



The  
Durfee  
Foundation

## Funders' Guide to Creating a Sabbatical Program

### Overview

Since the Durfee Foundation launched its Sabbatical Program for nonprofit executives in 1997, over 100 Los Angeles leaders have taken a three-month break from work and returned to its challenges with renewed vigor.

The benefits of sabbaticals for nonprofit leadership have been well documented. A study of five sabbatical programs over five years shows that sabbaticals not only provide needed respite to nonprofit leaders, they increase organizational capacity, aid succession planning, and strengthen governance, D. Linnell and T. Wolfred, [\*Creative Disruption: Sabbaticals for Capacity Building and Leadership Development in the Nonprofit Sector \(2010\)\*](#). A 20-year retrospective study of Durfee's sabbatical program confirms these results and further documents how sabbaticals can be a lever for whole systems change at organizations. D. Linnell, [\*From Creative Disruption to Systems Change \(2017\)\*](#).

Unfortunately, Durfee is not able to meet the demand for sabbaticals in Los Angeles, let alone meet the needs of the sector nationwide. We often receive requests from funders around the U.S. for guidance to help them create their own sabbatical programs, and have been pleased to help several programs launch. This guide is intended to facilitate yet more. Durfee provides its own model as an example, but we recognize that different communities may require different structures, and encourage adaptation.

There are several sabbatical programs operating in the U.S. These are the ones that we know about:

[Barr Foundation](#) (for Boston nonprofit and public school leaders)

[The California Wellness Foundation](#) (for California nonprofit health leaders)

[The Clare Rose Foundation](#) (for Orange County and San Diego nonprofit leaders)

[The Colorado Health Foundation](#) (for Colorado nonprofit leaders)

[O2 Initiatives](#) (for San Francisco Bay Area nonprofit leaders)

[Virginia G. Piper Trust](#) (for Phoenix nonprofit leaders)

[Rasmuson Foundation](#) (for Alaska nonprofit leaders)

[Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation](#) (for North Carolina nonprofit leaders)

## **Background**

The Durfee Foundation has long focused on extraordinary individuals – thinkers, mavericks, artists and social entrepreneurs. This focus led the foundation to the exceptional leaders in the nonprofit sector, who perform innovative work while balancing a complex array of duties. The Durfee Sabbatical Program recognizes that creative leaders need time to think and reflect if they are to maintain their pace and keep their organizations ahead of the curve. But the enormous demands of their jobs, often combined with the financial pressure of working in an underfinanced field, can prevent them from taking time off for much-needed rejuvenation. The risk of burnout is high. Without support, the greatest resource of the nonprofit sector -- its extraordinary human capital – can be squandered.

Since 1997, the Durfee Foundation has operated its Sabbatical Program, which makes grants to six Los Angeles County nonprofit organizations to allow their principal leaders to take an extended leave from the organization, most commonly for three months, in order to rest and rejuvenate. Recipients typically travel, spend time with friends and family, develop or renew hobbies and interests, read, exercise, and simply enjoy unscheduled time. They are prohibited from engaging in work-related activities, or even activities that have specific goals, so as to take advantage of this unique opportunity to disconnect from their fast-paced, goal-oriented lives.

In addition to the \$60,000 awarded to recipient organizations to cover the cost of the leader's salary/benefits and sabbatical expenses, The Durfee Foundation provide \$15,000 to the organization designated for two purposes: 1) to reward the interim leaders who carry extra responsibility during the sabbatical, and 2) to advance the skills and wellbeing of staff.

The benefits of sabbaticals are far-reaching, not just for the leaders who take a break, but for the entire organization. Organizations that have had the experience of preparing for a leader's temporary departure often jumpstart or solidify thoughtful succession planning, secondary leadership development, and other organizational capacity building. The staff at these organizations also experienced new or increased access to professional development opportunities.

Another benefit of the program has been the creation of an informal nonprofit leadership network. The Durfee Foundation brings together the Sabbatical recipients for semiannual lunches and biannual retreats. These events provide a combination of fellowship and information sharing by focusing on issues that affect the leaders, such as board development or staff retention. Since the group represents a variety of sectors – from domestic violence to advocacy to community theater -- the participants transcend issue-based discussions and focus on what they have in common as nonprofit leaders. Invariably, their discussions are rich and purposeful. Several organizational partnerships and many more informal, supportive relationships between leaders have developed as a result of this peer network.

