From Burnout to Wellbeing
BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE IMMIGRATION MOVEMENT
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>FOREWORD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>TESTIMONIALS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>ADVISORY COMMITTEE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>METHODOLOGY</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>THEMES AND FINDINGS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40</td>
<td>RECOMMENDATIONS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50</td>
<td>CLOSING REFLECTION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52</td>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53</td>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
On behalf of the California Community Foundation (CCF) and the Weingart Foundation, we are pleased to present a collaborative effort to examine the state and sustainability of the Southern California immigration sector.

Our motivation to fund this research starts from our own work. CCF and the Weingart Foundation have been supporting immigrant rights organizations in Southern California for many years. Immigrants are a critical, vibrant, and vital part of the fabric of our region and of every community in our country. We, as a country, are dependent on immigrants and immigration, and, as a result, the organizations that serve immigrant communities.

Our immigrant rights partners have done tremendous work, defending communities from harmful policies, providing mutual aid and safety net support during the pandemic, and advancing a powerful vision of justice in solidarity with others. We know that to realize this vision, the sector needs to be strong and healthy itself, and this requires the people who power the sector to be healthy and adequately resourced so that the excellent work of these immigration organizations can be both sustained and sustainable.

This research seeks to answer the question of how the immigration sector is doing in terms of wellness and sustainability. We find that, to no surprise, immigration staff are experiencing high levels of unaddressed burnout and are in need of solutions that promote the sustainability of the sector. Several themes emerged from the data, which demonstrate that this is a field that is driven and dedicated to the difficult, and unfortunately under-resourced, work that is a necessity to ensure immigrants are supported. However, burnout is high among immigration staff, especially personal and work burnout, which has reached elevated levels due to the COVID-19 pandemic and years of anti-immigrant rights policy.

While much has been said about the increased demands on nonprofits during the COVID crisis, and about burnout and mental health concerns in many professions, the immigration sector, and community was particularly hard hit. It is also chronically and woefully underfunded, with less than 1% of top foundation dollars going to the movement. Organizations that serve immigrant communities have been forced to slice that limited pie of funding into smaller and smaller pieces to try to meet the needs of the community. As funders, we would be remiss not to highlight the important opportunity for the philanthropic community to do our part to address the needs of the immigrant rights sector so that it can not only be sustained, but flourish, and to do that, the funding pie must increase.
This is a community that has shown immense resilience and has been essential to the well-being of our country during the pandemic. We must ensure they are supported through a healthy and vibrant movement.

This report serves as an urgent call to action for funders to take seriously the wellness of immigration organizations and their staff. Without a sustained, well-funded immigration nonprofit sector, we risk leaving the immigrant community, which is already facing multiple, intersectional challenges brought forth by political, economic, and social conditions, in greater vulnerability. With the world finally focused on the dire state of health, wellness, and mental health, we have a unique opportunity at this moment to rethink how we approach these issues and change how organizations and their staff are resourced and supported to ensure future sustainability.

We have seen some success in other efforts, such as the LA Justice Fund, where funders came together with the public and private sectors to meet the needs of the community. We now have the opportunity to reimagine support for our community partners that is focused more on supporting the people who provide these critical programs and services.

The sustainability of the people within organizations must be a consideration as the philanthropic community thinks about how best to support immigration organizations and other nonprofits through these challenging times. We invite funders to join us in approaching these issues together through the creation of the Immigrants Are Essential pooled fund of resources, dedicated to promoting sustainability and wellness so that we can continue to stand behind this community.

In solidarity,

Antonia Hernández  
President and Chief Executive Officer  
California Community Foundation

Miguel A. Santana  
President and Chief Executive Officer  
Weingart Foundation
CYNTHIA BUIZA  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
CALIFORNIA IMMIGRANT POLICY CENTER

"There is a great historical paradox in social impact work where many of us who belong to it are expected to offer great sacrifices often at the expense of our health, well-being, and financial sustainability. This timely and highly consequential report asks the difficult questions of resilience, burnout, and the future of immigrant justice work itself and challenges us with a compelling enigma: what are you going to do when the pillars of movement building begin to crumble because the people who need to sustain it have work lives that are themselves unsustainable? Movements cannot stand on feet of clay. This report is a clarion call for the times, and the wise recommendations contained in it will not only give hope to weary and worn advocates, but give the social change sector a much-needed roadmap towards an inclusive vision for social and immigrant justice."

MICHAEL NOBLEZA  
EXECUTIVE ADVISOR & EQUITY STRATEGIST  
LOS ANGELES COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF CONSUMER AND BUSINESS AFFAIRS

"An equitable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic includes more equitable investments in immigrants who power our economy, culture, and social movements. From strategic investments to strengthen the capacity of immigrant-serving organizations to streamlining the contracting process to enable frontline organizations to more effectively partner with the County, this public health crisis has presented a unique opportunity to expand what’s possible and to reimagine how we might center immigrants, knowing that doing so, benefits us all."

CLAIRE KNOWLTON  
FORMER ADVISORY SERVICES DIRECTOR  
NONPROFIT FINANCE FUND

“It was an absolute honor to contribute to this report, which first and foremost centers the humanity of staff that build and sustain the work. It is common to see reports address the needs of organizations and movements in the abstract while glossing over the fact that there are no organizations and there are no movements without dedicated people. The people staffing immigration organizations and movements, who courageously face dehumanizing systems every day in their work, deserve our love, our care, and our attention. A critical way funders and donors can show their love, care, and attention is by contributing at levels that allow organizations to fairly compensate their staff and employ enough staff to carry out their work in a way that centers the humanity of all."
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Those who serve the chronically underfunded immigrant rights nonprofit sector have experienced an unprecedented level of strain that has only been exacerbated by the current health pandemic, resulting in high levels of burnout. Given the challenging times of the past few years, philanthropy practitioners around the country are increasingly discussing the topics of burnout, wellness, and sustainability. Funders who speak to grantees and monitor trends in the nonprofit sector see that individuals are exhausted and burned out, and organizations need help.

This project’s objective is to better understand the challenges that immigration staff and organizations are facing and see how philanthropy can best support the sector, while also looking for long-term solutions that promote the sustainability of the immigrant rights sector so that it can better serve immigrant communities and reach its tremendous potential to bring about the political change that immigrants need.

This project builds on two recent studies of immigrant-serving organizations: Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees’ (GCIR) national research study on Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) and the University of the District of Columbia Law’s nationwide quantitative survey of asylum attorneys. Our report combined both quantitative and qualitative assessments through an online survey and a series of one-on-one and focus group interviews to assess the state of the immigrant rights movement in Southern California in the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside, and Ventura.

Based on the interviews, focus groups, and online assessment, immigration staff are experiencing very high levels of burnout and are in need of solutions that promote the sustainability of the sector. Several themes emerged from the data, which include: (1) by and large, people derive deep meaning from their work in the immigration sector; (2) burnout is high among immigration staff, especially personal and work burnout; (3) the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated levels of exhaustion and burnout; (4) burnout and trauma are highly correlated; (5) personal burnout manifests in multiple impacts for staff, which include issues focusing, exhaustion, and added pressure; (6) personal burnout can challenge staff’s abilities to engage with their communities; (7) those with high burnout also have lower vitality; (8) generational impacts and cultural differences in perceptions of wellness and sustainability; and (9) how staff are and would like to be supported.
The research with participants shows across the board that staff are in need of interventions and are searching for resources from their organizations and funders. There is an appetite to engage in wellness and self-care and to address trauma and burnout, and organizations and funders must meet the moment to demonstrate to staff that they are hearing these experiences and working to change the paradigm under which immigration advocacy occurs. The report’s recommendations are bucketed into four categories: changes to organizational practices; changes to funder practices; long-term efforts requiring funder investment; and systems change.

What organizations can do now include: (1) Ask and assess the situation, (2) Create a resource bank, (3) Compensate self-care, (4) Change organizational practices, and (5) Provide training and coaching.

Changes to Funder Practices include: (1) Ask and assess, (2) Create a resource bank, (3) Increase capacity without increasing metrics and deliverables, (4) Increase unrestricted funding, (5) Include wellness and sustainability in grants, including pooled funds, and (6) Fund training and coaching.

Funders can support systemic change by focusing on the following: (1) creating a dialogue between funders and organizations on how to change the system, and (2) creating avenues for organizations to provide living wages.
As we witnessed over the last few years, there is an unprecedented level of strain on nonprofit organizations and that strain has only been exacerbated by the current health pandemic. As NonProfit Quarterly reported in 2021, “about 30 percent of nonprofit workers are burned out, with an additional 20 percent in danger of burning out.”

Those who serve the chronically underfunded immigrant rights nonprofit sector have been especially hard hit. With years of anti-immigrant policies during the Trump Administration, the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of significant immigration reform thus far under the Biden Administration, and many other challenges, the constant trauma this work brings to the people working to serve immigrants, many who come from directly impacted communities, has only elevated the stress and trauma staff have and continue to experience. Add in the layer of unionization efforts, which many nonprofits in both Southern California and around the country are undergoing, many immigrant organization leaders and staff feel added pressure and challenging impacts on their organizations fighting for fairer and better working conditions within a sector struggling with gross underfunding. The last several years have taken a toll on both leaders and their staff and ultimately result in impacts on the communities of immigrants such organizations serve.

