



Wellness Equity

Report & Recommendations from the Nonprofit Wellness Pilot

By Susan Comfort and Rachel Rosner

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Letter from Susan (June 2020)

“OUR PEOPLE ARE OUR MOST PRECIOUS RESOURCE.”

All leaders have uttered a version of these words at some point.

All leaders want their staff to thrive, to have what they need to be productive. With constant change, chronic stress, and lean budgets, this has always been tricky for nonprofits.

And now, with society roiling from a global pandemic, widespread Black Lives Matter protests, and a polarized electoral environment, nonprofit leaders need new ways to help their teams thrive.

Good news: there are practices forward-thinking leaders can deploy to take care of their teams. No, we can't afford to spend \$7 billion, like the corporate sector does for wellness benefits. But nonprofits and schools also cannot afford to continue with wellness as an afterthought.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

I was in the nonprofit trenches for 25 years, constantly organizing, fundraising, managing, worrying. It was typical workaholicism, fed by mission passion: I've burned out a few times, but always returned. Many of my colleagues left the sector and never came back. After the 2016 election, the collective stress level in D.C. spiked overnight (and somehow, kept escalating to the present day).

In 2018, I decided to study organizational development at Georgetown, and I was hatching this Nonprofit Wellness Pilot at the same time. I needed an evaluator. I was thrilled to be connected with Rachel Rosner, who had worked with United Farm Workers, an organization that spurred my activism in the 90s. She agreed to co-design the research effort to address nonprofit burnout (and did it for free until we raised a little funding, thanks Rachel!).

You'll read in this report what we learned from our cohort, which was focused on folks who tend to have more stress (non-white, female, lower-income). It was an early nod toward what we now call **“wellness equity” — those who are most stressed, deserve the most wellness resources.**



SPOILER ALERT: Addressing wellness needs at nonprofits is complex. Harder than we thought.

1. We invited participants to “treat” their stress by going to classes or getting individual coaching, like workouts or meditation or financial counseling. But bringing experts in, to work with staff in the office, was what built team camaraderie as well as individual skills. **These investments in group**



experiences brought people together across differences of age, race, power, sector, or even union lines. In our screen-focused world, we miss out on interpersonal team-building. Talking about human wellness promotes vulnerability and therefore builds trust and connection across lines of difference. And with distributed teams, including working from home, this can be facilitated online.

- 2. We need to share creative solutions with shoestring budgets.** Nonprofits rarely have money set aside for wellness (beyond basic health insurance), despite unanimity on the need for stronger physical health and mental resilience. Cheap solutions exist, with in-house talent and coordination. **Let's compare notes.**

A round of applause, please, for the 60 nonprofit workers who participated in this Pilot. We picked a whirlwind six months — elections 2018, year-end fundraising, the government shutdown of 2019, more school shootings, a prevaricating president — yet they didn't complain about the stress (it's our M.O. in D.C.). We also appreciate the local wellness community for donating \$40,000 worth of services and supplies, making this all possible. ¡MIL GRACIAS!

Share these report findings any way you can. If you would like to support our outreach, please contribute: go to www.thecommunityfoundation.org/donate and choose "Nonprofit Wellness Pilot Fund." We shout out our deep gratitude to the Greater Washington Community Foundation for hosting this Fund, and to Alicia Robinson and Shira Broms for serving as our advisors.

Nonprofit Wellness is dedicated to weaving individual self-care skills into a blanket of team wellness culture. Download our tools at nonprofitwellness.org and let us know how it goes for you and your team.

Toward better burnout solutions,

Susan Comfort

Founder, NonprofitWellness.org
Principal, Comfort Consulting

I. Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to share actionable lessons from the six-month Nonprofit Wellness Pilot.

Nonprofit workers and teachers toil long, underpaid hours to serve the community, educate children, and/or spark social change. Passion is considered part of the paycheck for this rewarding work. However, these professionals face unprecedented stress, unpredictable budgets, and lack of support. Generally, there are lower salaries, minimal benefits, and only basic health care. Our leadership pipelines are narrowing dramatically.

“ Sadly I’ve seen so many good people who have just gone into the corporate sector and never come back.” (APALA)

In designing this Pilot, Susan Comfort first read *Happy Healthy Nonprofit* by Beth Kanter, then administered a 2017 burnout survey, where nonprofit staff were asked 10 questions on their employers’ approach to physical, mental, and team health.

In May 2018, nonprofit workers in the DC metro area were invited to apply to the Pilot, ranking physical and mental health benefits that would be most useful to them. From 100 applicants, we invited 60 people from 13 groups to participate in our six-month project. Then we helped them raise \$200 per person as a base fee (from their groups, individuals, or foundations). We invited local providers to donate the services that had been ranked. Then we distributed benefits and spent six months asking participants (via surveys and interviews) how it was going. Mileage varied, as you’ll see.

“ People get consumed with work life. You’ve got to remind yourself that you do have a life as well. And it’s okay to take time for yourself, go to the gym, go do yoga, self-care, it’s extremely important.” (FMBC)

We took a Lean Startup¹ approach. It’s called a “build, measure, learn” cycle when you listen to participants and incorporate their feedback for “continuous innovation.” So, for example, after the baseline survey, we expanded our thinking — in addition to sending workers out to redeem individual benefits at DC studios, we also recruited experts to come in and provide services in their offices.

“ I think it would be cool if there was more opportunity to do more things that come to the office.” (RPDC)

¹ The Lean Startup: How Today’s Entrepreneurs Use Continuous Innovation to Create Radically Successful Businesses, by Eric Ries, 2011.

FIVE FINDINGS:

- 1 Participants judged themselves, overall, as having poor individual health. Most self-reported “some progress” over the six months of the Pilot.**

“*To incorporate these things in our lives, we need a lot of assistance and reminders to make it easy. Once you start, it’s great and you feel better, but I’m frequently the last person that I prioritize.*” (APALA)

Wellness was ranked on energy level, work-life balance, work satisfaction/commitment, productivity level, and physical fitness. The most significant improvements from the beginning of the pilot to the end were improved rankings with physical health and energy level, with increases averaging 12% and 11%, respectively.