## **Why It Is Important for Funders to Sponsor Sabbaticals**

In an ideal world, nonprofit organizations would have sabbatical policies covering all of their staff as an integral part of their HR and retention strategy. But nonprofits are under constant pressure to do more with less, and this usually results in overworked staff who do not take regular vacations, let alone sabbaticals. When a funder prioritizes sabbaticals with its grant dollars it sends a clear message that it values the health and sustainability of the people working in the nonprofit sector.

Funder-sponsored sabbatical programs open the door for conversations between Executive Director/CEOs and their boards. The power imbalance and the need to appear at all times as though everything is under control make it especially difficult for EDs to ask their boards for a break. A foundation-sponsored program makes that request much easier. Not only is it financially smoother for the organization, the board understands that a funder values the sabbatical experience.

A funder-sponsored sabbatical that has strict guidelines about disconnecting also empowers the ED to take a no-contact break from board and staff. This is much harder to do with a self-initiated sabbatical.

### **Legalities**

The Durfee Foundation makes its grant payment for the sabbatical to the recipient's 501(c)(3) organization, rather than to the leader directly. Since the grant is earmarked to benefit an individual, however, it is wise to seek approval from the IRS before starting a sabbatical program. Durfee sought and received approval for its program from the IRS. Funders are advised to seek legal advice on this matter.

### **Eligibility**

Durfee targets its Sabbatical program for established leaders of nonprofit organizations, those who have been in a principal leadership role for at least seven years. Priority is given to those who have a demonstrated track record in the field, and are recognized not only for the success of their agency, but for their external leadership on commissions, boards, or other civic roles. Only full-time, paid leaders are eligible. The applicant agency must have at least five full-time staff. Experience has taught us that the extended absence of a leader is too stressful for smaller organizations.

Durfee also uses financial need as a criterion for selection. There is not a particular salary or budget that would disqualify an applicant, and the need criterion is relative to each pool of candidates. The foundation's primary goal is to make awards to those who would be unable to afford an extended leave without subsidy. For this reason, individuals with a high household income, or organizations with a substantial endowment, would receive a lower ranking in the review process. We take into account extenuating financial circumstances such as obligations to care for children or relatives.

## **The Application**

Durfee has developed an application, available [on our website](#), that seeks to strike the right balance between providing information without being overly burdensome. Eligibility criteria and answers to Frequently Asked Questions are also posted on the web site.

We require each applicant to provide a letter from his or her board chair endorsing the application.

## **Publicity**

The program relies primarily on electronic communication through email notices and social media posts. Comprehensive information about the program, including guidelines, applications, biographies and links to program alumni, is posted on Durfee's web site. In the first several years of the program, Durfee held an informational open house approximately one month prior to the application deadline. During this open house, Durfee's Executive Director described the program and the application process, and two program alumni spoke about their experiences. The foundation discontinued the open houses because attendance was dwindling while applications remained strong – this, we believed, was due to the fact that most potential applicants already knew about the program or knew someone that they could contact to obtain information about the program.

The foundation also requests recommendations from program alumni and foundation colleagues for applicants, and sends out a reminder e-mail with links to Durfee's web site when the application process opens at the first of the year. Program alums are encouraged to recruit colleagues for the program. Those who are considering applying are encouraged to call the Durfee office to discuss their application.

## **The Dangers of Recruitment**

While Durfee seeks to publicize the program as much as possible to ensure that strong candidates are aware of it, the foundation has learned that it is best not to recruit applicants directly. If the foundation solicits an application from a prospective candidate, expectations are raised about the likelihood of an award.

Unlike other grant programs for operational or program support, for which declines are disappointing but not usually devastating, the letdown of a decline from the Sabbatical Program can be significant. An applicant to the Sabbatical Program is not simply asking for money for the organization; he or she is seeking support for personal benefit. When writing the application, the applicant must confront feelings of job stress and possible burnout, may reveal how personal factors such as illness or family troubles have increased this stress, and will undoubtedly develop raised hopes by envisioning a sabbatical. Consequently, a decline from the program can be hard to handle. A decline that comes after solicitation of an application can lead to feelings of betrayal. If there is a candidate the foundation would like to see apply, foundation staff may ask a program alum or other third party to suggest the program to the candidate.

## **The Selection Process**

Each year, Durfee assembles a selection panel that consists of Durfee staff and trustees and three sabbatical program alumni. In the first year of the program when no alumni were available, Durfee asked three nonprofit leaders who were not applying to the program to sit on the panel. About three weeks prior to the first panel meeting, the foundation sends each panel member a secure link to the applications. For reasons Durfee has never been able to discern, the applicant pool in Los Angeles hovers between 25 and 40 every year. Almost all applicants are highly qualified.