Yet, despite these challenges, immigrant-serving organizations have stayed accountable to immigrants amidst incredibly challenging times, engaging in work that has saved immigrant lives during both the Trump Administration and the pandemic, built political power by promoting the immigrant vote in local and state election victories, and much more.

Given the challenging times of the past few years, philanthropy practitioners around the country are increasingly discussing the topics of burnout, wellness, and sustainability. Funders who speak to grantees and monitor trends in the nonprofit space see that individuals are exhausted and burned out, and organizations need help. However, to advocate for the dollars and resources needed to address these topics, many in the philanthropic space first want to see the data and current assessment of the fields they support.

This project applies this idea to a specific field: immigration and immigrant-serving organizations in a handful of Southern California counties. Its objective is to better understand the challenges that immigration staff and organizations are facing and to see how philanthropy can best support the sector while also looking for long-term solutions that promote the sustainability of the immigrant rights sector so that it can better serve immigrant communities and reach its tremendous potential to bring about the political change that immigrants need.
The stories heard and data captured by this project showcase just how significant the challenges to well-being are in this sector. It is deeper than staff being tired. This is about the sustainability of the sector and the immigrant rights movement overall. It is about overcoming the inequities that are reinforced in the context of a policy climate that is challenging to navigate. With the repeated failure of federal immigration reform efforts, the work moves even further to the state level and, within that, to local organizations that directly represent the communities they aim to support.

Organizations that participated in this research represent the front lines, and are often the only lifeline for immigrant communities who need support in the face of a global health pandemic, an impending economic crisis, and little progress on immigration reform. Now is the time to address these issues because, while the immigrant rights sector is under the strain of an increased load of work, it is still motivated to work in service of immigrants and refugees.

However, philanthropy must quickly act to meaningfully consider sustainability and implement changes to a sector that is largely underfunded. A report by the National Committee for Responsible Philanthropy shares that, according to Foundation Center data, between 2011 and 2015, barely 1% of all money granted by the 1,000 largest U.S. foundations was intended to benefit immigrants and refugees despite immigrants making up a much larger portion of the US population.¹ According to the American Immigration Council, one in seven U.S. residents are foreign-born, or 14% of the U.S. population.² With immigrants comprising a significant portion of the U.S. population and workforce, philanthropy must provide resources to a sector in dire need, before a possible next wave of challenging policies, economic crises, or global challenges hit, or before more staff who feel challenged decide to leave the sector altogether. There are good short and long-term solutions to promote the sustainability of the immigrant rights movement that funders can implement now. Alongside short-term changes, philanthropy must meet this moment with new thinking about the overall sustainability: of this sector, its people, and its work.
The Raben team, led by Patty First, Imali Bandara, and Daniela Ramirez, brought this work to life in close collaboration with an Advisory Committee made up of philanthropic, nonprofit, and academic leaders who are experts in various aspects of the nonprofit and immigrant rights sector.

The responsibilities of the Advisory Committee included providing expertise through its diverse range of representation, being ambassadors to the community by connecting the Raben team to a greater constituency of immigration advocacy leaders, and providing guidance and counsel, especially by reviewing the project’s methodology and program evaluation. An added benefit of the advisory committee was to better coordinate existing efforts intended to help inform and advance the nonprofit and immigrant rights community.

**THE ADVISORY COMMITTEE INCLUDED:**

- Rosie Arroyo, California Community Foundation (CCF)
- Regina Birdsell, Center for Nonprofit Management (CNM)
- Cynthia Buiza, California Immigrant Policy Center (CIPC)
- Diana Colin, California Community Foundation (CCF)
- Mary Cruz, formerly at The Durfee Foundation
- Kevin Douglas, Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees (GCIR)
- Claire Knowlton, formerly at Nonprofit Finance Fund (NFF)
- Tuly Martinez, Southern California Grantmakers
- Michael Nobleza, LA County Office of Immigrant Affairs
- Vy Nguyen, The Weingart Foundation
- Vera de Vera, The Weingart Foundation
- Anthony Ng, The Weingart Foundation
- Rhonda Ortiz, Equity Research Institute at USC
- Jamie Shapiro, Executive Leadership Coach, MCC, CPCC, Founder/CEO Connected EC
This project builds on two recent studies of immigrant-serving organizations. Grantmakers Concerned with Immigrants and Refugees (GCIR) commissioned an excellent national research study on Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) among front-line professionals that serve immigrant populations using interviews. The GCIR study found high levels of STS among these professionals and concluded that services to the communities they served may be affected as a result. Professors Lindsay Harris of the University of the District of Columbia Law School (UDC Law), and Professor Hillary Mellinger of Washington State University, conducted a nationwide quantitative survey of asylum attorneys that measured their levels of burnout and found those levels to be quite high.

The project combined both quantitative and qualitative assessments through an online survey and a series of one-on-one and focus group interviews to assess the state of the immigrant rights movement in Southern California in the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside, and Ventura.

With the support of the Advisory Committee, the team developed a comprehensive list of organizations that were invited to participate in the project that were reached first through the qualitative survey, and then a subset of participants, who elected to be interviewed, were reached through qualitative interviews.

Quantitative Research (Online Assessment Survey)

The project’s team, with the support of the Advisory Committee, invited organizations throughout the LA-area nonprofit and immigrant rights sector to participate in an online anonymous and confidential survey. The survey was made anonymous in an effort to foster honesty and candor from participants. The 113-question assessment consisted of seven sections, which included multiple choice and narrative questions, including a series of validated psychological assessments related to burnout and wellness.

The survey was made available in languages commonly spoken within the immigrant community in Southern California, including English, Spanish, Korean, Tagalog, and Thai. Included at the conclusion of the online survey was a list of mental health and wellness resources for participants who needed immediate help.

Key Terms & Psychological Assessments

In creating the quantitative assessment, the project team wanted to measure where staff fell on a spectrum of burnout to vitality, the impact of trauma on their work and health, whether they experience compassion fatigue, their overall wellness and vitality, and their level of psychological capital (which includes, among other things, hope, resilience, and self-efficacy).
To do this, we chose five validated psychological assessments that, when taken together, give us a more complete picture of a person’s levels of well-being.

The term **burnout** refers to “a state of emotional, mental and often physical exhaustion brought on by prolonged or repeated stress.” Burnout, which can be viewed as a spectrum (meaning some have more and some have less), manifests in many ways including exhaustion, cynicism, detachment, and a sense of helplessness or diminished effectiveness. Signs of burnout include insomnia, fatigue, inability to concentrate, anxiety, depression, exhaustion at the thought of work, detachment, pessimism, loss of enjoyment, apathy, overwhelm, cynicism, compassion fatigue, helplessness, irritability or a combination of several of these signs.

Our survey contained the following assessments:

**The Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (CBI):**

We chose the CBI because it specifically measures three types of burnout: personal, work-related, and client-related. This gives us better insight into what areas of life might be contributing to someone’s burnout. Personal burnout refers to things in your personal life that contribute to burnout (finances, relationships, etc). Work burnout refers to work stressors that can contribute to burnout (type of work, hours worked, the stress of the work, salary, etc). High client-related burnout is a sign that someone may be experiencing compassion fatigue, which is essentially diminishing compassion for the clients one serves.

**The Secondary Traumatic Stress Scale:**

Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) is emotional duress that occurs when someone hears about another’s trauma. It is secondary because the person is removed from the immediate trauma. Trauma and burnout are often highly correlated, thus making it important for us to assess levels of STS. The STS Scale also asks about compassion fatigue.

**The Positive Functioning at Work (PFW) Scale:**

The PFW Scale measures a person’s self-reported well-being at work through questions on topics including positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. This is useful in determining where someone might be on the spectrum of burnout to vitality.
The Leader Vitality Scale (LVS):

The LVS is a newer scale, developed by Jamie Shapiro and Stewart Donaldson, and we were pleased to include it in our assessment. Vitality encompasses a sense of aliveness and energy. According to psychologists Chris Peterson and Martin Seligman, "A vital person is someone whose aliveness and spirit are expressed not only in personal productivity and activity: such individuals often infectiously energize those with whom they come into contact." (Peterson and Seligman, Character Strengths and Virtues, 2004). Vitality is highly correlated with happiness and well-being. The LVS measures physical, psychological, and emotional vitality. When one's burnout level is high, we expect their vitality to be low.

The Psychological Capital (PsyCap) 12:

Someone with high psychological capital generally has more hope, self-efficacy (or belief about their capabilities), resilience, and optimism. High psychological capital is linked to life and work satisfaction and well-being.

A total of 103 responses were received through the online assessment survey, with 91 responses deemed complete for the purposes of analysis. The seven-part assessment included a section on demographics which asks about race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, level of ability, age, and religious/belief systems. While efforts were made to be thoughtful and inclusive in developing the questions in this section, answers may not have always been comprehensive. Participants were welcome to please specify or select “prefer not to say.”

