbatical Program: six each in 2003 and 2004 (managed by CompassPoint), and eight each in years 2005 through 2007 (**Table 1**). Thirty-three executive directors were interviewed for this report. Thirty-one of the executive directors were interviewed in person during site visits to their organizations and two were interviewed by telephone.

During or prior to their interviews, executive directors were asked to identify a knowledgeable staff and board representative for interviews. Twenty-six staff members, most of whom acted as interim director during the sabbatical, and 21 board representatives were interviewed either in person during site visits or by telephone.

Awardees were located throughout California (**Figure 1**). Types of organizations included seven clinics (plus one clinic consortium), five providers of multiple community services, and three providers each of disability services, homeless services, substance abuse services, and environmental policy and community health (**Attachment A**). In addition, two organizations each had a focus on violence prevention, domestic violence, and HIV education and prevention. Finally, one organization each provided health education, rape and child abuse intervention, reproductive health, foster care, general social services, and youth services in their communities.

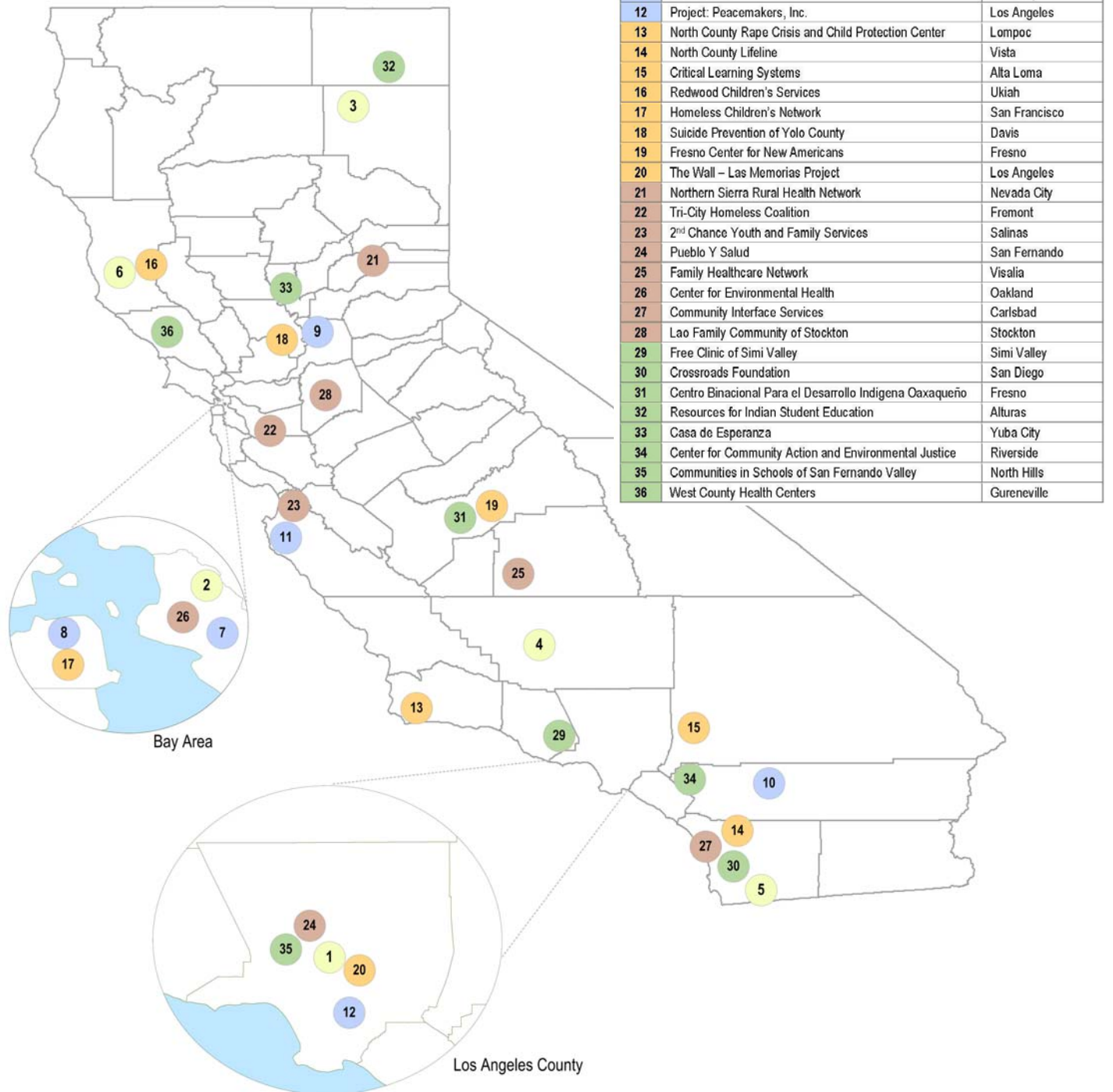
Executive directors had been leader of their organization for an average of 19.3 years (ranging from 7 to 36 years) at the time they applied; over half (17 of the 33 interviewed, or 52%) were also founder or co-founder of their organization. A third (12) of the 36 organizations had annual budgets less than \$1 million and a third (12) had budgets between \$1 and \$5 million. More detailed information about the executive directors and organizations is included in **Attachment A**.

**Table 1
Sabbatical Executives and Organization by Year of Award**

#	Name/Executive	Organization	City
2003			
1	Ann Britt	Valley Community Clinic	North Hollywood
2	boona cheema	Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency	Berkeley
3	Dave Jones	Mountain Valleys Health Centers, Inc.	Bieber
4	Stephen Schilling	Clinica Sierra Vista	Bakersfield
5	Diane Takvorian	Environmental Health Coalition	San Diego
6	Karin Wandrei	Mendocino Family and Youth Services	Ukiah
2004			
7	Jane Garcia	La Clinica de La Raza	Oakland
8	Dian Harrison	Planned Parenthood Golden Gate	San Francisco
9	Debra Oto-Kent	Health Education Council of W. Sacramento	Sacramento
10	Rick Mesa	The Ranch Recovery Centers, Inc.	Desert Hot Springs
11	Barbara Mitchell	Interim, Inc	Monterey
12	Bernita Walker	Project: Peacemakers, Inc.	Los Angeles
2005			
13	Shannon Rose Chavez	North County Rape Crisis & Child Protection Center	Lompoc
14	Shirley J. Cole	North County Lifeline, Inc.	Vista
15	Cheryl L. Houston*	Critical Learning Systems, Inc	Alta Loma
16	Camille Schraeder*	Redwood Children's Services, Inc.	Ukiah
17	April Y. Silas	Homeless Children's Network	San Francisco
18	Diane Sommers	Suicide Prevention of Yolo County	Davis
19	Lue N. Yang	Fresno Center for New Americans	Fresno
20	Richard Zaldivar	The Wall-Las Memorias Project	Los Angeles
2006			
21	Speranza Avram	Northern Sierra Rural Health Network	Nevada City
22	Louis Chicone	Tri-City Homeless Coalition	Fremont
23	Brian Contreras	2nd Chance Family & Youth Services	Salinas
24	Xavier Flores	Pueblo Y Salud, Inc	San Fernando
25	Harry Foster	Family Healthcare Network	Visalia
26	Michael Green	Center for Environmental Health	Oakland
27	Rojane Jackson	Community Interface Services	Carlsbad
28	Pheng Lo*	Lao Family Community of Stockton, Inc	Stockton
2007			
29	Fred Bauermeister	Free Clinic of Simi Valley	Simi Valley
30	Maria Costello	Crossroads Foundation	San Diego
31	Rufino Dominguez	C.B. Para el Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño	Fresno
32	April Lea Go Forth	Resources for Indian Student Education, Inc.	Alturas
33	Marsha Krouse-Taylor	Casa de Esperanza, Inc.	Yuba City
34	Penny Newman	Center for Community Action & Environmental Justice	Riverside
35	William Rodriguez	Com. In Schools of San Fernando Valley, Inc	North Hills
36	Mary Szecsey	West County Health Centers, Inc.	Guerneville

* Unable to contact for interview

Figure 1
Geographic Distribution of Sabbatical
Grantee Organizations



B. The Award Experience

1. Executive Director

a) *Personal Goals/Expectations*

Executive directors applied for a sabbatical for many different reasons, both personal and professional, but virtually all mentioned some type of stress or burnout issues or “just needing a break.” All recipients had been executive directors of their organizations for at least seven years;² more than a third had headed their organization for over 25 years. Nearly half (16) stated that a secondary goal was to physically remove themselves from the day-to-day operations of their organization so that they could better reflect on their role, leadership style, organizational growth opportunities, and/or succession. These executive directors spoke about the importance of the sabbatical as an opportunity to “test” their organizations, including giving staff – particularly the assistant director or executive leadership team – the opportunity to run the organization and engage in succession planning.