- 2 Off-site individual benefits were great, and sometimes frustrating.**

“*It’s harder to hold myself accountable ... If it was just up to me to go to a studio or a gym, I would be more likely to put it off.*” (FMBC)

The individual benefits were the reason many people applied, and overall, participants felt positively about having access to different options. In reality, given the short time and limited benefits, it was tough to determine the effectiveness of these interventions. Many respondents did not get their top choice of neighborhood/studio, or could not utilize benefits due to busy schedules and travel. Cheaper access to expensive fitness is attractive, but price doesn’t matter if you are out of town, unable to leave the office, or if you have not prioritized personal health.

- 3 Of the individual benefits, the phone-based benefits were most accessible and popular.**

“*[Coaching over five months] ...really helped me think through a lot of personal challenges that were creating mental blocks for me in the workplace. And then we had some really solid, specific, actionable advice for challenges.*” (APALA)

Due to barriers around off-site benefits, participants appreciated phone-based benefits that are more flexible and can be less time-consuming. Ease of accessibility is a key factor in any wellness program. In this category, personal coaching and Headspace (meditation app) were highly valued.

4 On-site group benefits were unexpectedly appreciated (even with low rates of use).

*“ The group that did yoga together, we’re talking about it all week and enjoyed it a lot.”
(Latina Institute)*

Surveys indicated that the on-site group benefits were high quality with nearly all the participants ranking them well above average [over 3 (good) on a scale of 4 (very good)]. Most teams redeemed at least one group benefit of the 25 offered; one group redeemed 9. There were some difficulties with scheduling and matching trainers that contributed to lower usage. Surveys showed that the satisfaction with the benefits varied, influenced by the amount they were used — however, the qualitative interviews expressed great appreciation and potential.

5 Fostering a culture of wellness takes time and engagement by organizational leadership.

“ We had an entire retreat framed around self-care and our communication has gotten a lot better. And I think our staff team, the culture has always been really positive and friendly, and with our staff now, our director prioritizes communication, self-care and work life balance... That message has gotten a lot stronger since the Pilot.” (RPDC)

Over a relatively short time period of six months, the survey responses showed small or not significant shifts in workplace wellness practices and culture. The areas with changes in workplace culture were in the domains of “norms and attitudes,” more than “policies and physical environment.” Some of the interviews surfaced important shifting of the group’s wellness culture. For workplace shifts to take hold, and impact culture, takes time and requires leadership to be supportive (and ideally, engaged).

FIVE RECOMMENDATIONS:

The pilot surfaced important learning about what works to support wellness practices for individuals, teams and organizations — and pointed to areas for further exploration and study:

1 Wellness equity:

*“ Given the political climate, women and people of color are experiencing a lot of stress, and I think that it’s negatively impacting our mental health, and especially if you are in organizations that are working with these populations, that are marginalized, like women of color. It can really have negative impacts and double and triple our stress levels.”
(Latina Institute)*

As a society, we're starting to look at how multiple stressors impact our nervous systems and our health, and how burnout affects our longevity as advocates. Wellness programs should seek to offer benefits to those experiencing multiple stressors related to identity (eg. race, gender, class), and circumstances (eg. divorce, caretaking) that define our lives. We've coined the term "wellness equity" to address this: those with the most stress should receive the most wellness resources.

2 User-led design and inclusive structures for sustainability:

“We're trying to understand that everyone has their preference on what feels restorative.” (TAP)

To make a wellness program sustainable and effective, those who use it must be given power to design it. For greater responsiveness and impact, groups can survey their staff about wellness related challenges, interests, and needs, then include a representative sample to tailor solutions to these preferences. A wellness team or committee with autonomy and a budget sustains the work and is an opportunity for shared/distributed leadership (can be combined with other committees).

3 Supporting high-stress nonprofit sectors, like K-12 education:

“46% of teachers report high daily stress during the school year (tied with nurses for the highest rate among all occupational groups). In D.C., teachers and principals have the highest turnover rates in the U.S.” Sources: Gallup, “State of American Schools” (2014) State Board of Education of D.C., Teacher attrition report (2018)

Retaining workers for demanding positions in nonprofits and K-12 schools is a priority. Wellness culture and practices can help with recruitment and retention. More than 77% of Pilot survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that if their organization offered the wellness benefits they wanted, their job would be more sustainable and attractive to them.

4 Exploring the benefits of team health:

“I loved having them come to the office -- I did all of the workshops in the office. Some of the individual stuff felt harder to make time for since I had to do it outside of work hours. It's different if everybody is taking an hour to do a yoga session, versus I wouldn't take an hour off in the middle of the day to go to yoga by myself.” (FMBC)

Group activities help to build positive organizational culture. The Pilot showed that team-based activities focused on wellness lifted participants' spirits and team culture. Further research into team-based activities will be critical. It builds trust, a core team tenet that often plagues workplaces.

5 Proactively devoting resources :

“I hope it continues and I hope that somehow we can find institutional support to make this a real thing, right? Don’t just fund the programmatic work but fund the budget that allows us to make sure this continues happening.” (APALA)

Some funders are waiting for groups to request wellness support, which is unlikely to happen. Instead, funders and donors must proactively recognize the burnout epidemic, and provide funds for their grantees to design their own customized wellness and retention strategies.

These Pilot lessons and recommendations reveal a blind spot and a resource gap in the nonprofit sector. The blind spot is ironic: many organizations are passionate about taking care of their mission, but aren’t (yet) taking care of the people who make the mission happen. The resource gap is tragic: between those who are experiencing multiple stressors, and wellness resources to help alleviate that stress.

The wellness tools and supporters are out there.

Nonprofit staff need them, now more than ever before.

Let’s build a bridge.

II. Overview

Nonprofit staff and school teachers have notoriously burned the candle at both ends, often donating their personal time to educate, serve the community, and spark social change. While passion is part of their paycheck, their transformative spark is being dimmed by unprecedented stress. Nonprofits and schools struggle with recruitment, productivity, and retention, causing our leadership pipelines to narrow dramatically and our performance to suffer.

Yet, we’re still not addressing the epic stress that plagues the nonprofit sector.

Meanwhile, in the corporate world, wellness benefits at work are expanding because it feeds the bottom line. Led by tech companies, workplace wellness is now a \$7+ billion industry² (not counting health care, which has its own wellness perks). The nonprofit sector rarely offers extra benefits.