The demographic data of the 91 respondents included:
METHODOLOGY
(CONTINUED)

RACE & ETHNICITY

- Hispanic and/or Latinx: 45.22%
- White: 15.65%
- Black or African American: 3.48%
- East Asian: 7.83%
- South Asian: 3.48%
- Middle Eastern and/or North African: 0.87%
- Other: 9.57%
- American Indian and/or Alaska Native: 5.22%
- European: 4.35%
- African (Sub-Saharan): 1.74%

GENDER

- Woman: 73.33%
- Man: 20.95%
- Nonbinary or Genderqueer: 4.76%
- Prefer not to say: 0.95%
- Different identity: 0.05%
METHODOLOGY
(CONTINUED)

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

PERSON WITH A DISABILITY

METHODOLOGY
(CONTINUED)
Additionally, the survey also asked for information about their organization and position (omitting the organization’s name), such as the counties they serve, primary services, their job title, and tenure at their organization.
METHODOLOGY
(CONTINUED)

PRIMARY SERVICES

- Capacity-building and technical assistance: 16.50%
- Direct services: 19.42%
- Leadership and professional development: 10.68%
- Policy, advocacy, and systems reform: 7.77%
- Unsure: 0%
- Other: 29.13%

JOB TITLE

- Executive Director: 16.50%
- Senior Vice President, Vice President, or equivalent: 19.42%
- Senior Director, Director, or equivalent: 10.68%
- Senior Manager, Manager, or equivalent: 9.71%
- Senior Coordinator, coordinator, or equivalent: 25.00%
- Administrative or support: 7.77%
- Other: 29.13%
- Unsure: 0%

- Board member: 1.94%
Qualitative Research (Focus Groups & One-on-One Interviews)

A key component of this work was facilitating a series of focus groups and one-on-one interviews with staff in order to provide additional insight to complement the data collected from the online assessment survey. Within the narrative section of the online assessment, participants were invited to participate in the interview phase and, in doing so, share their personal information. In this report, the identities of the interview participants remain anonymous and their individual responses confidential.

In an effort to keep these conversations people-centered and as safe as possible, each of the interviews (both the focus groups and one-one-ones) started off with a reminder of the reason why the research was being conducted, as well as engagement working agreements and a resurfacing of the project resource guide, which included immediate resources for mental health support should participants feel strongly impacted by the topics the questions posed. Additionally, to account for the time spent on the project research, all interviewees were financially compensated with a stipend for their participation.
A total of 21 people were interviewed via a confidential focus group or one-on-one interview. Their organizational titles consisted of the following:

- Executive Director
- Senior Director, Director, or equivalent
- Senior Manager, Manager, or equivalent
- Staff Attorney
- Organizer
- Volunteer
- Administrative or support

In addition to interviews with participants, the research team also engaged with ten wellness, nonprofit, and immigration experts through one-on-one interviews. The topics from those interviews included immigration, wellness, burnout, leadership, secondary-traumatic stress, and the nonprofit finance sector. The intent behind these interviews was to explore both short and long-term recommendations to address the findings from the research project.

Based on our interviews, focus groups, and online assessment, immigration staff are experiencing high levels of burnout and are in need of solutions that promote the sustainability of the sector. Several themes emerged from the data, which are detailed in the next section.
BY AND LARGE, PEOPLE DERIVE MEANING FROM THEIR WORK.

Based on the data collected, the majority of people arrive at immigration advocacy work with a deep sense of meaning, with 59% of survey takers strongly agreeing that their work is meaningful, alongside another 33% who agree. When asked if the work they do serves a greater purpose, 90% of survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed.

For multiple interviewees, the meaning and origin of their work in the immigration sector is derived from personal experiences. While this brings on a strong sense of duty for many staff, there is also a level of self-placed pressure that is born out of their own histories.

The majority of interviewees shared their personal or family immigration stories when asked what brought them to work in the immigration sector. Several interviewees shared experiences, either as the oldest child or the one with the most English language skills, of serving as translators for their parents and engaging with the complex immigration system from an early age.
“For me, [my immigration work] started around high school. My entire life, I saw that people were taken advantage of. My family didn’t speak English. I was 5 or 6 translating for them. People were disrespecting our family. I tried combating that through civic engagement.”

“I’m a first-generation daughter of immigrants. The experiences that we had, seeing my parents, I look back and wish that someone was there offering resources. Speaking up for them. Being able to do this work now, assisting and offering resources, ties back to that. It’s what I wish someone would have done for my family, and now it is what I do for others.

“Personally, the reason I’m in [the immigration space] now is because deportation is based on US imperialism. My family lost a lot during the war in Vietnam. I lost siblings, family members, etc. The work that I do is NOT just around what happens in the US, but around that and beyond. That’s why I stay in it - it’s more than a domestic issue, but instead an international human-rights issue.”
BURNOUT IS HIGH AMONG IMMIGRATION STAFF, ESPECIALLY PERSONAL AND WORK BURNOUT.

Despite finding meaning in their work, burnout was quite high for the majority of respondents. The levels of burnout were not concentrated in specific role levels; rather, burnout was high among all positions within organizations and across races and ethnicities as well as ages.

The assessments used in the online survey allowed for the evaluation of burnout across multiple dimensions: personal, work, and client-related. The data indicates that survey takers have the least satisfaction when it comes to questions that deal with personal burnout (e.g., personal life stressors, such as lack of childcare, housing insecurity, or inability to pay for basic needs), making it the largest area of concern, followed by work-related burnout. Staff find the most satisfaction in questions relating to client work, indicating that client-related burnout is not a significant issue for this sector.

This is key as it highlights that the majority of immigration staff surveyed are not experiencing compassion fatigue, which is “a condition in which someone becomes numb to the suffering of others, feels less able to display empathy toward them, or loses hope in their ability to help. It most often affects healthcare professionals, soldiers, or anyone who is regularly exposed to human suffering.”

Burnout

Burnout also manifests in physical exhaustion, with 35% of survey takers reporting that they are often or always physically exhausted. The survey revealed that 82% of respondents are often or always tired. In a focus group interview, one consultant said:

“My anxiety spikes. I can’t go to sleep, sometimes. It’s 2 AM and I’m pondering immigration reform.”
THEMES AND FINDINGS

(CONTINUED)

How often do you feel tired?

- Never/Almost Never: 2.94%
- Seldom: 13.73%
- Sometimes: 48.04%
- Often: 30.39%
- Always: 4.90%

How often are you physically exhausted?

- Never/Almost Never: 2.94%
- Seldom: 13.73%
- Sometimes: 48.04%
- Often: 30.39%
- Always: 4.90%
Mentally, the work can also be very challenging, as 84% find work sometimes, often, or always emotionally exhausting. Furthermore, 72% sometimes, often, or always feel burnt out because of their work.

Is your work emotionally exhausting?

Do you feel burnt out because of your work?
Most concerning is that over half of the survey respondents, almost 54%, sometimes, often, or always think, “I can’t take it anymore.” This type of exhaustion has been long-term, and people are reaching their limits. One research director shared:

“I’ve been with this org for 4.5 years, been in social change for a decade, and I’m TIRED. I’m 36, and I think I’m too young to be this tired.”

**How often do you think: "I can't take it anymore"?**
THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS EXACERBATED LEVELS OF EXHAUSTION AND BURNOUT.

In qualitative interviews, many participants attributed their levels of exhaustion to multiple factors but noted that the COVID-19 global health pandemic has exacerbated their exhaustion by creating a more challenging environment in which they must deliver services to immigrant communities, combined with a new and increased need for services. One directing attorney of an organization shared that their organization expanded to provide COVID-19 relief services, requiring them to step out of running day-to-day operations to focus on the provision of essential services such as produce and cash distribution, as well as hosting vaccine clinics for immigrant communities. A supervising attorney shared:

“There has been no cease in events or projects throughout the pandemic because the community has real, continuing needs. It feels like there’s more burden on our organizations. Our subgrantees and partners are overwhelmed and at capacity and don’t want to partner with us, and then this upsets funders. How do we support the whole ecosystem? We’re seeing the ripple effects throughout it.”

An attorney who works in an immigration clinic emphasized the instability caused by the pandemic and the fact that there remains an onslaught of work to do.

“The COVID-related ups and downs, the rollercoaster of being in person versus remote, means my burnout has increased. It feels so high volume and never-ending. While we don’t have the levels of fear that we did under Trump, the caseload hasn’t gone down and the work remains. I had COVID last year and still worked 12-hour days, and through Christmas.”

BURNOUT AND TRAUMA ARE HIGHLY CORRELATED IN THE DATA.

Based on a statistical analysis of the survey data, there is a significant correlation between burnout and trauma, meaning those reporting more secondary traumatic stress also experience higher burnout.

In a focus group where participants were asked to reflect on their experience taking the survey, one administrative assistant shared:

“What stood out the most was the questions around vicarious or secondary trauma. Taking in what you hear. When I first started working in my program, I was sympathizing with everyone. A lot of the stories were horrible - from countries, I had never engaged with. I became stronger with the stories. Before, I would maybe cry just hearing stories. But now, I need to become more of a professional. But also, I think we are so used to being in a routine and at a certain pace and you forget about yourself. I’m taking all of this information in, but I don’t even go to therapy.”
A senior staff attorney shared her observations on staff absorbing secondary traumatic stress.

"I was supervising a legal assistant who was really, really struggling and she was assigned to do all the intake for our children’s team and it came out that she had her own trauma from her own childhood when her mother died that she was really struggling with. It was very hard for her to engage in cases where there was a parental death and it manifested when she would avoid re-engaging with an intake. I couldn’t understand how she couldn’t proofread her work but she literally didn't want to look at the words on the page again."