I had really started to feel the strain... all I did was work.
Executive Director

I spent a lifetime building the organization and I didn't want it to fall apart when I left.

Executive Director

The sabbatical also was described as an opportunity to “pilot my replacement.” In one organization, the sabbatical enabled the executive director to “test” his three directors, one of whom was likely to succeed him. The executive director of another organization said, “About a year previously, we’d started some deep organizational development work focused on two major issues. [The] sabbatical came and I said, ‘This is perfect, like a final exam.’” Related goals included allowing the executive director and the board to observe how the organization functioned without its leader, who was often also the founder of the organization.

Executive directors described the value of the sabbatical as allowing them to reconnect with their personal lives – their families, their friends, their hobbies, and their communities. Many, throughout their long tenures with their organizations, had never had a real vacation. A sabbatical, they believed, was an opportunity to spend quality time with their children and family. It also allowed them to spend less time “doing” and more time “thinking.” Others saw the sabbatical as a way to cope with ongoing family issues, including the death of a spouse or child, their own illnesses, or taking care of aging or sick relatives.

A sabbatical's about finding out who you are inside – what you're doing with your life and where you're going from here.
Executive Director

² Of those interviewed; total =33.

b) Application and Selection Process

Executive directors arrived at the decision to apply for a sabbatical in a variety of ways. In some instances, the application was initiated by a colleague or a member of the board; in others the executive director submitted the application – sometimes not telling colleagues or staff until s/he was accepted. In other cases, the executive director talked with staff and board representatives, secured their support, and then submitted their application. All executive directors felt the application process and procedures were reasonable – not causing an undue burden through excessive paperwork or interviews. There were comments that the mere process of filling out the application was a positive experience, requiring them to focus on themselves and their needs rather than those of their organization.

Applying for the sabbatical kind of inspired me to get a lot of things accomplished. Even if I hadn't gotten it, the work would have still been done.

Executive Director

It was clear from our interviews with TCWF staff and their consultant that the applicant pool contained many more qualified executive directors than the number of sabbatical grants available. In addition, several executive directors referred to the competitiveness of the process and indicated that they had applied more than once before being selected.

c) Orientation to TCWF's Sabbatical Program

In conjunction with the awards ceremony, executive directors attended an orientation session that highlighted TCWF's expectations and provided information and resources to begin the sabbatical planning process. Interviews with executive directors, interim directors, other staff, and board members suggested that this orientation was helpful for all those affected by the sabbatical. Sample templates, policies, and emergency succession plans developed in part by CompassPoint were mentioned as particularly useful.

The orientation process also resulted in some unanticipated outcomes and insights into how to implement the sabbatical. One executive director was shocked when they were told, "Don't be surprised if you don't feel like coming back" – an idea that, in retrospect, rang true, but that hadn't occurred to her before attending the orientation. Another executive director who was very concerned about leaving too abruptly followed the orientation leaders' suggestion to make the transition gradually. Working only part time in the weeks leading up to the sabbatical proved to be a great strategy, according to that executive director. It was an approach she wouldn't have considered, if not for the orientation.

d) How Did Executive Directors Spend their Sabbaticals?

Two-thirds (22) of executive directors used their sabbaticals as an opportunity to travel – internationally, nationally, or regionally. Some traveled to places they had always wanted to see (e.g., Brazil, China, Laos, New Zealand, South Africa, and Spain). Others visited relatives, old friends, or places they had lived formerly. Some resumed hobbies that they had given up long ago, such as sewing, writing, fly fishing, or gardening. Three executive directors used their leave to stay home with a newborn child or grandchild.

For the first month, I still had all this background noise, but the next month, I slept late! I'd get up with my coffee and my book just in time for my novella at eleven ... ! Then it was time for lunch and the baseball game – I have a real clear recollection of being in the shade, doing my garden, listening to the A's play, and feeling just kind of "aaah!"

Executive Director

Sabbaticals did not always go as planned – several executive directors ran out of time, money, or the inclination to travel. Three unexpectedly lost close family members before their scheduled sabbatical and three others were diagnosed with serious illnesses between the time they received the sabbatical award and their planned departure. These executive directors used their time to grieve, receive treatment, or recover from the stress of

caring for loved ones during their illnesses. Despite the unconventional nature of their sabbatical experiences, they were grateful for the award and for the opportunity to have time and support while recovering their health or mourning their loved ones.

2. Organization

Interviews with interim directors, staff, and board members revealed nearly unanimous support for the Sabbatical Program throughout the organizations. These representatives regarded the Program as an opportunity to provide valued colleagues with well-deserved rest and recognition for their years of hard work and dedication. The sabbatical award also was considered by many as an acknowledgment of their organizations' excellence.

a) *Preparing for the Sabbatical*

Interviews with all organizational representatives (executive director, interim director, other staff, and board) indicated that the time organizations had available to plan for the executive director's departure – three to nine months – was adequate. Some challenges arose from differences of opinion about how the organization should be managed in the executive director's absence. Other challenges stemmed from the need for choosing from among two or more good options for interim director. At least one person who felt qualified to fill the leader's role interpreted not being selected as a criticism of his/her performance. In some organizations, not all of the players knew each other well, so there was an added step of introductions and building relationships. Organizations that already had a "second-in-command" had the advantage of previous opportunities to test that person's ability to fulfill the executive director's duties. Some organizations had already begun developing a succession plan and were eager to have a "trial run." Others were starting entirely from scratch.

The planning phase was a time to slowly hand things over to team members and give them an opportunity to build relationships in the communities we served.

Executive Director

My concern has been in making sure that people have somewhere to turn, so they don't feel abandoned.

Board member

A strong message from interviewees was that making sure board members clearly understood the chain of command during the sabbatical was of high importance. However, there was substantial variation among organizations in the extent to which their board was involved in planning for the sabbatical – from no involvement beyond need-to-know, to being actively engaged in the selection of the interim director and the delegation of responsibilities. More active roles assumed by boards prior to the sabbatical often included regular meetings with the executive director.

Planning strategies included board retreats, devoting part of each staff or executive meeting to planning, and creating an additional series of staff and management meetings. In one organization, a summit was held during which staff talked about their roles, their skills, and changes that could make them more effective. This resulted in successfully changing roles to create the best fit for all staff. Another organization instituted a series of conference calls among the people to be left in charge so that they could network, understand each other's roles, and begin to develop rapport.

Interviewees reported that extensive training was conducted for many staff to ensure their ability to take on new duties. One executive director developed a program to train managers in the new roles and responsibilities they would assume in grant writing and management. Others worked to update systems and make process improvements, sometimes using consultants or coaches to provide technical assistance. Job descriptions, policies, and core activities were examined; presentations were made to boards and major collaborators; and funders were informed of the upcoming sabbatical. One executive director reported promoting or rewarding staff before the sabbatical began: "I did a lot of sprinkling of the wealth before-hand in recognition that they were all going to have to step up."

We worked on leadership issues that might come up during that time. It was probably the best thing we could have done.

Executive Director

Preparations for the sabbatical left a trail of documents, including outlines of planned events, lists of responsibilities, lines of authority, revised job descriptions, communication plans, updated policies and procedures, new forms, resource manuals, and program management guidelines. One executive director wrote several grant proposals before leaving, knowing that they wouldn't be due until later – all that remained was to add budget figures and drop them in the mail. Another executive director specified circumstances of extreme emergency in which s/he wanted to be contacted. A third executive director negotiated that s/he would contact the organization once within the first two weeks of the sabbatical – but only once – and that the call would be scheduled in advance.