² According to [IBIS World’s](#) analysis of corporate wellness industry between 2014-2019

There is moral (but not financial) support for wellness in the nonprofit and education sectors. When leaders don't tell, and funders don't ask, no one fully knows about the stressors that fuel the accomplishment of world-changing goals. Leaders who do provide professional development are likely not investing in mental health; they focus instead on traditional skills, like learning new digital platforms.

The D.C. Nonprofit Wellness Pilot was a targeted, dynamic research project to understand how wellness benefits could alleviate burnout for workers while cultivating an organizational culture of resilient team-care.

To study these conditions and trends on a shoestring budget, we asked what our participants wanted, got these wellness benefits donated, and then asked participants for feedback about their experiences. The purpose of this report is to share our data and insights. We aim to make it useful and actionable for anyone in the nonprofit sector interested in sustaining team well-being. Our primary stakeholders are nonprofit leaders and workers, and we hope the philanthropists who fund them are listening intently.

We begin by offering key definitions to clarify the language used throughout the report and project. Then we describe the Pilot purpose and the evaluation framework. To provide context, we provide descriptive data on who participated, what was offered, and the utilization of the benefits. The emphasis of the report is on the findings and recommendations for the field.

KEY DEFINITIONS 

◆ **Resilience**

Beth Kanter defines resilience in the nonprofit sector: "...as the ability to recover from setbacks, adapt well to change, and keep going in the face of adversity. In the nonprofit sector, resiliency is framed as both a leadership skill for nonprofit professionals as well as organizational capacity."

◆ **Stressors**

A stressor is, literally, whatever causes stress. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)³ are traumatic stressors that are correlated with health outcomes, one of many studies showing stress management contributes to improved health. (As a result of this Pilot, Comfort Consulting developed materials on nervous system health, including the Stressor Scorecard, for self-awareness of stress related to identity and circumstances).

◆ **Organizational culture**

Organizational culture includes shared attitudes, beliefs, customs, assumptions, and written and unwritten rules, based in values, norms, systems, and language. Culture is commonly known as "the way things are done around here." Nonprofits tend to have a culture that reflects their leadership. High levels of trust are linked to positive organizational culture.

◆ **"Team Health" and "Team-Care" (vs. Self-care)**

Team health in this case is not health care, but instead the well-being of any team within an organization (project/team/department/whole). Creating systems of team-care, not only self-care, can contribute to a stronger, healthier enterprise. For example, a wellness committee might decide to try a combination of: on-site workshops, healthier snacks, team-building activities, an online retreat, or field trips to support staff. Any organized effort, be it well-funded or low-budget, conveys support (even if staff don't participate).

³ ACE is an ongoing longitudinal study funded by the Kaiser Permanente and the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Purpose and Theory of Change

The Nonprofit Wellness Pilot set out to create a positive impact with nonprofit workers’ individual health (physical and mental) amidst the pressures in Washington, D.C. We sought to identify how the philanthropic and nonprofit sectors can collaborate to: 1) boost worker health, both physically and mentally; 2) support recruitment, productivity and retention; and 3) build office cultures of well-being to advance nonprofit missions.

We tested the theory of change that Nonprofit Wellness participants choosing and using additional supports will experience positive changes to their individual well-being and workplace culture. Over time we anticipate that employees who bring their healthiest selves to work will be happier and more engaged. Furthermore, if additional wellness resources are offered and implemented by organizations, there will be improvements in organizational culture and health, including greater trust and retention.

Evaluation Framework

Using the Theory of Change as a guide, we developed the following evaluation framework⁴ showing the different levels of wellness and the potential areas of impact of wellness benefits.

	Level	Self-Reported Health & Well-being Areas of Impact
Wellness MINDSET	Individual well-being	<input type="checkbox"/> physical health / energy level <input type="checkbox"/> mental / emotional health <input type="checkbox"/> satisfaction levels (with work and self) <input type="checkbox"/> productivity / time management <input type="checkbox"/> retention
	Team well-being	<input type="checkbox"/> retention and wellness (compared to individual participant only) <input type="checkbox"/> leadership and accountability <input type="checkbox"/> communication and trust <input type="checkbox"/> relationship building and support
	Organizational wellness culture	<input type="checkbox"/> changes in wellness norms and practices <input type="checkbox"/> changes in policies (department, organization, system level) <input type="checkbox"/> changes in leadership engagement <input type="checkbox"/> changes in physical environment <input type="checkbox"/> change “readiness” (part of change management process)

⁴ For more on the evaluation methodology, see Appendix A.

Organizations and participants

To focus the pilot cohort on the disproportionate stress faced by those with multiple stressors, our group of 57 people from 13 organizations had three majorities: female (82%), people of color (65%), and lower-paid staff (54%). It also included participants with invisible disabilities/chronic illness (20%) and fundraisers responsible for revenues at work (30%).

Most were participating as a team greater than 1-2 people, with most people working in the nonprofit sector for more than four years. Of the 13 organizations, 6 had CEO participation (as indicated by * in the table below). Most of these groups are serving lower-income communities, and/or people of color, and/or immigrants, and/or incarcerated citizens.

The teams were mixed in terms of organizational roles and departments. Over half the organizations in which they participate have undergone recent leadership changes and almost half had changes in organization mission, programming, or structure in recent months.⁵



To kick off the Pilot, Under Armour hosted a workout class with trainer Roger Mack.

ORGANIZATION	# of participants
The Advancement Project (TAP)	16
Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance (APALA) *	2
First Focus (FF)	9
Florida House DC (FH)	2
Free Minds Book Club (FMBC)	4
German Marshall Fund of the U.S. (GMF)	1
Justice Policy Institute (JPI) *	1
National Latina Institute for Reproductive Justice (Latina Institute) *	9
Reading Partners DC (RPDC)	6
Tahirih Justice Center (TJC)	2
UndocuBLACK (UB) *	3
(2) groups remaining private, (1) participant each *	2

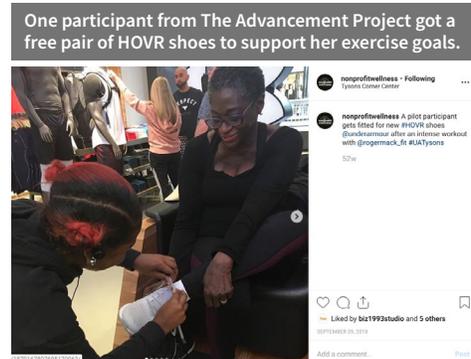
⁵ We kept the identity of our participants private unless they agreed to have their picture or story on a blog or video.