PERSONAL BURNOUT MANIFESTS IN MULTIPLE IMPACTS FOR STAFF, INCLUDING ISSUES FOCUSING, EXHAUSTION, AND ADDED PRESSURE.

For some, burnout results in exhaustion due to lack of sleep. 57% of respondents said they very often, often, or occasionally have trouble sleeping. One administrative assistant underscored how emotionally overwhelming the work can be, sharing:

“I don’t know what to expect with Title 42, Ukraine, and Afghan refugees who haven’t gotten enough aid. I don’t know what to expect. I’m worried about the unknown, but maybe I shouldn’t be thinking about it. Immigration is important to us. Maybe we don’t get sleep because we think about it too much. Right now it’s low, but it feels like something is going to happen. It feels like the calm before the storm.”

I had trouble sleeping.
Burnout can also manifest in feeling helpless in the face of extremely challenging circumstances. Staff are helping immigrant communities navigate a policy and legal environment that is complex and often unforgiving, leading them to feel the difficulty of situations being out of their control. A staff attorney shared:

“Every time I have to explain the 10-year bar to clients... I just rage. I’m just so angry, I don’t know. I get off the phone and think, ‘this is so messed up, to be the deliverer of bad news.’ I know that these aren’t my laws. I did not put them in place.”

A community organizer shared that she:

“talks to [her] family, but they don’t understand. It’s hard. It’s hard to seek resources because our organizations don’t offer them. It would be useful to get them, but we can’t always get what we want.”

Staff also experience trouble concentrating, with over 60% reporting that they occasionally, often or very often cannot focus.
A supervising attorney said:

“I see people not taking care of their health, not feeling well, people being absent from work or people being at work but not being able to focus, not being able to organize themselves in a way to kind of get through their days.”

A similar feeling expressed by interviewees across all levels was the added pressure they feel working on a high-stakes issue like immigration, where their work has a direct impact and consequences on people’s lives. Furthermore, given that the immigration advocacy sector is constrained by a lack of resources and compounding social and political effects, staff felt an increase in the pressure to show up, deliver their best work and be there for their communities. A senior director said:

“Every time there is a gap in campaigns, you get a guilt because you feel like you’re supposed to be constantly working.”

A case representative said:

“The person who was detained said, ‘you’re the only one who still cares. You’re the only person still fighting for me.’ I knew I needed to be that person, but I knew I shouldn’t be taking on that full responsibility. Someone was still depending on me. I started therapy and it’s really helped. But talking can only do so much.”

A supervising attorney shared:

“[My staff is] so overwhelmed that they can’t bear that time [to engage in self-care or process trauma]. I see people just feeling really overwhelmed like there’s just too many things to juggle and they are taking on such intense responsibility, feeling like they need to save clients, or that the weight the world is on their shoulders that if they don’t do this the right way or they don’t do it at all, people will be harmed.”

An executive director highlighted that:

“the industry pushes for white supremacy culture. The environment around you is constantly pushing against you. It’s been really hard seeing the health - not just for me, but for my team. I see it. It’s a combination of the pandemic and the backgrounds that we come from. It’s not just “this right now.” We are always in “defense mode” and are constantly in fear or feel a threat. When you think about trauma and what it does to your body. It’s not just the trauma you’ve lived through, but what you’ve experienced throughout this work.”
An attorney shared that:

“for myself and colleagues who have felt comfortable sharing with me, it’s a consistent feeling of being tired and not having enough energy to do things outside of work. Really hard for folks with family obligations.”

**Do you have enough energy for family and friends during leisure time?**

**THEMES AND FINDINGS (CONTINUED)**

**THOSE WITH HIGH BURNOUT, ALSO HAVE LOWER VITALITY.**

The quantitative analysis of the Positive Functioning at Work scale reveals that the areas where staff have the least satisfaction are physical health, economic security, and the work environment. Furthermore, analysis of the Leader Vitality Scale corresponds to the observation on wellbeing, as it shows that staff is least satisfied with their physical vitality, as compared to psychological and emotional vitality.
Physical Wellbeing

About 62% at least somewhat agree that they do not have enough physical stamina to do the things they want to do. In interviews, several staffers spoke to the need for exercise as a form of stress relief and decompression that they valued, but also shared that many of the options they wish to seek out are cost prohibitive.

One executive director expressed their wish for more wellness-focused funding, saying:

“I’d love to find funding that helps support wellness. I was doing yoga classes for a while. I loved it so much because it made me feel good — a great release. But then I couldn’t afford it anymore. Also for me personally, I feel wrong asking for that from my organization. I would love to be able to provide those stipends for my staff and for myself - if there were grants for wellness I could access.”
A director shared that their organization expanded to provide COVID-19 relief services and that the pressure to serve the community is never ending and takes a physical toll.

“I don’t think they pay us enough or give us enough space to deal with that heavy stuff. Because I have a background in child law (children that are abused, etc.) I am given a lot of those cases. They don’t pay us enough to think about how I’ll be okay after. They pay me enough to pay rent and put a roof over my head. As far as wellness goes, I do zero percent of that. I have to pay my rent and eat and that’s it.”

When asked to imagine an ideal workplace, one executive director said:

“Retirement plans for people. [We need] more support for organizations that help build that.”
I could lose several months of pay due to serious illness and still have my economic security.

In the event of a financial emergency, I have adequate savings.
Challenging Work Environment

Statistical analysis of the online assessment shows that the average survey responses for satisfaction with their environment were below average. This includes both a lack of a pleasant work environment as well as a lack of access to nature. Less than half of respondents agree or strongly agree that their workspace allows them to focus on their work.

My physical work environment (e.g., office space) allows me to focus on my work.

Multiple interviewees shared that the nature of their work does not always lend itself to a work-from-home setting, but that they wish their employers would further consider a hybrid work model allowing them to work from home for part of their jobs. One advocate shared:

"I started law school recently and have been forced to set more clear boundaries in regards to my work hours and my inability to take work home now. This makes it seem or feel like I am underperforming or my performance is not as efficient as it used to be. However, the truth is that I used to take work home a lot and no longer do that because I am in a night school program. I think work environments should be more receptive to hybrid work environments that allow employees to work on tasks and assignments from home."
GENERATIONAL IMPACTS AND CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Attrition and Lack of Elders

Several interviewees said that the immigration space in Southern California has a decreasing population of “elders.” Many shared that, due to high levels of burnout and exhaustion, there is a high rate of attrition in their organization and in the sector overall. The majority of survey takers were under the age of 45 and, when probed about generational gaps, explained it as due to exhaustion within a sector where change occurs slowly while the work never slows down, and where there is a lack of economic security and long-term benefits needed to sustain oneself in older age. An immigration rights consultant shared:

“My colleagues...have now retired or moved on in the sense of passing the torch. Part of it has to do with the fact that some have become jaded. Some things [about immigration policy] have changed but also remained the same. Few steps forward and [many] steps back.”

Generational Attitudes to Wellness

Furthermore, some interviewees noted that often there is a generational gap between how mental health, self-care, and community care are perceived. Young people are seen as more in tune with practices surrounding well-being, while older people may deem themselves to be more “old school.” One director shared that:

“The younger generation is wanting to deal with their trauma now, or they can’t deal with it and then I have to intervene [to do their work while they process]. [Some of it is that] I have to train up that staff to be good messengers of bad news. More support is necessary with younger staff; on one hand, they are blasé and, on the other, they are super sensitive.”

However, some elders shared their understanding that young people in their organizations are the next generation of leaders and, therefore, it might be prudent to pay closer attention to the ways they want to work. One executive director reconciled their own view on the work compared to the new generation and shared:

“I see why young people don’t want to work overtime, young people see things we don’t see or we are not used to; I think they have a point, and they are going to be the ones continuing the work. Young staff has asked for self-care activities and access to technology, and it’s a different generation doing things differently. In the end, we all want access to resources that we need to do this work, for instance, living wage. I’ve been thinking about how to raise salaries for them when inflation has raised prices so high.”
Additionally, perspectives on the concepts of wellness and self-care were also occasionally divided across ages as well as between immigrant and first or second-generation identities. Many interviewees who were the children of immigrants or arrived as young children who then primarily grew up in the United States were generally more familiar with the concepts as a way to ensure sustainability, even if they did not currently have the resources to access activities or support to address their wellness. However, some interviewees shared that older staff, many of who are immigrants themselves, had differing views on the concepts of self-care and wellness and their connection to the sustainability of this advocacy work. One supervising attorney shared that elder and immigrant staff in their organization translate wellness into community care and see self-care as a less relatable concept that promotes individualism. As one research director shared:

"The concept of self-care doesn't resonate with most of my colleagues, many who instead identify with community care. My colleagues and I attended a webinar about wellness and trauma that was counter-cultural for a lot of my colleagues, who were raised in a culture of community. So the idea of community care is far more motivating for these folks who couldn’t understand why you would ever pursue something for yourself."