Some executive directors gradually involved their chosen interim leaders in meetings and other activities, and/or had them take on some of their new duties early in order to gain experience prior to the sabbatical. This staged transition proved a valuable part of the process that helped build confidence on all sides.

Organizations in which the executive director was gone for a week or two prior to the sabbatical – time the interim leaders could use to “work out the bugs” – found that these were useful “trial runs.” Four organizations culminated the planning and preparation phase with a *bon voyage* party or media event to celebrate the sabbatical, honor the executive director, and provide a kick-off for the transition to interim leadership.

The value of the pre-sabbatical preparation phase was illustrated in a comment by one executive director, who reported, “The new model that emerged from the sabbatical planning period incorporates clarity of roles and authority, and an executive director with a supportive

There was lots of anticipation until finally it was more like, ‘Just go already, so we can start doing this stuff on our own.’

Staff

team of ‘best minds, problem-solvers, and decision-makers.’” However, it was challenging for some organizations and executive directors to decide when it was time to go. Finally, though, it was clear to most when the preparation period was over – time to move on to the next stage and let it unfold.

b) Implementation of the Sabbatical

Board

One of the key functions of a nonprofit executive director is to engage, support, and facilitate the organization’s governance structure – a role that is critical to the organization’s success. Boards of directors represent the interests and perspectives of the target population and have primary responsibility for overall strategic direction, advocacy, and policies.

In addition, executive directors are often the primary, if not only, staff contact with their boards. Sabbatical Awardees had long tenures in their positions and over half (17) also were founders or co-founders of their organizations. Given this close and ongoing relationship, the boards of directors were important stakeholders in the sabbatical and their support of this time off for their executive directors was essential.

In two organizations, the board was undergoing significant change before the sabbatical was announced. These changes proved beneficial by helping absorb some of the leaders’ duties and providing continuity in board leadership during the sabbatical. In one organization, the board was trying to determine how to lighten the executive director’s workload by restructuring and developing different committees. The other organization’s board revised its by-laws so that the chair and vice chair could serve more than a single one-year term consecutively. Changes that proved to be less beneficial included a board that, prior to the sabbatical, decided to switch to bi-monthly meetings, resulting in limited board availability and communication during the executive director’s absence.

Most board informants reported that the sabbatical period was more challenging than anticipated, although those challenges were most often appropriately addressed. The efforts of appointed decision-makers, staff, and board members were sufficient to maintain the organization’s services, direction, spirit, and consistency.

The board realized what it really takes to have this agency function so successfully.

Board member

Board roles during the sabbatical ranged from very minimal to increased involvement that was either planned ahead of time or deemed necessary once the executive director was on leave. Boards of some larger organizations reported that they barely noticed their executive director's absence except at regular meetings, when interim staff stepped into the role usually filled by the executive director. Other boards had new, clearly defined roles during the sabbatical, sometimes including more frequent meetings and more direct communication with staff. Some boards shared responsibility for a number of the executive director's tasks such as signing checks and staff oversight. One executive director found that the sabbatical was a timely opportunity to increase board involvement: "We had been trying to get the board to be more active and take a larger role in the function of the organization. It was good that it happened."

Interim Director and Other Staff

Interim directors and other staff experienced a blend of apprehension and excitement at the prospect of how their roles might change during the executive director's absence. In part, this depended on the stability of the organization before the sabbatical began, the extent of pre-planning that took place, and how the executive director's duties were delegated. In two organizations, a member of the board was chosen to serve as the interim director, while a third hired a consultant to fill the leadership role. Four general types of internal interim leadership characterized the remaining 30 organizations: 1) a single individual, often an assistant director or current second-in-command, served as the interim director; 2) co-interim directors shared responsibility; 3) an existing executive or management team filled the gap; or 4) a selected group of managers and staff covered the executive director's responsibilities.

***At first I was a little
bit terrified.
Interim Director***

Challenges were expected when interim directors took on the executive director's responsibilities in addition to their own. For some, the burden primarily involved the extra time and effort required during the sabbatical months. For others, the sabbatical led to more extensive changes as they expanded into new leadership roles that left them more visible – or, as some staff expressed it, more exposed – both inside and outside the organization. Despite the challenges, these changes often brought opportunities as well. As one interim director explained, "It gave me a chance to build relationships that I would not have had if I had still been solely in my former position."

Some interim directors experienced stress and nervousness stemming from the need to work with internal parties such as board members with whom their pre-sabbatical interactions had been minimal. Others faced challenges in working with external entities such as governmental agencies, funders, or political groups such as county councils. However, the key was preparation in the form of increased pre-sabbatical communication and relationship building.

In addition to relationship building before and during sabbaticals, clarity about responsibilities in managing deliverables and other staff assignments was important. Often, a trickle-down effect took place as work was reorganized and redistributed to compensate for the shift of responsibility and performance of additional tasks. Thus, in addition to upper-

level job description modifications, intermediate staff workloads increased and people throughout the organization occasionally reported feeling ‘spread thin.’

Despite heavier workloads and added responsibilities, it was asserted by key informants that the burden of increased time and energy required by staff during the sabbaticals frequently was offset by newly acquired skills, self-confidence, and leadership credibility, as well as by increased familiarity with the organization's community identity, mission, and activities.

Some interim directors stated that the sabbatical itself was “pretty much business as usual.” Others reported a considerable learning curve, and a few agreed that their fear and anxiety levels before and during the sabbatical were very high. A key variable in each scenario, however, was the leader’s confidence in the staff and organization.

I had no reservations at all, and because I had none, they had none.

Executive Director

Partner Organizations

Executive directors and their organizations generally reported very little, if any, disruption to their working relationships with other organizations, the fulfillment of their mission, or their work with clients during the sabbaticals. Interviewees noted that benefits resulted from the broadening of relationships and increased external exposure of staff who worked more closely with other organizations, foundations, or other funders. One executive director reported that there was curiosity among partners about the sabbatical, with questions such as, “What’s going on? Why are you leaving? Is it political?” Explanations about the sabbatical helped dispel rumors or speculation; most outsiders expressed amazement that such an incredible opportunity was being offered to the executive director.

Interviewees stressed that while community relationships during the sabbatical were seamless and disruptions were relatively minor, it was primarily due to deliberate preparation and communication with relevant parties. Transparency about the sabbatical helped keep operations running smoothly. As one key informant noted, “I think everyone pretty much wanted to know who the point person is – who’s going to be there to resolve things?”

Preparation was stressed as the key to a smooth transition of responsibility and leadership during the sabbaticals and to minimizing the impact on partner organizations. One executive director credited the TCWF pre-sabbatical orientation session with alerting him/her to the importance of communicating with partner organizations. As a result, communication strategies were implemented and an effort was launched to increase staff capacity to work effectively with partners.

c) Successes and Challenges

Interviewees reported that for the most part, everything went well and their organizations’ operations continued as expected. In fact, 16 executive directors reported that an intended outcome of the sabbatical period was just that – to show that staff could function without their leader. As one put it, “The intention was that the clients were served; the work was done and everything was fine.” Other positive organizational changes resulted from the

sabbatical as well. While reorganizing staff responsibilities in preparation for the executive director's absence, one interim director observed that the organization was somewhat understaffed in key management positions, particularly middle management, and a new staff position was filled as a result. There also was a new appreciation for each staff member's contribution. As a key informant stated, "[The sabbatical] showed how important everyone was to the team."

I knew what needed to be done. It was just getting myself mentally prepared to "go to" myself to solve that problem.
Interim Director

Sometimes the successes were not as dramatic or as long-lasting – one interim director noted that the decisions made during the sabbatical were very short-term, *status quo* decisions: "I made decisions that I wouldn't have made if I was CEO. My decisions were based on, 'How can I [get us] through the months before the CEO gets back?'" Another interim director observed that although the organization didn't experience any dramatic crises during the executive director's absence, there were "bumps in the road" that were learning experiences for everyone.