Wellness benefits

Pilot participants were surveyed about their preferred benefits and then offered a menu selection based on availability. All benefits were donated by a variety of providers, amounting to \$40,000 in services. A webstore and coupon codes were set up to connect participants with their chosen providers. The following types of benefits/services were used (See Appendix C for utilization of benefits):

Individual Health:

- Meditation app or online mindfulness classes
- Gym training or membership or class pass
- Yoga class pass or private (online) class
- Bike tune-ups, helmets, bikeshare memberships
- Dance class
- Theater tickets, Adventure park passes, or Float spa
- Nutrition coaching or recipe services
- Financial counseling with Trusted Advisor



Team Health (in-office):

- Yoga class
- “Take Five: Brain Breaks for Productivity & Joy”
- Dance classes - Salsa or “Moving Dialogues”
- Group meditation instruction
- Workout session
- Historic walking tour
- Cambodian cooking night
- Community Acupuncture (groups of five, off-site)



III. Five Findings

“It happens where people get a little more consumed with work life. You have to remind yourself that you do have a life. And, it’s okay to take time for yourself, go to the gym, go do yoga, self-care, it’s extremely important ... The pilot was a phenomenal opportunity to gain access to some wellness training from top-notch institutions that I wouldn’t have been able to afford otherwise.” (FMBC)

What began as a way to support immediate staff physical and mental health became a learning process about what gives these benefits the most impact. Among many insights, we saw the importance of

individual health being supported by team health. This helps cultivate an organizational culture that values health and wellness.

Here are our top five findings to share, followed by the top five recommendations for the field.

1 Participants judged themselves, overall, as having poor individual health. Most self-reported “some progress” over the six months of the Pilot.

“ It kinda opened my eyes to new things I can do for self-care that I hadn’t thought of before.” (RPDC)

“ One thing I have benefited a lot from is Capital Bikeshare, having a membership.” (FMBC)

“ This is such a perfect opportunity to get back into spin class.” (FMBC)

Wellness was ranked on energy level, work-life balance, work satisfaction/commitment, productivity level, and physical fitness. The most significant improvements from the beginning of the pilot to the end were improved rankings with physical health and energy level with increases averaging 12% and 11%, respectively.

At the start, self-reported work satisfaction and productivity rankings were higher than fitness and energy level rankings. Work/life balance fell in the middle of the rankings. There was a drop-off in filling out the third/end survey (n=57, n=27), therefore the results are likely skewed toward those who were feeling positive and motivated to fill out the last survey. Most self-reported “some progress” over the six months of the Pilot.

Today, I characterize my health and well-being in the following areas as:	Poor (1)		Somewhat below average (2)		Somewhat above average (3)		Very good (4)		Total (n)	SURVEY 1: Beginning Weighted Avg (1-4) n=57	SURVEY 3: End* n=27
Energy level	5.36%	3	51.79%	29	37.50%	21	5.36%	3	56	2.43	2.74
Work/life balance	3.57%	2	48.21%	27	41.07%	23	7.14%	4	56	2.52	2.78
Work satisfaction/commitment	3.64%	2	23.64%	13	47.27%	26	25.45%	14	55	2.95	2.93
Productivity level	3.57%	2	26.79%	15	48.21%	27	21.43%	12	56	2.88	2.93
Physical fitness	21.43%	12	50.00%	28	21.43%	12	7.14%	4	56	2.14	2.44

We recognize the impacts of race on resiliency and wellness, and were very interested in any differences between the participants’ experiences. While we did find some scale scores to be higher in certain

categories based on participants’ race, the small sample size made it difficult to draw any solid conclusions around trends. We encourage further research to truly understand variation in the responses and impacts of wellness programming based on race.

While we did not necessarily expect health outcomes to improve much over the limited amount of time, we were looking to see signs of “change readiness” with both organizational culture and individual practices. At the onset, most participants did not judge themselves overall as having good health or habits, but at the end of the six months they did express the potential to change. The evaluation findings were more in the realm of learning than significant shifts in participants’ health and well-being overall.

2 Off-site individual benefits were great, and sometimes logistically frustrating.

“After the Pilot, I decided to cancel my gym membership and I got a Class Pass. Part of the reason why I did is because I was exposed to so many different types of programming in this wellness pilot that I didn’t want to stick to gym programming anymore. I want to try a whole variety of things... class is very expensive, though.” (FMBC)

“I also had a home yoga thing that I didn’t end up scheduling, though I liked the idea I could do from home. I tried to schedule something in the fall when I was traveling for election stuff, but then I never ended up getting it scheduled. So yeah, it was great, but I had a really hard time, making the time. I assume it’s a thing for nonprofits.” (APALA)

The individual benefits were the reason many people applied, and overall, participants felt positively about having access to different options. In reality, given the short time and limited benefits, it was tough to determine their effectiveness. Many respondents did not get their top choice of neighborhood/studio, had transportation or parking issues, or could not utilize benefits due to busy schedules or travel.

Cheaper access to fitness seems attractive, but price doesn’t matter if you are out of town, unable to leave the office, can’t find parking, or if you have not prioritized your own health. And because cost was minimized in the Pilot, some participants admitted that the “freebee mentality” led them to de-value their wellness benefit, by skipping a scheduled session or letting deadlines lapse.

3 Of the individual benefits, the online/phone options were most accessible and popular.

“[Headspace] I’ve still got it in my phone, I’m using it very sporadically, but I liked that it was offered to everybody. That was a really easy thing for people to access. Nice to have it for free. I wouldn’t have done it otherwise.” (FMBC)

“[My coach] looked holistically at my life and we were able to talk about a lot of different things.” (Latina Institute)

“[Quartz Queen Yoga] I enjoyed and liked how I could do it from my office.” (UB)

Due to these barriers of off-site benefits, participants appreciated phone-based benefits that are more flexible and can be less time-consuming. Ease of accessibility is a key factor in any wellness program. In this category, personal coaching and Headspace (an app) were highly valued. It is important to note that some of the benefits were used much more than others, the lower-ranked benefits were used much less. The greater flexibility of online tools allowed for more reliable and consistent exposure to the benefits.