An executive director shared a similar perspective, noting that:

"Wellness and self-care concepts, at least for me, are new. I don’t think we are intentional about it. We do find ways to take care of ourselves on the weekends but we do that with our families. I know this is different for new people coming to our organization. Personally, I've been doing this work since I was 17 or 18; I'm 54 now and sometimes my body is tired even though my mind is racing with ideas. Retirement does not exist in my vocabulary, but I'm trying to be more intentional about self-care because we deal with a lot of trauma."

Finally, given the various cultural backgrounds within organizations' staff, multiple interviewees flagged the need for culturally competent resources. One director shared:

“We are a bicultural staff. The more westernized staff would be open to [resources such as] coaching, but for non-westernized staff, they are not there yet [in the process of accepting these concepts] and would need in-language training and resources.”
HOW STAFF ARE AND WOULD LIKE TO BE SUPPORTED

In the online assessment, staff were asked to share what types of wellness policies their organizations already have in place, how important the policies would be to them and what additional support they would like from their organizations.

Existing Organizational Policies and Approaches to Wellness

The online assessment asked surveyees to share any existing efforts by their organizations to address their wellbeing. When asked if their organizations had wellness policies, 39% said yes, while 60% either said no or were unsure. As a follow-up, survey takers were asked if it would matter to them if their organizations had a wellness policy, to which nearly 80% said yes, while less than 3% said no and 18% said unsure.

Does your organization have a wellness policy or self-care practices?
Some examples of existing wellness resources provided by organizations included: wellness stipends (cash) to use in whatever way wellness speaks to employees; wellness lunches where staff can engage in activities such as art therapy; office closures for certain periods such as the holidays, for a summer break, or after an intense work period; and wellness rooms in office spaces.

Multiple interviewees acknowledged that their organizations are doing the best they can and have the desire to do more in this area but cannot, given the current levels of funding.

Organizational leaders lamented that they often did not have the resources to fully meet the needs of their staff and that they often had to think creatively to find the budget to provide any wellness-focused opportunities, which come at the expense of losing some funds that contribute to their programming. Many organizations also do not have significant human resources support to help put wellness policies into place. While staff have real, unmet needs around the multiple dimensions of work that could be addressed through increased attention and action by their employers on the topics of wellbeing and sustainability, many staff understood the reality of the underfunded and under-resourced field in which their organizations operate. One advocate shared:

“I think the organization is doing the best that it can, [is being] very resourceful, and I genuinely see [an increased attention to] health being included as we grow.”
Interventions staff want

Staff is interested in multiple interventions to promote their well-being and the sustainability of their work. They are most interested in compensated self-care, which 80% of respondents indicated would make the most difference to their wellbeing. They are also highly interested in increased staffing, training on burnout, flexible hours, and coaching—all of which were ranked important by more than 50% of survey takers.

Which of the following interventions do you think would make the most difference to their wellbeing at work? Check all that apply.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Intervention</th>
<th>Degree of Difference to Wellbeing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Increased Staffing</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decreased Case/Client Load</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching</td>
<td>46</td>
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<tr>
<td>Flexible Hours</td>
<td>45</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fewer Work Hours</td>
<td>33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Compensated Self-Care</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training on Burnout, Secondary Traumatic Stress, Wellness and Vitality</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>15</td>
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</tbody>
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Given the opportunity to write in answers on the online assessment, many survey takers shared additional specific interventions and comments that they would like philanthropy to consider when examining the state of the immigration advocacy field.

Several staffers expressed a desire for their organizations to increase resources that focus on healthcare. Some flagged that they need health insurance in general, and several noted that access to options for healthcare for their dependents would help alleviate challenges. Many staff also asked for increased support focused on their mental health, including funds to cover co-pays and deductibles for semi-regular counseling, and an increased acknowledgment that many who are in this field deal with historical and personal traumas.

As one respondent shared:
In sum, there are very high levels of burnout throughout organizations. This burnout is highly correlated with secondary traumatic stress. High levels of burnout also strongly correlate to low levels of vitality, especially in physical health and economic security. Based on the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data, as well as input provided by experts, interventions should address these four areas: burnout, trauma, physical health, and economic security.

"Individuals deal with trauma in different ways and we all need to learn how to support individuals with their personal issues because often they blend with the difficult work they are doing. We need more personalized as well as collective training.”
RECOMMENDATIONS

WHY NOW?

Although burnout levels are high, our data shows that this is a key time to intervene to ensure that people’s needs are met before they reach compassion fatigue—which is much harder to recover from and can affect organizational health and the quality of services provided to the community. Our conversations with participants show across the board that people are in need of interventions and searching for resources from their organizations and funders. There is an appetite to engage in self-care and address trauma and burnout, and organizations and funders must meet the moment to demonstrate to staff that they are hearing these experiences and working to change the paradigm under which immigration advocacy occurs.

Our recommendations are sorted into four categories: changes to organizational practices; changes to funder practices; long-term efforts requiring funder investment; and systems change.

CHANGES TO ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES

The following are interventions that organizations can implement on their own. Some interventions, however, would require additional funding.

Ask & Assess

In the narrative portion of the survey and in almost every interview, participants thanked us for asking how they are doing, and in many cases said that no one had asked these types of questions before. They appreciated the opportunity to reflect on their wellbeing. Some interviewees also expressed a desire for organizational management to ask more often about their wellbeing, and to ask what they need, even if management cannot provide everything needed.

We recommend that managers regularly check in with staff on wellbeing and burnout, and ask what interventions might be most helpful. It matters to employees when leadership takes burnout seriously, works to understand the personal burnout of employees, and, in turn, offers solutions to help them address it. It’s important to also note that interventions will require funder resources.

One community organizer shared that they had trouble initially identifying their own burnout, noting:

“My mental health wasn’t the best — all I did was work. When I first started, I was expected to get things done. I felt like I needed to work every second of every day, like ‘I need to be doing something every 15 minutes.’ That caused a lot of burnout and stress. It was to a point that you found yourself not being able to do basic things.”
RECOMMENDATIONS

(CONTINUED)

However, they had the support of their manager to help them through the state of burnout:

My direct supervisor really cares about mental health, self-care, and work-life balance. I wasn’t so much used to that. When she reached out and asked me how I could be supported to take care of myself, it wasn’t something I was used to. But I felt comfortable trying things out, and felt supported to the point where I felt it was okay to step back.”

Compensated Self-Care

Compensated self-care was ranked highest — by 80% of survey participants — as the intervention that would make the most difference in their lives. This was confirmed in our interviews as well. In many organizations, staff needs to take sick leave or vacation time to care for themselves, including accessing therapy or taking time to process the secondary traumatic stress they experience from their work. Many organizations do not have mental health days, although some have begun to close the office for a few days or a week on a semi-regular basis as a way to give all staff time away from work at the same time, and executive directors and human resources managers we spoke with expressed that they wished they could afford to do more. Most organizations cannot offer compensated self-care without additional resources.

Furthermore, compensated self-care is an area in which funders can also be intentional about supporting a community of immigrant rights workers who face a unique set of pressures rooted in the fact that, for many workers, this is very personal work that relates directly to their own and their families’ immigrant experiences. As many workers toggle between multiple cultures of their ancestral countries and the United States, it is important to recognize that the concepts of wellness and self-care are culturally rooted as well. By providing resources to help immigrant rights workers engage in self-determined wellness, funders open up the conversation to not only honor their work, but celebrate the many ways in which immigrant and immigrant-adjacent communities may choose to engage in self-care—which many of the interviewees have noted involves community care and cultural celebration. By keeping the funds flexible but intentional regarding self-care, funders have the opportunity to make progress in helping organizations be celebrated and valued for their unique positioning.

Changing Work Practices

While some current work practices are the nature of the nonprofit sector in 2022, and require long-term systemic solutions, there are work practices organizations can adopt that would help create more sustainable workplaces in the short term. Below are practices that were mentioned in our interviews, in the narrative portion of the assessment, or in our expert interviews.
• **Flexible hours**: This includes office hour flexibility, and also increasing options for hybrid work whenever possible. As we have seen in the pandemic, flexibility offers staff — especially staff who are also caregivers — the ability to do their work when they are best able. Flexible hours can also include flexibility to, for example, go to a therapy session during the middle of the day, or begin work earlier or later so staff has the opportunity to care for themselves. We recognize that some direct service providers are challenged by flexible work arrangements because they see clients in person. Funding to pilot creative solutions, such as job splitting, might be necessary.

A supervising attorney noted,

“The flexible hours is a big one, can there be a way to envision the way that we structure work as we reopen offices in a hybrid way so that the hours of work don’t necessarily have to be done in the hours of 9 to 5.”

• **Blocking lunch breaks**: Some organizations have begun blocking off lunch on staff’s calendars and making it clear that staff are not expected or encouraged to work during lunch.

• **Wellness Stipends**: Some organizations have been able to provide small wellness stipends (cash) for staff to use for anything wellness related that would help them. A researcher shared that her organization gives small stipends to help staff with “trips, gym memberships, or buy or replace things.” Another interviewee shared that their “organization has begun to host wellness lunches every other week, where the administrative team will bring in art therapy and are reimbursed for lunch so that they can ‘take a real lunch and connect.’”