Organizations sometimes discovered that what worked when the executive director was present didn't work quite as well when s/he was away. These challenges took a variety of forms; in one case, issues that arose during the sabbatical were compounded by a difference in management style between the executive director and the interim director, culminating in administrative "chaos." In other cases, organizational stresses were the result of pre-existing personnel issues such as poor attendance or inappropriate behavior. One staff member reported that a pre-sabbatical problem was exacerbated during the sabbatical when a key person proved unwilling to give up control in some areas and ultimately left the organization. Another executive director had tolerated a personnel problem for 15 years that became a stumbling block while s/he was away. In both cases, the sabbatical resulted in moving those staff out of the organization and hiring more skilled replacements.

Although these challenges were difficult for the organization, the issues that were revealed allowed leaders to respond and make appropriate changes: the sabbatical "made visible the invisible" and prompted necessary changes. One key informant related, "[The executive director] had more energy to handle those things and came back ready to deal with them."

Some challenges that were not anticipated occurred in the immediate post-sabbatical period – the re-entry phase. Procedures put in place while one executive director was away were difficult to rescind once s/he returned. An interim director related that "While the executive director was on sabbatical, I relied on the management team to assist in the overall management of the organization. It was a difficult adjustment for the executive director to get used to that when [s/he] came back." Interviewees reported that the re-entry phase was more problematic than anticipated and wished that they had put more effort into planning for the executive director's return.

C. Outcomes

Although TCWF's Sabbatical Program was designed with a simple goal in mind – to allow leaders of nonprofit organizations time off to rest and rejuvenate – the outcomes of the sabbatical experience were in fact more far-reaching.

Conversations with TCWF staff furthered our understanding of the rest and rejuvenation goals as well as possible secondary outcomes. They pointed out that what executive directors did while on sabbatical, and even whether or not they returned to their organization, are not necessarily indicators of success. Given that, just what does indicate success for the Sabbatical Program?

Certainly rest and rejuvenation for the executive director are indicators of success. However, outcomes related to organizational changes and the sustainability of these changes also are important legacies of the Sabbatical Program. Therefore, success can be determined by considering the evaluation questions described in Section II:

1. To what extent did the Sabbatical Program provide respite to executive directors to help mitigate high stress and burnout?
2. How did the outlooks, leadership, and management techniques of the Sabbatical Awardees change as a result of the Program?
3. What, if any, positive and/or adverse consequences did the nonprofit organizations experience due to the participation of their executive directors in the Sabbatical Program?
4. How were the stipends reserved for the nonprofit organizations of the Sabbatical Awardees used?
5. How did the Sabbatical Program contribute to the nonprofit organizations' stability and sustainability?

Findings relevant to each question are discussed below.

1. To what extent did the Sabbatical Program provide respite to executive directors?

Since executive directors could do whatever they wanted to do as long as it was not work-related, the rest and rejuvenation goal of the Program was easily realized. Regardless of how executive directors spent their time away, all reported feeling rested and rejuvenated by their sabbatical. Whether they traveled, fished, wrote books, reconnected with their children or bonded with their newborns, carpooled soccer teams to games, or cooked dinner for their spouses for the first time in years, all were energized and very thankful to TCWF for making

these experiences possible – even, or perhaps especially, those who spent their time away coping with illness or grieving the loss of a loved one.

a) Rest

Executive directors were passionate, hard-working, and engaged in their communities. Many reported being equally busy while on sabbatical, but with different kinds of activities. One executive director stated, “We [executive directors] have our own methods of relaxation. Part of coping is to achieve goals and benchmarks.” However, several reported that they were tired and they knew it, expressing that all they did was work or that they were fearful about how much longer they could last. Some organizations had just been through a rough period of lost funding, mergers, capital campaigns, or massive expansion. One executive director recounted saying, after having to lay off 15 staff, “Man, I need a break!” Some executive directors didn’t realize how much they needed a rest until they were on sabbatical.

I didn’t realize how really tired I was... I slept the first month.
Executive Director

b) Rejuvenation

It was not uncommon for executive directors to admit that it took a while to “break away” completely from work. One executive director related that their IT manager had to disconnect his e-mail account to get him to stop checking up on staff. However, whether they took a while to disentangle from work, truly took time to rest, or jumped right into a whirlwind of new activities, virtually all executive directors agreed that their sabbaticals left them feeling rejuvenated.

He definitely came back with a vengeance! He was ready to just roll up his sleeves and get in there!
Board Chair

Staff too saw evidence of change in their leaders when they returned: “He was totally a changed man – he’d lost a lot of weight and just had a burst of energy after he came back.” Another staff member who didn’t see the executive director’s sabbatical as totally positive laughed, “[Having her gone] was really hard – and draining. Funny, she came back all refreshed and we were all burned out... she had *way* too much energy!” Board members also agreed that executive directors came back from their sabbaticals with new energy.

Repeatedly, interviewees mentioned that executive directors were more relaxed after their return. One executive director reported, “My whole outlook changed. I used to get frustrated and mad at everything – I’ve really mellowed out a lot.” An interim staff member noted, “[The executive director] looked so happy when he returned – like a different person!”

c) Recognition

Although all executive directors felt honored to be recognized by their sabbatical award, they made it clear that they do their work for other reasons – commitment to the nonprofit sector and their own field or type of service, compassion for less fortunate community members, and a vision of a better world for all citizens. The annual awards

My husband came with me [to the awards luncheon] and was very proud. A lot of people were very proud.
Executive Director

luncheons reinforced that honor and allowed those selected to share their recognition with family, friends, and co-workers. In addition, focus group attendees reported being honored just to sit in the same room with other such impressive sabbatical recipients.

d) Other

As mentioned previously, three executive directors spent their sabbaticals as a stay-at-home parent or grandparent with newborns. Although not necessarily restful or rejuvenating, these times were profoundly important opportunities for executive directors to bond with family members. As one new dad told the focus group, “I kept trying to double task and it didn’t work. It was this great thing: if I hadn’t had the sabbatical, I might have never learned that until he was, like, 14.”

2. How did the outlooks, leadership, and management techniques of the Sabbatical Awardees change?

Just as executive directors, organizations, and sabbatical activities varied widely, so did the impact of the sabbaticals on leaders’ outlooks, leadership, and management styles. These impacts varied from little-to-no-change to a complete overhaul of some organizations after the executive director’s return.

a) Business Continued as Usual

Upon the return of the executive directors, some interviewees reported that things simply returned to the way they had been pre-sabbatical. As one executive director said, “I basically just stepped back into my role.” In part, this reflected thorough planning, a strong back-up management team, and a lack of unexpected crises during the executive director’s absence.

b) Changes Were Made

More dramatic changes in the executive director’s style or work habits included executive directors who no longer came to work early and left late. Instead of leaving at 10:00 or 11:00 p.m., these leaders were out the door by 6:00, if not earlier, and they encouraged their staff to

I think [executive director] finally woke up and realized that he has a life outside of work and that the agency will still operate.

Interim Director

do the same. Many executive directors were more diligent about using earned vacation time and again, encouraging their staff to do the same. As one executive director stated, “I make it a point to take two weeks off every three months.”

Some executive directors felt that they’d learned to be more efficient with their time and were more willing to “let go” of certain tasks that they’d always managed, such as direct supervision of staff. As one executive director put it, “I have lots of opportunity to do almost whatever I want to do because I’m not doing what I used to be doing.”

Executive directors took stock of their responsibilities upon their return and often started delegating more or hired additional staff. Executive directors also reported increased confidence in their staff, enabling them to feel secure in leaving duties in the hands of those who were responsible for them during their absence. This allowed them time to focus more on broader issues that they always knew they should have been taking on – fundraising, networking, and strategic thinking.

c) Big Shake-Ups Occurred

Occasionally, executive directors decided to re-think and re-structure their organizations based on their sabbatical experiences. This resulted in totally reassigning duties, or promoting or letting go of staff, according to how well the individuals and organization as a whole had performed during the sabbatical. One executive director reported such a significant change in thinking about her organization that her most reliable, stable, and committed staff member left within a month of her return and all staff and board members were gone within two years. However, as she related, “The gift was that it didn’t work. When I left, the vacuum was so huge that no one really could step into that. I couldn’t see that at the time. It didn’t work, so we could see the unhealthiness in the midst of us and make some very real changes. I could leave a month from now and [the organization] would be more than fine.”