How was the quality of the individual resources? (Please rate 1=fair to 4=very good)	n=23 respondents, survey 3
Headspace or other meditation benefits	3.63
Yoga or dance	3.5
Coaching	3.5
Arts/theater therapy	3.33
Exercise or gym related	3.33
Nutrition	2.08
Financial	2



4 In-office group benefits were unexpectedly appreciated.

Ricardo Loaiza leads a salsa dance class with staff at Tahirih Justice Center.



“We had such a good time [salsa dancing]! He made us feel comfortable, even though I can’t dance to save my life” (TJC)

I loved having them come to the office -- I did all of the ones in the office. Some of the individual stuff, it felt harder to make time for it since I had to do it outside of work hours. It’s different when everybody is taking an hour to go do a yoga session, versus I wouldn’t have otherwise took an hour off in the middle of the day to go to yoga by myself.” (FMBC)

We did a team building activity that was like a cooking demonstration; it was also like a Cambodian cultural demonstration? We were able to bring in more staff for a fun experience. We did that right before we left for this trip that included a training and board meeting so it was a nice way to check in with each other before a long work trip.” (APALA)

Most teams redeemed at least one group benefit of the 25 offered. Organizations received on-site benefits in two ways: inviting guest speakers to present to staff and small group excursions to wellness activities, classes and events.

Examples:

- Community Acupuncture, with clothed hand/foot/neck treatment in groups of five
- Pilates demonstration at FMBC office, which evolved into Pilates w/ returning citizens
- “Take Five” Comfort Consulting’s team-building talk, focusing on 5-min brain breaks
- Skills classes: salsa dance (TJC) or Cambodian cooking (APALA) or bilingual yoga (Latina Institute)

There were some difficulties with scheduling and matching trainers that contributed to lower usage. Also, the government shutdown of 2019 affected accessibility and participation.

Surveys showed that the quality and satisfaction with the team benefits varied; however, the qualitative interviews expressed great appreciation and potential. Providing training by experts, and creating opportunities for team bonding, such as group acupuncture or a historic walking tour, were considered valuable to survey respondents. This finding brought greater attention to teams as we shifted gears to investigate “team health” more.

5 Fostering a culture of wellness is a process requiring engagement by organizational leadership.

“I was struggling to build a culture of wellness with limited resources. So it was helpful to have an outsider perspective, help the team think overall about culture and holding each other accountable on having fun and injecting wellness at work.” (APALA)

“If we could continue to grow the culture so that the folks in the higher levels of management were also participating, I think that it would send a signal across the board to the organization that this is something that we value.” (TAP)

“It’s a good way of building camaraderie. We’re a very small team, so it was a nice change of pace for everyone for 45 minutes or an hour, set aside everything else that’s going on and do this thing together.” (FMBC)

Over a relatively short time period of six months, the survey responses indicated small or insignificant shifts in workplace wellness practices and culture. The areas with changes in workplace culture were in the domains of “norms and attitudes,” more than “policies and physical environment.” Some of the interviews surfaced important shifting of the organizational wellness culture. For workplace shifts to take hold, and impact organizational culture, takes time and requires organizational leadership to be supportive (and ideally, engaged).

About half of the pilot groups (6 of 13) had the top leader involved in the Pilot; their participation levels varied. Leaders are in position to set organizational values and practices. They can be proactive about

wellness. For some leaders, bringing this topic up changes the culture automatically, without any new spending. Leaders who ask questions will hear how employee needs change over time. There are plenty of wellness solutions, and the support and engagement of leadership matters. Authenticity counts too.

CHEAP/FREE WELLNESS IDEAS

- Bosses and funders should ask staff how they're doing, really. Then they should LISTEN.
- Do check-in questions at meetings and make some of them about physical or mental health practices.
- Provide nuts or fruit or tea at meetings; discuss what flavors/foods staff would like to try next.
- With budgets for things like food or wellness, give staff control/choices on how to spend those funds.
- Bosses should create opportunities to bring up “work-life balance” and ask how staff need help.
- Staff should assess skills they can teach each other (DIY-PD). Doesn't have to be work-related skills.
- Appoint a break master. Unlike a task master, they are empowered to nag people to take breaks.
- Make hand-made cards or other gestures for people's birthdays.
- Express more gratitude. Do it verbally. And in writing. And at meetings. Make it part of the culture.
- Celebrate milestones, to appreciate people's contributions and underscore positivity.
- Find opportunities to talk about saving money, thrifty practices, and support tools for financial advice.
- Figure out how to support worker ergonomics (eg. postural seat cushions or standing desk hacks).
- Talk more openly about failure and relapses; vulnerability is key to building empathy and trust.
- Do more walking meetings, including remote ones.

IV. Five Recommendations

“It kinda opened my eyes to new things I can do for self-care that I hadn't thought of before. I hadn't thought of making it part of my routine, what we can do in the office to like, re-energize and refocus.” (RPDC)

The pilot surfaced important learning about what works to support wellness practices for individuals, teams and organizations — and pointed to areas for further exploration and study.

1 Wellness Equity: those with more stress deserve more wellness resources

“Given the political climate, women and people of color are experiencing a lot of stress, and I think that it's negatively impacting our mental health, and especially if you are in organizations that are working with these populations who are marginalized, like women of color. It can really have negative impacts and double and triple our stress levels.” (Latina Institute)

“As a nonprofit worker and a disabled person, it’s especially difficult to find the time and resources to meet my wellness needs.” (Latina Institute)

As a society, we’re starting to understand how childhood trauma and everyday stressors impact our nervous system and long-term health. Wellness programs should seek to offer benefits to those experiencing multiple stressors related to the identities (eg. race, gender, class), and circumstances (eg. divorce, caretaking, trauma) that define our lives.

Wellness Equity is the concept that those who have the most stressors should receive the greatest wellness support. Who, within our organizations, has the most access to resources? And who has the most wellness needs? It’s often an inverted scenario, where those on the lower rungs of income and decision-making have higher life stressors, but lower access to wellness resources. Those on the higher rungs of decision-making tend to have salaries that afford greater wellness choices (eg. trainer, therapist, classes). Yet they might be facing fewer daily stressors related to identity and circumstance.