Implementing such changes to work practices and culture can be a challenging process. Staff from the Durfee Foundation, an industry leader in funding and prioritizing sabbaticals and rest for nonprofits, shared that an observation from their Lark Awards program, which supports collective care and staff renewal for small, Los Angeles-based nonprofits, indicated that organizations (in addition to individual employees) need coaching in order to make the internal work policy changes needed to better prevent burnout and increase renewal and sustainability and improve the wellbeing of staff. Furthermore, the process cannot be a top-down plan and instead should be informed and developed in collaboration with the entire organization.
Survey respondents and interviewees spoke about the need for more general operating grants rather than grants that are tied to specific programs of metrics. When organizations have flexibility, they are better able to respond to staff and organizational needs such as compensated self-care, increasing pay and benefits, or time off. Those we interviewed noted that funders have begun to offer more general operating grants, but they would like to see this practice increase significantly. As one executive director said:

“We don’t even have money for healthcare, let alone self care.”

One executive director shared their need for unrestricted funding to creatively address multiple issue areas, saying:

“I need [general operating funds to] increase pay and more support in building the infrastructure of the organization including a sustainable model to fundraise for unrestricted funds, a functional board and a supporting staff that understands the hard work that has been put into what we currently have. Support in mediating conflict in a restorative way will also be invaluable.”

One executive director expressed the desire for increased unrestricted support to better focus on sustainability, saying:

“I need unrestricted funds that I can use however I think I need them. Trust me. I will always have that lens on mental health support and additional support. Don’t question me. Don’t put limits on [my ability to decide how to spend the money].”

**Increase Well-Resourced Capacity without Increasing Metrics and Deliverables**

More than 73% of survey respondents and as well as most interview respondents chose to add more staff to handle the workload as one of the top priorities that would decrease burnout and increase wellness in their organization. In our interviews, respondents made it clear, however, that staff increases should be well-resourced and should not come with significantly increased metrics or deliverables because that does nothing to decrease the existing too-full workload.

Funders might consider capacity-building grants and metrics separately as a way of delinking these concepts and recognize that many organizations need additional staff capacity to do their existing work sustainably. When staff leaves due to burnout, it creates a backlog for organizations that then have to hire and train someone new.
This puts additional stress on the rest of the organization's staff who may have to pick up additional work. It is far healthier for organizations and staff to ensure they have adequate staff to meet their existing work needs. A directing attorney noted that:

“[I]t feels like there’s more of a burden on our organizations because the work doesn’t end and keeps growing. Funding is growing but it’s not enough. I’m still struggling with placing cases in advance of the incoming eviction tsunami. Also, sub-grantees and partners are overwhelmed and at capacity and don’t want to partner with us, but then that upsets the funders.”

A researcher shared their perspective that what is most needed is:

“[M]ore staff to cover the work we are already doing, not to add work. We are also part of the problem which is that we think, in order to get more funding, we need to do more. Philanthropy likes shiny new objects. But there’s something to be said about the fact that, if we’re doing more work than we should be, we want more money to do the same good seven things we do rather than create new work. We’re not helping ourselves when we engage in the system of philanthropy where we have to promise new work for more money.”

Include Wellness and Sustainability in Grants

Consider including language in grants that encourages organizations to use some of the funds on wellness, sustainability, and staff care. Some organizations indicated that if they had the flexibility in grants to use some money in these areas, they would. A director noted that they:

“[W]ould like for funders to help ensure that self-care hours are funded through work so that the office is not stretched too thin.”

When funding wellness and self-care, donors must be explicit that the purpose of the funds is for wellness and sustainability (and joy); otherwise, they risk having organizations that are deeply committed to their mission, use “flexible funds” to address any gaps in organizational or programming needs.

The Weingart Foundation has modeled this practice through their John W. Mack Movement Building Fellows program, having learned over time the need to be more explicit about fellowship grant funds self-care and sustainability; without that explicit guidance, many leaders feel a trade-off between funding sustainability versus funding their programs.
Ask and Assess

We recommend that funders ask organizations about the well-being of their staff and inquire about needed interventions or resources. This type of transparency will help instill trust between funders and organizations, so that talking about wellness becomes normalized within organizations and, ultimately, the sector, and so that funders are made aware of resource needs.

Pooled Fund for Wellness Grants

Some funders have found spot grants to organizations focused on wellness to be useful. These allow organizations the flexibility to tailor the resources to staff needs and also ensure that organizations will use the funds for wellness as opposed to, for example, a new printer. Creating a pooled fund for such grants would ensure that there is enough money to reach many organizations.

Create a Resource Bank

In our interviews, it became clear that organizations often do not know how to access resources for their staff such as training, culturally competent therapists, trauma experts, coaches, and the like. We recommend that funders create and consistently update a resource bank for organizations to assist them in finding the services their staff needs.

Compensated Self-Care

In order to provide compensated self-care, many organizations will need additional funding or paid access to services such as culturally competent therapy or trauma support.

Increase Availability of Paid Sabbaticals

The Durfee Foundation, which for over 20 years has provided funding and support for organizational leaders in the LA area to take three-month sabbaticals, has found that sabbaticals contribute to nonprofit stability and also to sustainability. While the prevalence of sabbaticals is increasing in the corporate world (see a list of sabbatical policies compiled by The Sabbatical Project), sabbatical programs are most often targeted at executive directors or very senior leaders in nonprofit organizations. Expanding the availability of sabbaticals and support for employees who take sabbaticals could help staff recover from burnout and return with new energy and creativity.
Training

Although the results of our survey show that many people in immigration organizations in the LA area are experiencing significant burnout and trauma, survey respondents and interviewees noted that they don’t know how to spot the signs of burnout and trauma in themselves or in colleagues, nor what to do to counteract it. Training in topics such as burnout, secondary traumatic stress, wellness, vitality, and organizational and individual actions to help heal would be welcomed by many organizations.

Coaching

Coaching is useful to assist individuals with setting boundaries and changing their work life to create more personal sustainability. Some interviewees and survey respondents said coaching would be beneficial to help them set boundaries, determine their needs, and help create more balance.

Funder Investments

Significantly Increase Funding for the Sector

Across the board, staff expressed a clear need for increased resources to help them meet the growing needs of the immigrant community while sustaining their own staff and organizations to handle the work. The National Committee for Responsible Philanthropy’s assessment of foundations funding pro-immigrant work finds that, in addition to only 1% of top foundation money going to immigration work, there are only eleven funders who are responsible for over half of all resources going to the pro-immigration movement in the United States. Furthermore, the minimal levels of funding mean organizations that have long been underfunded have to now push themselves to do even more with their scant resources in the face of compounding challenges such as recent years of anti-immigration policy and the coronavirus pandemic. NCRP notes that “national networks and local grassroots groups focused on organizing have been particularly underfunded,” confirming what was shared in the qualitative interviews regarding the pressure placed on front-line organizations to continue to serve the growing needs of immigrants without added funding to their organizations. Ultimately, more resources need to be diverted to the field to ensure that its leaders and organizers are supported, well-resourced, and can continue to do work that supports a community vital to this country that faces immense pressure and crises.
RECOMMENDATIONS

(CONTINUED)

Invest in Building Up Culturally Competent Resources

Along with a resource bank, interviewees noted that there are not enough culturally competent mental health professionals, coaches, and trauma experts to access because historically these professions have been in the realm of the dominant culture. In 2018, the American Psychological Associated noted that 86% of psychologists in the United States are white. Research funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) has found, “When a mental health professional understands the role that cultural differences play in the diagnosis of a condition and incorporates cultural needs and differences into a person’s care, it significantly improves outcomes.” We recommend additional research into this issue and also funding programs to increase the number and pipeline of culturally competent wellness and mental health professionals in the LA area, perhaps by partnering with area universities to break down barriers to entry into these professions.

As one community leader said in our interviews, “We are a bicultural staff- the more westernized staff would be open to coaching, but for culturally [South-East Asian] staff, they’re not there and would need it in language.”

Model Wellness Policies

About 38% of the organizations that responded to the survey have wellness policies, although some of those we interviewed said their wellness policies are not comprehensive (providing, for example, only one mental health day per year). Others expressed interest in creating policies but were unsure where to begin. Almost 80% of respondents indicated they would like to see their organization adopt a wellness policy. We recommend creating model wellness policies that organizations can draw from.

Training

While there are some, but not many, training and organizational wellness supports for immigration legal organizations (such as the one run by the Center for Victims of Torture), we were unable to find any significant programs for non-legal organizations beyond small trainings or cohorts in leadership development or cultural competencies. And, it is a bit unfair to put the onus on the already understaffed and under-resourced executive staff at organizations to learn how to improve the wellness of their organization.

We recommend funders consider building out a trauma-informed, culturally competent, diagnosis and training program or organization that could help organizations assess their staff and organizational needs, determine possible interventions, and assist the organization with implementing those interventions.
Create a Dialogue Between Funders and Organizations on How to Change the System

Ultimately, to truly create a sustainable sector, the system must change from one rooted in the patriarchal and colonial ideas of productivity that deny rest and care until after a certain level of productivity is achieved, to one rooted in community and community care. To move towards this, the sector needs new, innovative ideas.

We highly recommend a structured dialogue between funders and organizations about how to change this system. Funders might consider a facilitated appreciative inquiry process, which is a strengths-based approach to organizational and systems change. Embracing trust-based philanthropy would also advance this type of system change. One executive director shared a wish to see the dynamics of the funder-grantee relationship flipped to address challenging power dynamics.