We are no longer an executive director-dependent organization — it’s the best transition we made.

Executive Director

Five executive directors decided to retire or resign as a result of their sabbatical and gave notice upon their return to their organizations, in part because they learned from their experiences away that they were replaceable. As one executive director told her staff and board, “You should be really proud. You don’t need me! I don’t need to be here!”

3. What, if any, positive and/or adverse consequences did the nonprofit organizations experience?

Despite the stresses experienced during the executive director’s absence, a vast majority of interviewees reported that the sabbatical resulted in a positive experience for their organization and an increase in capacity – benefits that extended deep into the organization. In some ways, the organizational impacts and outcomes were equal to or greater than those of the executive directors themselves. Staff, board members, and executive directors reported that their sabbatical experience clarified “what worked and what didn’t” in their current organizational structure and highlighted or even accelerated much-needed changes. Sabbaticals helped the staff work together better and gain more clarity and understanding about their goals and challenges. Areas in which capacities were built related to infrastructure, staff empowerment, communications, teamwork, and leadership development.

Only one organization reported significant adverse consequences. The organization was having financial and staffing problems prior to the sabbatical. The executive director was suffering from burnout, both personal and professional. S/he also had guilt about leaving the agency at such a time, yet feeling that s/he couldn’t ***not*** go on sabbatical. Upon return from

three months of travel, s/he found the organization “a mess,” and in continued financial crisis. S/he reported, “I just had to bear down and work, work, work” for about a year to overcome the problems that had been brewing since before the sabbatical. That said, the interim director noted, “We learned that we weren’t adequately staffed in middle management, and how important everyone was to the team.” The executive director added, “I know now that the organization can survive without me.”

a) *Organizational Infrastructure*

Interviewees were in agreement that the sabbatical gave organizations an opportunity to assess their own effectiveness, bringing to light their strengths and weaknesses and allowing leadership to identify and implement corrective actions where needed. One executive director pointed out that the sabbatical award gave her and the board a greater sense of urgency and responsibility in terms of assessing the adequacy of their infrastructure. In response, they modified their systems to be more effective and mapped strategies to build organizational capacity. Others reported that the sabbaticals prompted a deeper analysis of the organization and helped teams identify what was needed to sustain it and to move it forward.

The sabbatical created an opportunity for people to step up and take ownership of their programs.

Interim Director

Changes in how staff perceived their organizations and their own roles also resulted from the sabbaticals. One staff member reported that the sabbatical had led to greater clarity of roles and lines of authority, allowing the organization to create a strong team that continued to support the executive director when he returned. In another organization, the leadership team realized that they needed to change their business model to better reflect their mission, the populations they serve, and their commitment to diversity.

b) *Staff Empowerment*

We learned that we can do it... that this organization is bigger than just one person.

Interim Director

The absence of the executive director for an extended period of time served as a catalyst for building staff capacities in organizations. Several interim directors reported that they and other staff became more independent without the executive directors’ involvement in most decisions, resulting in increased confidence and trust. Interim directors whose executive directors employed a more hands-on, micro-managing style reported a new sense of freedom to use their own leadership skills and exert greater autonomy in the workplace. Staff observed that less oversight provided them not only with learning experiences, but also the opportunity to test their own judgment, discover individual strengths, and identify areas of weakness. A board member serving as the interim director noted that the sabbatical built her confidence in the management team.

c) Increased Communication

Increased communication was another positive result of sabbatical experiences. One interim director observed that the sabbatical gave his organization the opportunity to adhere to the communication structure and “chain of command” that was in place, but had not been used routinely before the sabbatical.

Key staff often had been at their organizations for nearly as long as the executive director. The sabbatical period initiated discussion among members of the management team that raised their awareness of issues such as communication, succession planning, and staff strengths and gaps. As one person noted, “When people have been at an organization for so long, they can become fixtures; the sabbatical offered an opportunity to think in a meaningful way about how to carry on. It was valuable for board members and other program directors.” The sabbaticals led to re-thinking roles and responsibilities and prompted deeper dialogue among administrators, board members, program managers, and staff.

Generally, the executive director provided a direct link between the board and the staff. In the executive director’s absence, leadership communication widened to include broader participation of upper- and intermediate-level managers and staff. With a higher degree of staff accountability, board oversight often increased during the sabbatical. Organizations took special effort to ensure that senior managers worked closely together and with the board. As one key informant stated, “This resulted in more communication or check-ins than normal – communication has been more intentional and has been maintained.”

d) Increased Teamwork

During the sabbaticals, staff had opportunities to take on new challenges. An interim director reported that one of the biggest successes of his organization during the sabbatical grew from a team response to an unexpected funding opportunity. “I put together a team to work on it, to envision what we wanted to do. It was a huge success – everybody owned that!” During the sabbatical, staff not only grew in ownership of the organization and its mission, but also gained an understanding of others’ roles and how they contributed to the organization.

It made the staff a team. We all worked together. Everybody was on the same page and really worked together to help everybody.

Interim Director

By managing the organization during the sabbatical, interim directors reported identifying skills they didn’t know they had as well as developing new skills. They also discovered the power of the collective. As one staff person said, “The piece that was really good is that whatever one person didn’t have, the other did. We all would get together and figure it all out. Our camaraderie grew and so did our problem solving and communications with our own directors. It was a real positive experience.”

In organizations with a strong participatory culture, interim directors reported that even in challenging times, they were able to manage well because the staff included people with different areas of expertise that could be brought to the table. They also described bonding

as a team, more frequent communication across teams, and greater understanding of the complexity of their organizations as a result of working together to fill in during their executive directors' absences.

e) Leadership Development

Increased leadership capacity was supported through trainings, coaches, and consultants. Given the opportunity to put new skills into practice, interim directors were able to demonstrate their ability to assume leadership in the organization. As they were exposed to different responsibilities, staff became better prepared to handle more responsibility. This increased capacity extended down through the ranks of organizations as tasks were reassigned, yielding additional benefits to the organization.

When weaknesses were uncovered in organizations, the sabbatical provided insights and elucidated avenues for improvement and change. Staff members were cross trained – one interim director of a small organization was able to report that “Now anyone can fill any position.”

4. How were stipends reserved for the organizations used?

Sabbatical grants included \$5,000 designated for professional development and/or organizational support before or during the executive director's absence, to be used in whatever way was deemed most appropriate. Organizations that used their professional development funds to hold team-building staff retreats reported that time away from work was devoted to candid and fruitful communication – an opportunity to strengthen and rebuild relationships, examine leadership roles, and discuss their strengths and weaknesses. Organizations also used the professional development funds for staff trainings aimed at increasing leadership and management skills, fiscal management, and/or specific skill areas such as grant writing. One organization used these funds to send its Medical Director and Operations Officer to trainings with the National Association of Community Health Centers. Another organization sent its proposed interim director to a training program for nonprofit leaders and beginning executive directors.

We used [the \$5,000] to contract a coach for me to do work with on leadership issues that might come up during that time. It was probably the best thing we could have done.

Executive Director

A less common use of the professional development funds was hiring a coach or consultant to work with interim directors. Coaches' involvement ranged from working very closely with interim directors to playing a very minor role. However, just knowing that consultants were available provided a reassuring safety net. In one organization, a consultant was hired early on to assist the organization in planning for the sabbatical.

Awarding bonuses for staff members' extra time and effort during the sabbatical was another use of the professional support funds. Whether they were used as incentives with clear and mutually-agreed-upon objectives and benchmarks prior to the sabbatical, to hire additional staff, or to pay the interim director an executive director's salary during the sabbatical, all key informants expressed gratitude for the added financial support. One executive director

who was about to take a sabbatical said, “The \$5,000 for infrastructure will help out a lot. We’re using it to hire a part-time temp for administrative support services – that was the only part I was concerned about.”