Therefore, seeking out and including groups who have less access and/or more stressors should be a priority for wellness programs. Equitable wellness programs would be: encouraged and funded by leadership, culturally-relevant, designed with user input, and structured so that those who need the most help get it first.

2 User-led design: those who build it, use it

“It was super intentionally done and I appreciate all the requests for feedback, and all of the input from the pilot participants.” (FMBC)

Any program is more sustainable and effective when those who will use it have the power to build it. In the Pilot, applicants ranked their wellness preferences, then we built the webstore accordingly, where participants picked what they wanted (based on the donated options). Having maximum choice is key to participation because everyone wants/needs different solutions.

Groups can survey their staff about wellness-related challenges, interests, and needs. Groups can engage an internal leader, or a subset of motivated people, and give them decision-making power and a bit of funding. A wellness team or point person also provides opportunities for shared/distributed leadership and can build both teamwork and trust. Eventually, these practices can be shared with the group’s members or community.

We offered a bilingual yoga class for Pilot participants at the Latina Institute.



In one Pilot experience, we hear from two perspectives how a staff wellness workshop quickly got extended to the members served by the group:

“I worked with Free Minds Book Club twice so far, it’s been an amazing experience. I got to work with the employees, and then they asked me to do a class with their members who were coming out of the prison system. I loved seeing them working together, and it was like the employees and the members, they bonded, because people that sweat together, they bond. The sweat is an equalizer, we’re all on the same playing field.”
 - Tyecia Powell, Pilates instructor and Director at BYW

Tyecia Powell led these Free Minds Book Club staff in Pilates, and repeated the workout a week later for FMBC staff and their members.



“We had a group of 18 guys that just came home from federal prison. So we asked Ty to do the 45 min Pilates demo with them. They were standoffish at first because they’re like, what do you have us doing? We thought Pilates was Arts & Crafts. We didn’t know we were gonna be working [laughter] oh that’s why you told us bring comfortable clothes! But, we had the music pumping and Ty’s energy and spirit is amazing. She made all of them feel so comfortable. And we were able to be interactive with some of the guys we knew needed a bit more push. And Ty’s Yelp special, if you check in, you take a class for free. Some guys were like, Oh, I’m going on Saturday, I’m going Sunday, I’ll take a group.” (FMBC staffer)

Lastly, it is critical to understand that needs change over time. Pilot participants started out focusing on certain individual benefits. Over the course of six months, their jobs and lives and seasons changed, and some participants changed their minds about what they wanted or needed.

3 Supporting high-stress nonprofit sectors, like K-12 schools:

“Teachers’ personal resources and Social-Emotional Competence (SEC) are central sources of teacher stress, which influences student and classroom outcomes.”
 - RWJF/Penn State University, “Teacher Stress and Schools” (2017)

It is a priority to retain workers for the most stressful, demanding nonprofit positions, like those in K-12 schools. Wellness culture and practices can help with recruitment and retention — more than 77% of Pilot survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that if their organization offered the wellness benefits they wanted, their job would be more sustainable and attractive to them.

The D.C. teacher and principal turnover rate is twice the national average, costing the District at least \$10 million per year plus the loss of priceless relationships. We need to give teachers the physical and mental health support needed to keep up their health, polish their sparkle, and retain them in the classroom even in the face of increasing stress⁶. Recruitment challenges abound if a quarter of school staff depart every year. Educator stress levels are sky-high, and morale is dangerously low. Staffing challenges are more acute at schools in lower-income communities, partially as a result of the trauma that some students and some staff have faced in their lives.

Now that we are facing a pandemic, widespread societal unrest, and school shootings in addition to the stress educators have felt for years, school-based wellness benefits and self-care for educators is now mission-critical. This could be a cost-effective solution to teacher retention challenges locally, and a model for training/developing teachers nationally.

4 Exploring the trust-building benefits of team health:

The Still Point Spa offered community acupuncture, an affordable, clothed, small-group option treating meridians in the hands, feet and head.



“ The acupuncture group ... I think we really bonded around that activity, the folks that joined....And then there was some conversation afterwards, about how it felt. One of our team members found it particularly healing for her. So that was great.” (TAP)

“ It’s harder to hold myself accountable ... If it was just up to me to go to a workshop or a gym, I would be more likely to put it off. Would that happen with a group benefit since there’s another person involved? It’s like, we’d make a plan and stick to it.” (FMBC)

Group activities build organizational culture and trust. First, by experiencing challenges together that ARE NOT work, team members get practice for challenges AT work. Also, colleagues can interact in different settings, and learn new skills from/with each other. Finally, wellness activities can shift or invert power dynamics, because everyone has an equal human nervous system and we all need to learn skills to manage it. As Ty Powell said (see finding #2): “People that sweat together, they bond. The sweat is an equalizer; we’re all on the same playing field.”

⁶ Technically/legally, school Wellness Committees are required by DC Healthy Schools Act of 2010. While they are not yet enforced, or tracked, these committees could be an opportunity to sustain wellness and build culture.

Wellness activities can also deepen relationships and build camaraderie, as described by this participant:

“It definitely benefits relationship building, when you can create activities for people, it opens up conversation in a different way. It’s not just about, like, seeing someone at the water cooler and chit-chatting about your weekend, but deeper...it opens up a different avenue for a relational conversation. For example, we have a Paint-N-Sip activity once a year at the office. And the conversations that happen while people are painting are very different than the conversations that people have when we’re eating cake for a birthday or at happy hour. When we used to have the running group, those conversations are just at a different level. It’s hard to describe it -- the drinking wine or the eating cake, those things aren’t bad. But the wellness-related conversations are different.” (TAP)

Further research into improving team-care is critical. It helps build the elusive “trust” that many groups struggle with⁷. And trust is golden — as beneficial as whatever gains are made through individual acts of self-care.

5 Pro-actively devoting resources:

“I hope it continues and I hope that somehow we can find institutional support to make this a real thing, right? Don’t just fund the programmatic work but fund the budget that allows us to make sure this continues happening.” (APALA)

A participant from Asian Pacific American Labor Alliance poses with Frances Perkins, who is mentioned in the “Take Five Brain Breaks” team talk.