Analysis of applications takes place on several levels. Durfee publishes its Review Criteria on our website to be fully transparent: <https://durfee.org/our-programs/sabbatical/how-to-apply/>. We first look at whether the applicant meets the basic eligibility criteria. We then look at the applicant on both a professional and personal level. Does the applicant exhibit extraordinary leadership both within and outside the four walls of his or her organization? Has the applicant cultivated a strong leadership team that can take the reins during the sabbatical? We also look to the strength of the organization, how it is perceived by peers in its field, and the efficacy of its achievements.

Timing can play a very important part in selection. On the application we ask the question, “Why have you chosen this year to apply for a sabbatical?” The answers are illuminating, and inform our decisions. A leader who has successfully completed a major building project, or has recently cared for a family member battling illness, may have urgent need for a break. A candidate may reveal that this summer is particularly good to take off because her youngest child will be leaving for college in the fall and she wants to spend time with him and contemplate this next phase of her life.

The purpose of the panel’s first meeting is to narrow the pool to twelve finalists. In addition to the analysis noted above, the panel also seeks a diverse group of finalists in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, type and size of organization represented, and geographic location. Once the finalists have been identified, Durfee schedules site visits and interviews.

Foundation staff check the references of the finalists by telephone, and often call others in the Durfee network as additional sources of information. Staff go on site visits to each of the twelve finalists’ organizations. Durfee has found that the site visits are extremely important to the decision process, especially because it provides an opportunity to meet the other staff at the applicant organizations and assess whether they will be able and willing to handle the interim duties.

Finally, the selection panel meets for two full days of interviews, where each finalist is interviewed for approximately 45 minutes and the panel is apprised of the information learned from the reference calls and site visits. After the last interview, each panelist is asked to submit his or her list of six awardees. Durfee has found that there is usually a great deal of overlap between the panelists’ lists, and at least three, and sometimes as many as five, receive unanimous

votes. The remaining names in contention are then discussed, and consensus on the final six is reached.

The six awardees are notified of their success by phone soon after the final interview. Those declined are notified by email, usually sent within 72 hours of the conclusion of the interviews. We attempt to time the notifications so all twelve finalists are informed of the outcome on the same day.

We have found that it is kinder to inform a candidate of a decline by email, rather than by phone. This allows the candidate to process disappointment before calling the foundation for feedback, should he or she choose to do so. We encourage all declined applicants to call, and many do. Because the process is so personal it is helpful to bring closure through a conversation. It also provides an opportunity to advise the candidate whether he or she should apply again, and if so, how to better frame the application in another round.

Why would a strong candidate be declined? The Selection Panel learns many things in the application process that affect the award choices: combined household income may be sufficiently high that the candidate does not have as strong a need as others for foundation support to provide a break; the organization may be so well supported or endowed that it should be able to underwrite the candidate's sabbatical; the secondary leadership at the organization may not be able to maintain operations during the candidate's absence; the candidate's organization may be embarking on a major capital campaign or other project during which it would not be advisable for the candidate to be absent for the projected time period. Even if none of those factors are present, a strong candidate might be denied simply because other candidates in the pool submitted stronger applications. It is not unusual for applicants to apply as many as two or three times before they are selected for an award.

### **Who Will Mind the Shop?**

The Durfee Foundation requires organizations to propose an interim organizational plan that relies on current staff. We do not select applicants who want to hire an Interim Executive Director, or to use board members or former E.D.s to step in to take over the sabbatical recipient's duties. One of the purposes of the Sabbatical Program is to give the organization the opportunity to bolster secondary leadership. Applicants are encouraged to present management plans that promote senior managers to the interim leadership position, or create a management team to take on the duties of the sabbatical recipient. This way, the organization and its staff have a "dry run" at managing the organization, and may broach discussion of an eventual succession plan. Staff typically develop new muscles and management expertise. Some discover they have potential for high level leadership; others discover that they are better suited to program work (and better to learn this in a three-month trial than after assuming the position of Executive Director). As a small token of appreciation, Durfee offers \$3,000 to the organization for the interim leader (or to be divided among a management team) to compensate them for their extra work.