Executive directors occasionally sought input from their staff on how the funds should be used. The organization with three interim directors had a unique approach: they added \$1,000 to the total amount, split the money three ways, and allowed them to spend the money for something that would help them in their work.

5. How did the Program contribute to the organizations’ stability and sustainability?

a) *Succession Planning and Transition*

Succession planning became much more relevant to the organizations, since the sabbatical experience revolved around their executive director’s extended absence. Only five of the 33 organizations already had formal succession plans with oversight and regular progress updates. Organizations that had done little or no succession planning prior to receiving the sabbatical award reported that it stimulated thinking about executive transition, either formally through the board, or informally through discussions with staff members.

Whether succession planning among the organizations was formal or informal, all commented on the benefits – individually and organizationally – of thinking beyond their current day-to-day operations and challenges. It gave them an opportunity to move important topics critical to the survival of the agency “off the back burner,” as one staff person described it, and to begin to plan in a more thoughtful, strategic way.

The sabbatical was a way to make us think about things a lot of nonprofits don’t really want to think about.

Interim Director

For organizations that had actively engaged in succession planning prior to the sabbatical, the experience provided an opportunity to “test” leadership skills – to see how well the organization could run during the executive director’s absence. For organizations that had not addressed longer-term transition issues, participating in the Sabbatical Program stimulated a greater sense of urgency to begin figuring out how the organization could survive and thrive in the long term through determining its staffing and infrastructure needs. Examples of specific future-focused outcomes included securing an insurance policy on the executive director, beginning strategic planning, focusing more on the development of new managers, and cross training mid-level staff to prepare them for new responsibilities.

Board members agreed that the sabbatical gave their organizations a chance to think seriously about the future. They spoke of the importance of seeing how resilient the organization was during the executive director’s absence and assessing the organization’s stability and sustainability. The sabbatical was viewed as having a positive impact on the organization by virtually all board members. “We learned that we could survive without [the executive director]” was a comment that captured this sentiment, a welcome indicator of organizational strength.

Interim directors related that, in addition to providing a well-deserved rest for the executive director, the sabbatical provided an opportunity for “fresh eyes” to look at how the organization functioned on a daily basis. Staff “stepped up” in a variety of ways that demonstrated their skills and developed relationships with the board and other key stakeholders. At the same time, the executive directors’ absences reminded everyone of their leaders’ value and competence and how essential their skills and experience were for the organizations.

Instead of stimulating a succession plan, one organization experienced the opposite effect. The executive director reported that his/her board was so happy and relieved when s/he returned that they had no intention of planning ahead for future transitions.

b) Sustaining the Change

Several factors appeared to influence sustainability of individual and organizational changes.

Attitude/Self Care

The executive director’s attitude upon re-entry played a significant part in whether benefits were sustained. Executive directors who returned from their sabbaticals with a strong sense of valuing their health and well being, and a desire to create a greater balance between their work and personal life, found their sense of rejuvenation more likely to continue. They were more apt to build ways to take care of themselves into their routines and to recognize, acknowledge, and find ways to alleviate stress, and to promote wellness among their staff.

Part of the discussion in the alumni focus group was about staying well, with executive directors noting that the organizations they led were in the business of health and wellness. As one executive director put it, “There is something elegant about ‘walking the talk’ and actually practicing internally what we’re trying to foster outside the organization.”

***We used to think, “Well, I’m so cool, I work until eight or nine every night, I’m so important the world will fall apart without me.” I see now that that’s total ego!
Executive Director***

Focus group participants said that one way to sustain the sabbatical’s benefits would be to repeat it at regular intervals – as often as every three to five years. In lieu of that, some executive directors were eager to explore the concept of “mini-sabbaticals” as a means of maintaining rest and rejuvenation. Although mini-sabbaticals don’t offer an extended escape from day-to-day work concerns, participants stressed the value of taking time, when possible, such as tacking on extra days to business travel, just to relax and enjoy life. One executive director pointed out that the root of the word “sabbatical” is “Sabbath,” implying that even one extra day of rest can be beneficial. There was strong support for building rest and rejuvenation time into expectations for staff as well, and for creating a healthier work/life balance within the organization’s culture.

Returning to Work – the Executive Director, Staff and Board

Executive directors described a “honeymoon” phase just after they returned from their sabbaticals, which quickly gave way to the realities of being back on the job. The ease of re-entry appeared to be related to the executive directors’ level of trust in others’ abilities. Leaders who focused on staff and board growth and sought ways to continue delegating some of their responsibilities maintained more of their sabbaticals’ benefits.

There was a period in my life as an executive director where I really felt that everything had to have my imprint on it. Now it’s like “I trust you guys.”

Executive Director

Not surprisingly, many staff reported a sense of relief when the executive director returned. For some, the executive director’s return meant simply being able to return to old patterns and roles – “I don’t need to work so hard because [the executive director] will take care of it.” In contrast, those who viewed the post-sabbatical stage as an opportunity to continue to explore their own leadership potential helped the organization not only sustain what had been gained, but set a course of continued improvement.

Board members reported that the sabbatical period gave them a broader view of the organization. When their new role was personally gratifying, perceived as helpful by staff, and valued by the executive director, board members were likely to remain highly engaged. The sabbatical also provided an opportunity for board members, managers, and staff to get to know and work alongside one another, building relationships that helped ensure that the lessons learned during the sabbatical were used to benefit the organization.

I feel far more comfortable with the sustainability in this agency at this point in time.

Board Chair

Systems

Structures and systems within the organization contributed to sustaining the benefits. For some, sabbaticals provided an opportunity to test existing systems such as communications, staff supervision, financial management, and policies and procedures under new circumstances. Other organizations needed to develop new systems, procedures, and modes of operation. In both scenarios, the process was beneficial in sparking a critical analysis of the gaps and leading to stronger systems that could support the organization into the future – with or without the executive director. Whether the organization was transformed or merely fine-tuned to accommodate the sabbatical, interviewees reported that the effects were more lasting if decisions made during the sabbatical were put in writing, clearly communicated to all involved, and integrated into the policies, practices, and day-to-day routines of the organization.

IV. KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Key evaluation findings related to grantee organizations, executive directors, and the nonprofit sector are presented below.

A. Sabbaticals Succeed

The Sabbatical Program is a grant-making effort that meets an important need and provides resources to outstanding individuals and nonprofit organizations. The Program's reputation for excellence is evident among other funders, the health nonprofit sector, the community of nonprofit executive directors, and the recipients of Sabbatical Program grants.

The Sabbatical Program places TCWF in a unique position among major funders. While many other funders report an interest in and value for such grants, few foundations have built on that interest and included sabbatical programs in their grant-making portfolios.

TCWF's continuing commitment to the Sabbatical Program provides opportunities for the Foundation to be a philanthropic leader. While funders in general support nonprofit organizations rather than individual leaders of organizations, TCWF's Sabbatical Program recognizes the importance of the executive director in those nonprofits. By recognizing and supporting leaders in the nonprofit sector, TCWF has a natural platform for encouraging other funders to consider how they might respond to the needs of executive directors and other leaders. This is particularly important as the nonprofit sector continues to see many of its long-time leaders preparing for retirement – highlighting the importance of succession planning in these organizations.

The Sabbatical Program requires a relatively modest outlay of staff, consultant time, and grant funds to continue its process of alerting the nonprofit sector and its executive directors to the potential for sabbatical support; recruiting and selecting grantees; and recognizing, funding, and supporting executive directors and their organizations during the sabbatical period.

B. Executive Directors Learn

Building Trust

Executive directors discussed their need to finally let go and simply trust their staff and the systems that were in place in their organizations. Despite initial difficulty doing so, they eventually found that they could take full advantage of their time off. Executive directors didn't necessarily return to find their organizations in perfect order, but discovering that they had operated reasonably well overall was an important learning experience. It was fine to let go, "As long as you have board members who will step up and staff experienced and willing to take responsibility, it'll be fine." Executive directors discovered a new-found freedom to delegate more after they returned because of the trust developed while they were away. New relationships developed, new teams formed, and a new climate of collaboration emerged in many of the organizations.