“Instead of us applying, it should be [funders] applying to us, to let us know that they want to be involved in our work. That would break this relationship that currently exists, this current dynamic where you must operate in your lane and you’re told that every step of the way. If we’re going to keep foundations, it needs to be the other way around with them coming to us. Otherwise, it feels like it’s like a “White Club” that we are trying to enter.”

Create Avenues for Organizations to Provide Living Wages

Perhaps the biggest barrier staff faces to overcoming burnout and increasing their wellness is lack of resources and low pay. Almost every person interviewed mentioned this, whether it was the choices their own low salary forced them to make, or executive directors that want to pay staff more but do not have the funds to do so.

The vast majority highlighted adequate compensation as an issue that must be addressed in order to create sustainable jobs in their organization and in the sector. We heard, for example, from many staff (at all levels) who know what would help increase their wellness —be it therapy, regular exercise classes that they love, or access to nature—but they cannot afford to access it. Many staff mentioned that their salary covers rent, bills, and groceries, but not much more, especially now that inflation has increased.
In addition to increased funding for organizations to provide living wages, we recommend funders consider other advocacy or campaigns that would guarantee a living wage for all workers in their area.

**Funders Should Increasingly Address Unionization**

In recent years, there has been an increase in nonprofit workers’ efforts to unionize in order to create better working conditions and promote livable wages for work that has historically been underfunded and under-resourced. Program Officers at CCF and Weingart who have been working alongside the Southern California immigrant rights sector have increasingly noted efforts by organizations to unionize, and aim to create environments where both organization leaders and staff are supported through these types of processes that can often be highly complex and sometimes contentious.

Given the rise of unionization seen as a strategic shift by nonprofit workers, including in the immigration sector, it is time for philanthropy to change the paradigm of traditional donor-grantee relationships by openly addressing issues such as unionization. Funders can and should open up the conversation to invite grantees to share more about their experiences with unionization and consider offering resources, including emergency or one-time grants, to provide facilitation of meetings or leadership coaching to help support grantees undergoing such processes.
Immigrants and immigrant rights groups are often applauded for their resilience. Against tough odds, migrants cross borders, set roots in sometimes hostile lands, and find ways to contribute economically, raise families, and participate civically. Meanwhile, the organizations that seek to ease that transition confront xenophobia, indifference, and policies of exclusion but find ways to team up with business leaders, political leaders, and non-migrant communities to turn what was a cold shoulder into a warm welcome.

But at what cost? Why is resilience – if it means being battered by a system that exhibits little care for your well-being – a good thing? What if we could equip people and organizations to transform the world and heal from the hurt that heads their way? Better yet, what if we could stop the harm and trauma altogether?

This important report tackles all these issues in a timely way. It finds that people working in the immigrant rights infrastructure that has grown up in Southern California continue to derive meaning from their work – but that they are burned out from the cruelty of the Trump years, the uneven ravages of the pandemic, and the continued stalemate around achieving immigration reform that could reflect our best values.

They are also exhausted from their own family experiences with COVID-19, worry about relatives at risk of deportation, and have a sharp sense of urgency when dealing with their clients. Working in “defense mode,” they are trying to compensate with therapy, self-care, and sometimes less care about the precarity of those they help. Executive directors are juggling budget constraints, generational tensions about the balance of commitment and rest, and the pressures from the field and funders to “perform.”

Something’s got to give – and we worry that without more funder support, it will wind up being those on the front lines of the struggle and those immigrant families who depend on them. This report offers a first step to getting it right, recommending that we actually ask immigrant rights staff about their needs rather than expecting them to be uncomplaining heroes of the movement.

Building on what they heard, the authors suggest some changes in practices, such as compensating people for self- (or community-) care, offering flexible hours and work locations, and making clear that wellness is an important part of the job.
For funders, they suggest that general operating grants are needed so that directors can feel free to fund these new practices, offer sabbaticals to a wider range of staff, and provide the training, coaching, and other forms of support needed for truly sustainable organizations.

For organizations and funders seeking to promote social justice, an oft-heard phrase is that “another world is possible.” By that, it is meant that we can come together to challenge multiple systems of oppression – to tackle anti-Blackness, overturn harsh enforcement of immigrant laws, upend our economy’s reliance on underpaid labor, to eradicate the patriarchal, homophobic, and transphobic structures that marginalize so many.

But we are not going to get there unless we also realize that “another social movement infrastructure is possible.” We cannot expect a humane society to be generated by inhumane working conditions. We cannot expect widespread healing when the organizations fighting for that outcome are – because of a shortage of resources – unintentionally inflicting or ignoring harm. This report is an important cry for help and it is a critical call for action – and we urge funders and the field to pay close attention.
A special thank you to Rosie Arroyo of the California Community Foundation and Vy Nguyen, and Anthony Ng & Vera De Vera of the Weingart Foundation for their tireless efforts on behalf of this project, and on behalf of the immigrant community in the Los Angeles area.

We would also like to extend our gratitude to our advisory committee for their guidance and wisdom, and especially to Jamie Shapiro of ConnectED for her keen insights and statistical analysis of our data.

WE THANK YOU FOR YOUR CONTINUED SUPPORT.
Patty First
Founding Principal, The Raben Group

With a career dedicated to advancing progressive nonprofits and helping organizations and people become their best selves, Patty is one of the foremost experts on policy advocacy and coalition building in the nation, and is also a positive psychology-based executive coach who specializes in using positive psychology to help organizations — and the people who work at them — thrive. A lawyer and an advocate for progressive causes for much of her career, Patty’s own journey facing anxiety and burnout means she intimately understands the struggles and challenges people at organizations face. In addition to her own coaching business, Patty First Coaching, she has been a valuable member of The Raben Group team since its inception and serves as a founding principal and lead of a practice area dedicated to issue campaigns and movement building and sustaining.

Patty was on the front lines of the struggle for humane immigration policy and civil rights. She worked on the Senate Judiciary Committee as counsel to Senator Edward M. Kennedy, where she helped craft landmark immigration legislation. She also served under Janet Reno as deputy assistant attorney general in the Office for Legislative Affairs, and litigated voting rights and redistricting cases as a trial attorney in the civil rights division at the Department of Justice. Patty earned her law degree at the William Mitchell College of Law in St. Paul, Minnesota, and received her undergraduate degree at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

In addition to her law degree, Patty’s coach training has led her to study with a wide variety of groups and people, including with the Flourishing Center, Martha Beck’s Wayfinder program, and mindfulness experts Tara Brach and Jack Kornfield. Patty is certified as a Martha Beck Wayfinder Life Coach, and an Applied Positive Psychology coach, and is credentialed at the ACC level by the International Coaching Federation (ICF). She is also becoming a certified meditation teacher.
Imali Bandara
Director, The Raben Group

Imali Bandara (she/her/hers) is a director in The Raben Group’s Issue Campaigns and Movements practice, where she brings experience in public policy, human rights, and social and economic justice philanthropy to support clients. She is deeply committed to amplifying the hard work of nonprofit and community organizations to gain public support.

Prior to joining Raben, Imali spent five years as part of the International Human Rights Program at Wellspring Philanthropic Fund. As a program associate, Imali developed expertise in a range of human rights issues, co-managing and providing strategic input on multi-million-dollar grant-making portfolios focused on business and human rights, the protection of human rights defenders and activists, and disability rights. At Wellspring, Imali also co-chaired the Young Professionals Working Group, where she supported the onboarding of junior-level programmatic staff, and sat on the Racial Justice Advocacy Group, which developed an internal diversity, equity, and inclusion strategy, and built out racial justice outcomes and priorities for the fund’s grant-making programs.

Imali holds a master’s degree in Public Policy and a Certificate in International Development Policy from the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, where she focused on management and social impact. She also holds a bachelor’s degree in Political Economy from the University of California, Berkeley.

Daniela Ramírez
Sr. Associate, The Raben Group

Daniela Ramírez is a senior associate in The Raben Group’s Beyond Diversity Strategies practice. A passionate DEIJ practitioner with years of experience in communications, project management, and client experience, Daniela supports clients as they work to create and implement strategies that foster a more diverse, equitable, inclusive, and just organization.

Prior to joining Raben, Daniela worked at Beautycounter — a mission-based skincare and cosmetics brand that not only creates safer products but also advocates for safer beauty laws in both the U.S. and Canada. Throughout her career at Beautycounter, she served as a supervisor for the Client Experience department and later served as a senior coordinator for Beautycounter’s Community Expansion and Communications function where she focused on Latinx strategies and cultural competencies. Daniela earned a bachelor’s degree in English Literature from Loyola Marymount University in 2016 — the first in her family to graduate from college.
Part One: Demographic information

1. Which of the following counties does your organization work in? (Please select all that apply.)
2. What are the primary services your organization provides? (Please select all that apply.)
3. Which one, if any, best describes your current job title at your organization?
4. How long have you served in your organization’s current position? (Please select one.)
5. What is your age?
6. What is your education level?
7. What is your gender? You can choose multiple options.
8. Do you identify as transgender (your gender is different than your sex assigned at birth)?
9. What is your sexual orientation? You can choose multiple options.
10. Do you have a disability?
11. Have you ever served in the military?
12. What is your racial or ethnic identity? (Please select all that apply.)
13. Do you identify with any of the following religions/belief systems? (Please select all that apply.)