## **Professional Development Fund**

Although the sabbatical program funds primarily benefit the leader who takes a sabbatical, Durfee supports the entire organization with a Professional Development Fund grant. The idea of the Professional Development Fund is to create (or supplement) a \$5,000 line item in each sabbatical organization's budget to support the professional development of staff other than the leader who received a sabbatical. The Fund is designed to provide professional development opportunities for staff at these organizations, such as workshop fees, travel, or continuing education. An important premise of the fund is that requests be employee-initiated, and not management-directed. Use of the funds for group benefit, such as staff trainings or retreats, are discouraged. Applicants to the Sabbatical Program must submit a plan for how the organization will operate the Professional Development Fund; for example, what it is to be used for, who will decide how the funds are to be distributed, and who is eligible for the funds. The Foundation requires submission of the plan prior to release of the funds.

## **Orientation**

Once the Sabbatical recipients have been selected, the Durfee Foundation holds an informal orientation meeting at its office. Recipients meet one another, share their plans for their sabbaticals, and learn more about the how the program works. Recipients are advised to seek counsel from their personal and their agencies' accountants about the tax consequences of their awards, and to work out a plan to minimize the tax impact. During the meeting, the recipients are introduced to a project consultant who is available for up to five hours of technical assistance to each organization, as needed, before, during and after the leave. The consultant is paid by Durfee under separate contract.

The orientation meeting is planned so that the interim leaders come in during the final hour of the Sabbatical recipients' meeting, and once the Sabbatical recipients depart, there is a meeting focused on the interim leaders. While all are assembled, the interim leaders are charged with being actively involved in preparing the agency for the sabbatical experience. Directors and interim leaders are encouraged to work together over several months to plan the hand-off of responsibilities. This typically involves integrating systems, sharing contacts, and weaving interim leaders into a working relationship with the board, funders and other external partners.

## **Deadlines**

Sabbatical recipients must start their sabbaticals one year after notification of the award. Durfee is very strict with recipients about this deadline; the award is forfeited if the deadline passes. Extensions have been granted in rare circumstances, usually relating to health, but otherwise they are not allowed. The fact is that there is no truly convenient time to take a sabbatical – there will always be unexpected grant deadlines, staff emergencies and facilities crises – but the recipient

and the organization must commit to making the sabbatical happen. A firm deadline facilitates that commitment.

### **Awards Ceremony**

Durfee hosts an awards ceremony for the sabbatical recipients biannually, and the awards are presented along with the foundation's Stanton Fellowship Awards. Durfee finds that the event provides the recipients with needed recognition for their achievements, and a chance to share them with staff, board, family and friends. Durfee awardees are encouraged to invite guests to the ceremony and reception. Each awardee is asked to speak for one minute about why they do what they do. The event is briskly paced, but very powerful. Durfee also provides a more intimate dinner for the awardees and immediate family or significant others after the awards ceremony at a nearby location.

### **Press Release and Photographs**

Durfee issues a press release about the awardees not long after the awards are announced, and again for the awards ceremony. Durfee also hires a professional photographer to take portraits of the six awardees. This provides a uniform look for Durfee's website and the Awards Ceremony program, and the awardees obtain a professional portrait.

### **During the Sabbatical**

Recipients are instructed to cease all contact with their office when they are on sabbatical. The object of the program is for participants to disengage from work, and this cannot happen if the participant checks e-mail or receives calls from the office. Recipients tell Durfee that it is easier for them to instruct the office not to contact them when the mandate comes from the funder.

In case of a true emergency, for example, the death of a staff member or sudden eviction from office premises, the organization is permitted to contact the recipient. One organization adopted the rule that the Acting Executive Director and the Board Chair had to agree that the issue required contact during the sabbatical. This enabled the team to defuse and decentralize crises, and to work collaboratively to solve problems effectively without need for contact with the Sabbatical recipient.

It is also important that awardees disengage from all external professional activities. If they sit on commissions or other boards, they should seek a leave from those commitments as well. The point of the sabbatical is to obtain the benefits of true disengagement.

A few weeks before the Sabbatical is over, Durfee's Executive Director takes the Acting Director or management team out to lunch. This offers an opportunity to express the foundation's gratitude to the staff for shouldering the extra workload, and also provides an immediate report on what the experience has been like for the organization. After the sabbatical, interim leaders are eligible for Durfee's [LEAD program](#) for professional development.