Mutual Appreciation

The increased appreciation that staff and boards felt for their executive directors was matched by an equally powerful appreciation on the part of executive directors for their staff and for the resilience of their organizations. Executive directors found upon their return that

they were able to delegate with confidence and share the responsibilities of leadership with a staff that was well able to take on expanded roles.

Re-entry Challenges

One of the most difficult challenges reported by staff and executive directors was the re-entry phase. Some executive directors returned to organizations that had undergone major changes during their absences: new staff had been hired, new routines had been established, staff had become accustomed to a different leader and leadership style, and some of the executive directors' old ways of doing things had been re-examined. Occasionally, executive directors returned to find a crisis in progress and needed to hit the ground running, or came back to find the interim director patiently or impatiently waiting to relinquish the reins. Sometimes the executive director was simply not ready to return, or not to the same fast pace or previous style of working. Because the challenges in returning were often unanticipated, interviewees came to realize that preparation for re-entry was as important as planning to leave.

Life is Bigger than Work

Executive directors reported rediscovering their world, their families, and even themselves as a result of their sabbaticals – realizing that there is a whole life beyond the office. They learned that in order to be truly effective, they needed time off; as one executive director put it, “Time just for yourself, then you can come back and give more.” Allowing one’s self to become burned out was deemed a disservice to both the individual and to his/her organization. The same philosophy carried over to the organization as a whole. Several focus group participants reported a major “Aha!” moment regarding the subject of wellness – focusing some of their energy when they returned on ways to promote wellness among staff and “to be more in tune with helping each other get the time off that we need.”

***Plan well and forget about it...
just go and relax and
reconnect, discover and enjoy.
Executive Director***

Support Systems to Connect and Reinforce

Some executive directors initially were surprised that they might need a support system. However, they reported that their sabbatical helped them realize the need for, and importance of, such support. In part, this was due to not knowing what to expect; it also stemmed from wanting to learn from others' experiences and validating that what they were doing was acceptable. Their concerns or doubts were topics that they felt they couldn't discuss internally with staff or board members, while someone outside the organization could help them get a clearer perspective. Executive directors also wanted an opportunity to connect with others who had taken sabbaticals and to share their own stories when they returned. The sabbatical was not just a vacation; to some executive directors it was a highly emotional experience. Connecting with others who had gone on sabbaticals could allow an opportunity to learn from them as well as to remember and reaffirm what they had learned on their own.

C. Organizations Benefit

We Can Do It

Organizations' experiences confirmed that an organization is bigger than any one person. The sabbatical provided an opportunity to test organizational resilience and demonstrate that

1) people were willing and able to step up to fill the executive role, and 2) everyone was important to the team. In the absence of the executive director, organizations could, for the most part, function effectively with the staff they had. Even when everyone did not or could not rise to the occasion, the organization and its board gained important insights about organizational capacities and what responsibilities current staff could assume. For the interim directors, it was an opportunity to test their own abilities and gain a new view of the executive director role – a learning that will likely shape their future career decisions.

Building Skills and Confidence

Giving new responsibility and/or greater independence to staff not only tested their capabilities, it also allowed them to learn and practice new skills. Demonstrating that operations could function smoothly and experiencing first hand that “we can do it” instilled a new sense of confidence for the interim director, board members, and other staff as well. That new-found confidence was sometimes hard-earned: often, adjustments had to be made to a new style of leadership, new relationships had to be forged, tough decisions had to be made, and mistakes needed to be rectified. However, there was consensus among interviewees that the sabbatical was an opportunity for everyone to stretch and grow, resulting in the commitment to support a more inclusive management system, build a stronger infrastructure, and/or develop new leaders.

Greater Appreciation

Board and staff members alike learned a great deal about their executive directors while they were on sabbatical – their strengths, the difficulty of the role they fill, and the intensity of the often invisible work they do to keep the organizations on track and thriving. Whether it was their visionary leadership, long-term connections in the community, intuition drawn from years of experience, and/or participatory management style, these leaders’ talents were missed. Theirs were big shoes to fill. Increased understanding of the magnitude of the executive director’s role was balanced by the discovery that s/he was not indispensable. Executive directors similarly grew to appreciate staff – and the fact that their organizations were able to carry on in their absence.

Planning Ahead

Staff and board members reported that it was crucial to take a close look at all aspects of the organization in order to plan and prepare for the executive director’s absence. Scheduling the sabbatical at a time when their absence was least disruptive (e.g., when contracts had been negotiated, staffing was stable, and there were no impending crises) was a priority for executive directors. Planning was more complicated than simply designating an interim leader; it involved a complex blend of high-level efforts including conducting systems analyses, designing strategies, training staff, implementing communications, and ensuring sensitive relationship building within the organization. This planning led to such activities as review and redesign of policies and procedures, defining or redefining roles and responsibilities, designating a chain of command, anticipating issues, developing contingency plans, reviewing guidelines, and providing orientations. At times, the planning process pointed out the need to have more than one person on the team who understood each job – a more collaborative or team-focused approach. This, in itself, prompted thinking about the future and “continuing to look forward and to go deeper into the organization.”

Capacity Building for the Nonprofit Sector

Included among the benefits of the sabbatical grants was the support of organizations and their staff in leadership development, fiscal management, and other capacity-building areas. Funds were used to hire coaches and trainers, allowing staff to stretch and grow into new roles. The next tier of managers gained valuable exposure to the executive director's role and responsibilities. As one interim director said, "The focus also was for me to position myself to be CEO, maybe here, or someplace else. It pushed me to that next career step."

V. SUMMARY

The nonprofit sector is a critical resource for developing, supporting, and building our communities. In particular, health-related nonprofit organizations are in a unique position to provide benefits to individuals as well as communities. These benefits include health improvement, population-appropriate information and services, a safety net for those in need, and opportunities for civic engagement. The leadership of these organizations includes experienced, trained, committed, and often over-worked executive directors – executive directors who provide stability and wisdom for this important work.

In 2003, TCWF launched its Sabbatical Program, a grant-making initiative that provides resources for executive director rest, rejuvenation, and recognition. During the Program's first five years, TCWF supported 36 executive directors and their organizations across the State of California to plan and undertake a three- to six-month sabbatical. While the requirements and expectations imposed by TCWF on those taking a sabbatical are minimal, the results of the program are profound and impressive.

Those chosen as Awardees were outstanding directors and individuals. Only one had previously taken a sabbatical, and many had taken little time off from the demanding positions they held. All had been in their executive director role for a substantial period of time. All were appreciative of the opportunities that the grant made possible. The executive directors felt recognized. They rested. After the sabbatical they were rejuvenated, and most returned to their organizations with a different perspective.

The organizations involved in the Sabbatical Program were outstanding as well. They were recognized and valued by their communities, and the awards provided resources, time, and encouragement to consider succession planning so that the organizations could remain strong well into the future.

Sabbaticals did present challenges to the executive directors and their organizations. However, from our visits, conversations, reading, and observations it was clear that the challenges were far outweighed by the benefits that accrued from participation in the Program. This unique, proactive grant program clearly has had a positive impact on the lives of exceptional nonprofit leaders, their equally impressive organizations, and the strategic thinking of funders committed to communities and organizations and their continued success.