“...honestly the one thing that I would wish for this program is to just expand it. Funding sources. It can be larger. I think so many people require access to something like this.” (FMBC)

It’s always been true that social change movements are fractious and challenging. And that nonprofit workers endure high levels of stress. But today, the added intersections of divisive politics, a pandemic, racial protests, and the looming spectre of climate change intensify that stress exponentially.

Waiting for leaders to request support for their stress is unrealistic. Donors must proactively inquire about or provide support for mental and physical health.

⁷ *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Lencioni, Patrick (2002)

This Pilot modeled the Lean Startup practice of “start before you’re ready” but in retrospect, we would have been better equipped had we involved philanthropists more in the project at the start. The Pilot process would have operated more smoothly, and more quickly, and been more impactful with funding. We are exceedingly grateful for all the donated labor and benefits, which amounted to much good will and valuable expertise.

We are grateful to the funders who were able to provide some support.⁸ But this Pilot is a mere drop toward the culture change tsunami needed to address nonprofit worker wellness. Just as social movements strive for long-term systems change, we realize this is a long-term endeavor. We have already lost too many high-achieving nonprofit staff to burnout. Philanthropists need to be strategic and proactive in devoting resources towards nonprofit worker and organizational wellness.

Conclusion

The future of nonprofit wellness is about equity. We must address the gaps between stress and resources among world-changers, so we can keep them in the game. This will mean shifting resources to those with the most stress, and/or those on the front lines -- who are resilient out of necessity, and always asked to do more with less.

The future of nonprofits relies on engaged workers, but we can’t rely on mission passion to prevent burnout. And we can’t rely on self-care; we’re not good at it or inclined to make the time. We have to build in team-care, so that we can take care of each other.

The future of teams is shifting in our new world order. Google embarked on “Project Aristotle” to study what made teams effective. They found that effectiveness is less about who is on the team, and more about how the team worked together. The top two (out of five) things that teams need are psychological safety and dependability⁹. These are related to how team members take care of each other.

This Nonprofit Wellness Pilot produced important learnings on what might be needed to provide that psychological safety and dependability in a world that is changing rapidly. Even through distributed workforces and online interaction, we can stay connected and support each other’s wellness.

**We can’t keep going the way we have in the past.
We’re building a new nonprofit future, together.
To move forward, let’s take care of the caretakers.**

⁸ These funders were: Ford and Packard Foundations (paid fees for four grantees’ participation) and the Consumer Health Foundation (paid fees for UndocuBLACK staff). The Resilience Initiative gave a \$5,000 gift. For more information, see the budget appendix.

⁹ Google found that teams need (in order of importance): psychological safety, dependability, structure and clarity, meaning, impact. <https://rework.withgoogle.com/print/guides/5721312655835136/>

V. Appendices

Appendix A: The Evaluation Methodology

The following overarching learning questions guided our evaluation design:

1. What are the impacts of self-chosen wellness benefits on the chooser?
2. What are the differences of coming to the pilot alone, or with a team? With CEO/ED?
3. What impacts, if any, does participation in the program have on workplace wellness culture at the organization (change readiness, norms, policies, practices, and physical environment)?
4. In surveying the wellness providers at the end of the pilot program, what were the benefits of their participation and what did they learn?

We sought to look at the Pilot's effect on individual workers, their Pilot teams, and their organizations:

- *For individuals:* impacts on their physical and mental well-being.
- *For teams:* how collective care through participating Pilot teams (some of which include the CEO) can support self-care, as well as organizational change.
- *For organizations:* early change readiness and workplace culture shifts.
Need to distinguish here between the process learning and the outcomes

Quantitative and Qualitative tools and metrics measured

Three Pilot surveys were conducted before, during, and after with both quantitative and qualitative measures. To complement these results, 12 qualitative interviews allowed us to have candid conversations to dig deeper into how staff are defining and practicing individual wellness.

While we are not able to quantitatively measure health outcomes in six short months, we will draw on self-reported proxies for wellness, workplace engagement and change readiness, such as: retention, satisfaction, access, support, expectations, reinforcement, energy level, teamwork. The long-term impact would be the understanding that support for well-being “is the way things are here.”

Based on survey 1, follow-up questions and metrics were integrated into surveys 2 & 3. We are intentionally taking a learning approach so that participants simultaneously inform the project as they participate. Some of the metrics we know to track are related to services, how people access services and what impact they have -- but some we will discover as we learn more about our cohort and how the idea plays out in real time. It is a dynamic and adaptive process, built on The Lean StartUp model developed by Eric Ries.¹⁰

¹⁰ Ries, Eric. *The Lean Startup: How Today's Entrepreneurs Use Continuous Innovation to Create Radically Successful Businesses*, 2011, Crown Business: New York (theleanstartup.com/principles)

Appendix B: Project Timeline

- Dec 2017: Comfort Consulting distributes a national Nonprofit Burnout Prevention Survey to gather physical and mental health data from 240 nonprofit staff in over 100 different groups.
- JAN 2018: The results are published at www.nonprofitcomfort.com
- MAR-APRIL 2018: Nonprofit Wellness is founded & Pilot takes shape.
- MAY-JULY 2018: Pilot launches. 100 people apply. 60 are chosen.
- AUG 2018: \$40,000 in wellness benefits are donated (see appendix).
- SEPT 2018: 60 people respond to Baseline survey. Then they “shop” for individual & team benefits.
- OCT - DEC 2018 Participants utilize the team and individual health benefits.
- JAN - MAR 2019 Second half of Pilot/second survey is conducted. New Year’s resolutions feedback is included.
- APRIL - JUNE 2019 Pilot participants submit Final survey. Interviews completed and transcribed.
- DECEMBER 2019 Grant received to publish Pilot report

Appendix C: Pilot Budget

Nonprofit Wellness is currently an LLC in Delaware; it could be a B-Corp or possibly 501c3 in the future. Nonprofit Wellness Pilot Fund is hosted at the Greater Washington Community Foundation. We are accepting tax-deductible donations to support the dissemination of this report.