Part Two: Please indicate how frequently the following statements apply to you

NOTE: “Client” is used to indicate persons with whom you have been engaged in a helping relationship. You may substitute another noun that better represents your work such as consumer, patient, recipient, etc.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Never/Almost Never</th>
<th>Seldom</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

14. How often do you feel tired?
15. How often are you physically exhausted?
16. How often are you emotionally exhausted?
17. How often do you think: "I can’t take it anymore"?
18. How often do you feel worn out?
19. How often do you feel weak and susceptible to illness?
20. Do you feel worn out at the end of the working day?
21. Are you exhausted in the morning at the thought of another day at work?
22. Do you feel that every working hour is tiring for you?
23. Do you have enough energy for family and friends during leisure time?
24. Is your work emotionally exhausting?
25. Does your work frustrate you?
26. Do you feel burnt out because of your work?
27. Do you find it hard to work with clients?
APPENDICES

SURVEY QUESTIONS
(CONTINUED)

Part Two (continued): Please indicate how frequently the following statements apply to you
NOTE: “Client” is used to indicate persons with whom you have been engaged in a helping relationship. You may substitute another noun that better represents your work such as consumer, patient, recipient, etc.

28. Does it drain your energy to work with clients?
29. Do you find it frustrating to work with clients?
30. Do you feel that you give more than you get back when you work with clients?
31. Are you tired of working with clients?
32. Do you sometimes wonder how long you will be able to continue working with clients?

Part Three: Read each statement then indicate how frequently the statement was true for you in the past seven (7) days by selecting the corresponding number next to the statement.

33. I felt emotionally numb.
34. My heart started pounding when I thought about my work with clients.
35. It seemed as if I was reliving the trauma(s) experienced by my client(s).
36. I had trouble sleeping.
37. I felt discouraged about the future.
38. Reminders of my work with clients upset me.
39. I had little interest in being around others.
40. I felt jumpy.
41. I was less active than usual.
42. I thought about my work with clients when I didn't intend to.
43. I had trouble concentrating.
44. I avoided people, places, or things that reminded me of my work with clients.
45. I had disturbing dreams about my work with clients.
46. I wanted to avoid working with some clients.
47. I was easily annoyed.
48. I expected something bad to happen.
49. I noticed gaps in my memory about client sessions.
Part Four: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat Disagree</td>
<td>Neither Agree Nor Disagree</td>
<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

50. I drink water throughout the day  
51. I regularly eat healthy  
52. I incorporate movement into my day  
53. I have the physical stamina to do the things I want to do in my life  
54. I feel alive and vital  
55. I nearly always feel awake and alert  
56. I feel at choice in what thoughts I give attention to  
57. I am able to maintain a positive outlook  
58. I can influence my emotions when needed  
59. I have the energy I need to manage my stress  
60. I have the emotional stamina to face problems

Part Five: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
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<td>Somewhat Agree</td>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

61. I feel joy in a typical workday  
62. Overall, I feel enthusiastic about my work  
63. I love my job  
64. I typically become absorbed while I am working on something that challenges my abilities  
65. I lose track of time while doing something I enjoy at work  
66. When I am working on something I enjoy, I forget everything else around me  
67. I can receive support from coworkers if I need it  
68. I feel appreciated by my coworkers  
69. I trust my colleagues  
70. My colleagues bring out my best self  
71. My work is meaningful  
72. I understand what makes my job meaningful  
73. The work I do serves a greater purpose  
74. I set goals that help me achieve my career aspirations  
75. I typically accomplish what I set out to do in my job  
76. I am generally satisfied with my performance at work  
77. I believe I can improve my job skills through hard work
Part Five: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

78. I believe my job will allow me to develop in the future
79. I have a bright future at my current work organization
80. I typically feel physically healthy
81. I am rarely sick
82. I can typically overcome sources of physical distress (e.g., insomnia, injuries, vision issues, etc.)
83. I feel in control of my physical health
84. I am comfortable with my current income
85. I could lose several months of pay due to serious illness, and still have my economic security
86. In the event of a financial emergency, I have adequate savings
87. My physical work environment (e.g., office space) allows me to focus on my work.
88. There is plenty of natural light in my workplace
89. I can conveniently access nature in my work environment (e.g., parks, oceans, mountains, etc.)

Part Six: Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

90. I feel confident in representing my work area in meetings with management.
91. I feel confident contributing to discussions about the organization's strategy.
92. I feel confident presenting information to a group of colleagues.
93. If I should find myself in a jam at work, I could think of many ways to get out of it.
94. Right now I see myself as being pretty successful at work.
95. I can think of many ways to reach my current work goals.
96. At this time, I am meeting the work goals that I have set for myself.
97. I can be "on my own," so to speak, at work if I have to.
98. I usually take stressful things at work in stride.
99. I can get through difficult times at work because I've experienced difficulty before.
100. I always look on the bright side of things regarding my job.
101. I'm optimistic about what will happen to me in the future as it pertains to work.
Part Seven:

102. What do you need personally to sustain yourself in your work?
103. What do you need from your organization to sustain yourself in your work?
104. Does your organization have a wellness policy or self-care practices?
105. If your organization has a wellness policy or self-care practices, what are they?
106. If your organization does not have a wellness policy or self-care practices, would it matter to you if it did?
107. Which of the following interventions do you think would make the most difference to their well-being at work? Check all that apply.
108. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?
109. In addition to online assessments, the SIM research team is conducting interviews to capture stories and experiences from the sector. The team plans to interview 50 people who will spend 1-1.5 hours in either a focus group or one-on-one setting, and be compensated at a range of $75-125 for their time. Are you willing to participate and be interviewed via phone or videoconference?
110. If you are interested in participating in a focus group, what is your preferred language of engagement?
111. If you are interested in participating, please provide your first and last name:
112. If you are interested in participating, please share the email address would you like to be contacted at?

Focus Group/1:1 Interview Questions

Engagement Questions:

- Share your name, title, what organization you belong to, and how long you’ve been a part of it?
- What is your favorite way to relax? This could be something you enjoy doing on a daily basis (a quick walk, or enjoying your favorite treat), or something you wish you could do more of (meditation, going on a hike, a spa day, etc.).
- What made you decide to join the immigration rights movement? Why do you do the work that you do?
  - Survey data: 91% of survey respondents found significant meaning and purpose in their work.

Exploration Questions:

We are incredibly grateful that you all took the time to respond to the survey. We want to use our time together today to dig into a few areas we could not adequately assess in a survey.
1. We would love to hear what the survey brought up for you if anyone would like to share.
2. How would you describe your current levels of burnout, exhaustion and also of wellness?
3. One area we’re curious about is intersectionality. In the immigration movement - perhaps more than in most movements - the people doing the work are often from the very communities they serve. We are curious about this intersection when it comes to burnout and wellness. What have you noticed if anything?
4. Have you noticed any physical effects on you from your work?
5. Many people in the survey mentioned compensation levels and that they did not have enough savings should something happen to them or a loved one. Does this resonate with you? In what ways?
6. Most of the people who answered our survey were under 45 years old. We were curious about that. Are there intergenerational dynamics in your workplace or in your area of the immigration movement that are important to consider?
7. We have also heard in the comments about unionization efforts in organizations, which can be stressful, even if ultimately positive for your staff. Has your organization gone through collective bargaining? What has the effect been - positive or negative?
8. Now we would like to turn to solutions. Obviously, there is no one-size-fits-all solution. What we want to do is give philanthropy a sense of what staff needs for their jobs to feel more sustainable and what sustains them personally. The following rose to the top as what people needed:
   - Compensated self-care
   - More staff
   - Training on topics like burnout, STS, and wellness
   - Flexible hours to do the work
   - Coaching
   - [Of these, what would make the most difference to you? Why? What would make the most difference to your workplace?]
9. We would like you to do some blue sky imagining with us. If you had the opportunity to rethink the structure of your workplace or your work so that it was more rooted in community values, how would it be different?

Exit Question:
- Before we turn to some tools to unwind stress and burnout, is there anything else you would like to share?
- Exercises:
  - 3-part breath
  - Post-traumatic growth
  - Noun gratitude
LIST OF EXPERTS INTERVIEWED

- Immigration Advocacy
  - Michael Nobleza, Los Angeles County Department of Consumer and Business Affairs
  - Leora Hudak, Center for Victims of Torture
  - Cynthia Buiza, California Immigrant Policy Center

- Nonprofits
  - Claire Knowlton, Nonprofit Finance Fund
  - Mary Cruz, The Durfee Foundation

- Burnout, Wellness, and Vitality
  - Stewart Donaldson, Claremont Graduate University
  - Jamie Shapiro, Connected EC
  - Victoria Cabrera, Claremont Graduate University
  - Darlene Nipper, Rockwood Leadership Institute

- Researchers
  - Lindsay Harris, University of the District of Columbia, David A. Clarke School of Law
  - Kristen Guskovic, Humanitarian Empathy & Refugee Trauma (HEART) of Aid Work
  - Miriam Potocky, Humanitarian Empathy & Refugee Trauma (HEART) of Aid Work