ATTACHMENTS:

- A. Organization Descriptions**
- B. Key Informant Interview Questions**
- C. Bibliography**

Attachment A: Organization Descriptions

Executive Director	Organization	City	Organization Type	**Annual Budget	Tenure as ED	ED Status	† Interviews		
							ED	S	B
2003									
Ann Britt	Valley Community Clinic	N. Hollywood	Clinic	7	20	Retired	✓	✓	✓
boona cheema	Building Opportunities for Self-Sufficiency	Berkeley	Homeless and disability services	6	30	Still ED	✓	✓	✓
Dave Jones	Mountain Valleys Health Centers, Inc.	Bieber	Clinic	7	21	Still ED	✓	✓	
Stephen Schilling	Clinica Sierra Vista	Bakersfield	Clinic	44	31	Still ED	✓	✓	✓
Diane Takvorian*	Environmental Health Coalition	San Diego	Policy and community health	2	28	Still ED	✓	✓	
Karin Wandrei	Mendocino Family and Youth Services	Ukiah	Youth services	0.3	10	Still ED	✓	✓	✓
2004									
Jane Garcia	La Clinica de La Raza	Oakland	Clinic	41	30	Still ED	✓	✓	✓
Dian Harrison	Planned Parenthood Golden Gate	San Francisco	Reproductive health services	21	15	Still ED	✓	✓	
Debra Oto-Kent*	Health Education Council of W. Sacramento	Sacramento	Health education	2	26	Still ED	✓	✓	
Rick Mesa	The Ranch Recovery Centers, Inc.	Desert Hot Springs	Substance abuse services	2	7	Still ED	✓	✓	✓
Barbara Mitchell	Interim, Inc	Monterey	Mental health/disability services	6	24	Still ED	✓	✓	✓
Bernita Walker*	Project: Peacemakers, Inc.	Los Angeles	Domestic violence prevention	0.6	13	Still ED	✓	✓	✓
2005									
Shannon Chavez	North County Rape Crisis/Child Protection Center	Lompoc	Intervention services	0.5	25	Still ED	✓	✓	✓
Shirley J. Cole	North City Lifeline, Inc.	Vista	Community health services	7	24	Retired	✓	✓	✓
Cheryl L. Houston*	Critical Learning Systems, Inc	Alta Loma	HIV/AIDS prevention	-	-	Resigned			
Camille Schraeder*	Redwood Children's Services, Inc.	Ukiah	Foster care	-	-	Still ED			
April Y. Silas	Homeless Children's Network	San Francisco	Homeless services	1.2	14	Still ED	✓		
Diane Sommers	Suicide Prevention of Yolo County	Davis	Suicide prevention	0.5	18	Still ED	✓	✓	✓
Lue N. Yang	Fresno Center for New Americans	Fresno	Community health services	2	15	Still ED	✓	✓	
Richard Zaldivar*	The Wall-Las Memorias Project	Los Angeles	HIV/AIDS prevention	0.5	15	Still ED	✓	✓	
2006									
Speranza Avram*	Northern Sierra Rural Health Network	Nevada City	Clinic consortium	1.8	10	Resigned	✓	✓	✓
Louis Chicone*	Tri-City Homeless Coalition	Fremont	Homeless services	2.4	12	Still ED	✓	✓	✓
Brian Contreras*	2nd Chance Family & Youth Services	Salinas	Violence prevention	0.4	19	Still ED	✓		
Xavier Flores*	Pueblo Y Salud, Inc	San Fernando	Substance abuse prevention	0.3	15	Resigned	✓	✓	
Harry Foster	Family Healthcare Network	Visalia	Clinic	60	24	Still ED	✓	✓	✓
Michael Green*	Center for Environmental Health	Oakland	Policy and community health	0.8	10	Still ED	✓	✓	✓
Rojane Jackson*	Community Interface Services	Carlsbad	Disability services	4.7	23	Still ED	✓	✓	✓
Pheng Lo*	Lao Family Community of Stockton, Inc	Stockton	Community health services	-	-	Deceased			
2007									
Fred Bauermeister*	Free Clinic of Simi Valley	Simi Valley	Clinic	0.3	36	Still ED	✓		
Maria Costello	Crossroads Foundation	San Diego	Substance abuse services	0.3	15	Still ED	✓	✓	✓
Rufino Dominguez	C.B. Para el Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueño	Fresno	Community health services	1	9	Still ED	✓		
April Lee Go Forth*	Resources for Indian Student Education, Inc.	Alturas	Community health services	0.4	12	Still ED	✓	✓	✓
M. Krouse-Taylor	Casa de Esperanza, Inc.	Yuba City	Domestic violence prevention	1	27	Still ED	✓		✓
Penny Newman*	Center for Community Action/ Environmental Justice	Riverside	Policy and community health	1.3	15	Still ED	✓		
William Rodriguez*	Com. In Schools of San Fernando Valley, Inc	North Hills	Violence prevention	1.3	13	Still ED	✓	✓	✓
Mary Szecsey	West County Health Centers, Inc.	Guerneville	Clinic	5	12	Still ED	✓		✓

* Founder or Co-Founder of the organization ** Estimated budget in \$M † ED (executive director), S (Staff), (Board) ✓ Organizational representatives interviewed

Attachment B: Crosswalk of Key Informant Interview Questions

The following table lists the interview questions asked by type of key informant. Depending upon the timing of their sabbatical, executive directors participating in the Sabbatical Program in year five may have been interviewed before (pre-), during, or after (post-) sabbatical. In a few instances, 2007 executive directors were interviewed more than one time. Likewise, the 2007 board representative may have been interviewed pre- or post-sabbatical. Staff key informants were interviewed only post-sabbatical.

Question	ED = Executive Director			Board Pre	Board Post	Staff Post
	ED Pre	ED During	ED Post			
Tell me a little about yourself and your involvement with (<i>name of organization/current position</i>).	X	X	X	X	X	X
What prompted you to apply for the Program?	X	X	X			
Do you have a specific <i>plan</i> for your time during the sabbatical? <u>If so</u> , what is the plan?	X					
Did [does] the Board have a role in decision-making or planning for the executive director's absence? <u>If so</u> , explain.				X	X	
How did you spend your time away?			X			
Could you comment on whether the Program provides recognition?	X	X				
The sabbatical Program aims to provide recognition, rest, and rejuvenation for non-profit executive directors. - Could you comment on whether the Program provided recognition? - Did you feel rested and rejuvenated after your sabbatical?			X			
How do you think your [the] sabbatical is viewed by the staff? - By the board? - By clients or the people you serve? - By other colleagues in the field?	X	X		X	X	X
How much time was there between when your [the] sabbatical grant was awarded and when your [the] sabbatical began?	X	X	X		X	X
How did your organization prepare for your [the] sabbatical leave? [<i>Probes:</i> - How were duties delegated? - What steps were taken to prepare others? - Was the time leading up to departure adequate (about right) for the organization to prepare? - Were any concerns expressed about how the sabbatical would impact the organization? <u>If so</u> , explain.	X	X	X		X	X
How well do you think your [the] organization functioned in your [the executive director's] absence? What were the successes and challenges?			X		X	X
Are there ways that the sabbatical contributed to the organization's capacities or its planning? <u>If so</u> , explain.			X		X	X
[Cohort 4 only] What impact, if any, do you think the sabbatical had on other organizations that you work			X		X	X

Question	ED Pre	ED During	ED Post	Board Pre	Board Post	Staff Post
closely (partner) with?						
What happened when you returned to work – what were the successes and challenge?			X			
When you [the executive director] returned from the sabbatical? What, if anything, changed in how you [the executive director] approached your [his/her] work?			X		X	X
What, if anything, changed on a more personal level?			X			
TCWF provided \$35k to support the sabbatical. - Was that amount appropriate and adequate given what the Sabbatical Program is trying to achieve? - How was the funding used?	X	X	X			X
Did the Sabbatical Program prompt the organization to think about succession planning for its leadership roles? <u>If yes</u> , explain.			X		X	X
What insight or wisdom could you pass on to others who find themselves filling the shoes of an executive director on sabbatical?						X
What advice would you give other executive directors/organizations planning for a sabbatical?	X		X		X	X
What did you and the organization learn from the experience of this sabbatical?	X		X		X	X
Do you have any suggestions for improving the Sabbatical Program?			X			
What did you think about the application and selection process?	X	X	X			
How helpful was the orientation session?	X	X	X			
Has your organization considered instituting a sabbatical for other staff?			X		X	X
Would you [have liked/like] an opportunity to talk with other executive directors who have taken sabbaticals? Is there a support role that others sharing this experience can provide? <u>If so</u> , how might that happen?	X		X			

Attachment C: Bibliography

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The Center for Community Health
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*Part of the Group Health
Center for Health Studies*

1730 Minor Ave. Suite 1600
Seattle, WA 98101

phone: 206-287-4389
cche@ghc.org