PILOT REVENUES

- 11,770 Fees raised (54 paid \$200, 6 paid \$150, extra benefits \$70)
- 5,000 Resilience Initiative gift
- 14,000 Anonymous gift (to Community Foundation)
 - **Total raised: \$30,770**
 - **Wellness benefits donated \$40,000**
 - **Pro-bono services donated \$25,000**

PILOT EXPENSES

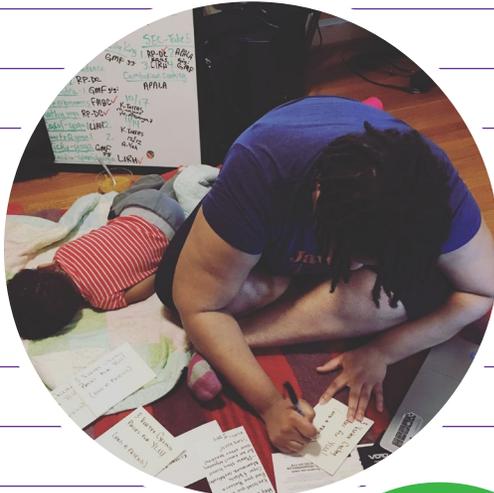
- Directing Pilot: 9,000
- Evaluation services: 9,000
- Cohort Coordination, Events: 6,223
- Web, Materials, Communications: 2,452
- Printing, Postage, Supplies, meetings: 2,023
- Legal, Admin: 808
- Travel, Fundraising: 1,300
- Total spent: **\$30,806**

Appendix D. Full List of Benefits Donated

I. INDIVIDUAL HEALTH BENEFITS
5-class passes (Georgia Ave or Takoma Park) at Yoga Heights (2)
10-class passes for Yoga, Pilates, or Meditation classes at Willow Street Yoga (10)
5 calls: EnableU Health Coaching for individuals (5)
2 tickets to one show at Imagination Stage (1)

2 tickets to 2018-2019 season at Woolley Mammoth (1)
2 tickets to El Viejo El Joven Y El Mar at Gala Teatro (1)
1-month Passport membership at Balance Gym (3)
4-class pass at Mind the Mat (2)
2 months of wellness coaching with Rahim Spence Coaching (2)
2 class passes to Five Rhythms music/dance class with Ann Kite (2)
\$20 gift cards for JRINK fresh juices (8)
Nutrition counseling: 3 calls with Devaney Nutrition (3)
Two 1-hour coaching calls with Leslie Zucker (2)
3 Months: Investment Boot Camp with Andy Proctor (3)
10-week coaching (group class) with Natalie Miller (5)
Two floats per person at SoulEx Float Spa (5)
3 classes free (you and friend) at Vortex Cycling (10)
5-class pass for yoga, pilates, and/or meditation classes at Bluebird Sky Yoga (1)
3-month memberships (meal planning) with Six O’Clock Scramble (10)
Free Mindfulness Fundamentals courses with Mindful Schools (10)
Free month membership at Crunch, Sport&Health, or OneFitness (25)
First class free at BYW (yoga and pilates) (20)
First Flywheel spin class free (30)
Trusted Advisor service (60)
VIDA 7-day all-access passes (60)
HEADSPACE 1-year subscription (60)
2 individual sessions with Quartz Queen Yoga (3)
1 month SoldierFit Silver Spring (5)
Capital Bikeshare bike helmets (5) and annual membership (10)
Healthy Now! Foodconfidence.com subscriptions (5)
3-class pass at Blue Heron Wellness (3)
3 drop-in dance classes at Urban Artistry (5)

5-class passes at M Street Yoga (5)
5-class pass at Joy of Motion Dance (1)
Passes to Sandy Spring Adventure Park tree course (2)
3 workouts @ Orange Theory Fitness Silver Spring (5)
3 workouts @ Orange Theory Fitness Tenleytown (5)
Joe's Movement Emporium dance workshops (5)
3-class pass with Shaw Yoga (1)
Bike tune up with Takoma Bicycles (2)
II. TEAM HEALTH BENEFITS
Community Acupuncture October at Still Point Spa (5)
Community Acupuncture November at Still Point Spa (5)
Community Acupuncture December at Still Point Spa (5)
Intro to meditation 3-class series with Dave Trachtenberg (3)
Team yoga session (via web) with Quartz Queen Yoga (1)
Cambodian group cooking lesson w/ Sou Family Cooking (1)
Group Health Coaching with Enable U Coaching (1)
Group coaching with Natalie Miller Coaching (1)
Group Yoga with Kathy Carroll Yoga (1)
Intro to meditation with Institute for African-American Mindfulness (1)
Unstick Your Body group movement session with Kate Miller (1)
Moving Dialogues workshop with Kelly King (1)
Historic Walking Tour of downtown with Washington Walks (1)
Beginning yoga in your office with Carol Collins (1)
Yoga Nidra session with Carol Mermey (1)
Flow yoga classes with Vicky Bonasera (3)
Bilingual language yoga class with Claudia Arango (1)
Take Five: Building 5-minute brain breaks for Productivity & Joy w/ Comfort Consulting (5)
Pilates demonstration from Tyecia Powell, BYW (2)



Extra thanks to Iyana Turner, who helped get all the benefits organized and sent out to Pilot participants (while her baby napped)."

Latin Dance class with After School Dance Fund’s Ricardo Loaiza (1)
Under Armour workout events with free HOVR shoes & 30% off code (Sept 2018)
Patagonia yoga class with ayurveda lecture (November 2018)
WEBINARS FOR PILOT PARTICIPANTS ONLY (recorded)
Authentic Spirituality webinar with Kristin Ransford Hiemstra
Emotional Intelligence webinar with Kristin Ransford Hiemstra
Trusted Advisor: 30 min intro session and Q&A (September 2018)

Appendix E: About Nonprofit Wellness



Nonprofit Wellness is a social enterprise dedicated to helping schools and nonprofits resist burnout, improve health, and retain staff. We put the “WE” in wellness by focusing on Wellness Equity and team health.

With a vibrant online platform, Nonprofit Wellness focuses on training world-changing nonprofit staff and K-12 educators.

Principal trainers are Susan Comfort and Tyecia Powell, plus a rotating cast of supporting skill-builders. Susan is a career nonprofit leader and nature/yoga enthusiast, while Tyecia is a veteran educator and fitness professional.

Their interactive training curriculum incorporates brain science, personal stories, and practical, embodied skills for stronger health and resilience.

Find us online @NonprofitWellness (IG, FB), via email susan@nonprofitwellness.org or at www.nonprofitwellness.org