## **Returning from Sabbatical**

Often, the return from sabbatical marks an important and positive turning point for the recipient and the organization. Many take a fresh look at their operations, and find room for improvement, particularly with regard to their own duties. It is very common for leaders to come to the realization that there are many tasks they can permanently delegate to other capable staff, thus freeing valuable time for strategic planning, policy and other mission-related work. Returning sabbatical awardees are strongly encouraged to take time debriefing with their staffs to learn what happened when they were gone and discover whether changes occurred that are worth incorporating. The return should not mark the resumption of “business as usual,” but rather a new chapter in the organization’s operations.

Durfee warns recipients that re-entry may be difficult. Some recipients have found that “everyone moves too fast” after slowing their own pace during sabbatical. Others might experience post-sabbatical blues, or may simply feel out of the information loop when they rejoin their staff. Most find that things were not done quite as they would have done them, but respect the hard work and different approaches of their colleagues.

A few days after the Sabbatical awardee has returned to work, Durfee sends a gift basket of baked goods to the organization. The gift is meant to acknowledge the extra load the staff have carried during the leader’s absence. It also provides a pleasant respite for staff and executive director during the director’s first days back at work.

About six weeks after the Sabbatical recipient has returned to work, Durfee’s Executive Director takes him or her out to lunch to debrief the experience and the re-entry.

## **Reporting**

Sabbatical recipients are required to submit a short, informal report about their sabbatical. Many have sent photos, poetry or journal entries. The interim leaders are also asked to provide reflections on their experiences.

The recipient organizations are asked to report on the financial expenditures of the grant. It is expected that the recipient will have been paid his or her full salary and benefits during the sabbatical, and that the balance of the funds have been allocated to the recipient to pay for travel and other expenses as far as the grant budget stretches. While the recipient organizations may require receipts for non-salary expenses, Durfee does not request itemized receipts from the awardee.

## **Evaluation**

As noted above, Durfee’s sabbatical program, along with four other sabbatical programs, was the subject of a long-range study performed by Third Sector New England and CompassPoint Nonprofit Services. The report is available [here](#).

A twenty-year retrospective evaluation of Durfee's sabbatical program is available [here](#).

Durfee continues to track data on Sabbatical awardees, and conducts surveys of the organizations every 3-5 years. Because the Sabbatical program is local, Durfee also benefits from regular, informal input from grantees and alums, who convene with Durfee every six months. We have been particularly attentive to adjustments in workflow at awardee organizations, changes in human resources policies, and the professional advancement of staff.

### **Peer Learning and Support**

One of the great benefits of Durfee's Sabbatical Program has been the establishment of a peer network of nonprofit leaders in Los Angeles County. Twice a year, Durfee brings together Sabbatical alumni for half-day gatherings over lunch. These luncheons started out at neighborhood restaurants, but as the group has grown, the meetings have rotated among the recipients' organizations.

The agenda for the meetings is loose. The first hour is usually spent socializing, and then the group moves on to discussion of a designated topic. Durfee solicits ideas for discussion topics by email in the weeks before the lunch, and decides on a topic and a discussion leader (often the person who suggested the topic) in advance. Previous discussion topics include board development, staff retention, fundraising in a down economy, and how to incorporate the lessons of the sabbatical experience into their everyday lives. On occasion, we have had special guests, from city government or other foundations, at the sabbatical gatherings. As the peer network has grown, so has the value of connecting this group of nonprofit leaders to regional decision makers so that they can learn from one another.

### **Retreats**

Durfee hosts biannual retreats for the sabbatical alumni at a relaxing location nearby. The retreat agenda is similar to that of the semiannual lunches, with the group deciding on the discussion topics. Durfee has offered to bring in outside speakers, and the suggestion has been soundly rejected. This group seems to enjoy learning from one another and enjoys the trust and camaraderie that have built over the years.

### **Long-Term Commitment**

When Durfee started the Sabbatical Program in 1997, the initial plan was to run the program for two years, then put it on a biannual schedule. We rather naively thought that there would not be an ample supply of qualified nonprofit leaders to apply for the program after it had been running for a few years. This was not the case, as the program ran annually for more than ten years. After the class of 2009 was selected, we put the program on a biannual schedule. Sabbaticals are now awarded every other year.

Durfee’s long-term commitment to the Sabbatical Program has enriched the program considerably. We feel we have deepened our own understanding about the needs of nonprofit leaders since we have had the opportunity to work with so many of them. Our lunches and retreats are richer and more comfortable with each passing year, as longtime alumni reconnect and newcomers are welcomed. The program has developed a solid reputation in Los Angeles and beyond, and the ever-growing roster of distinguished alumni nurtures that reputation.

**Budget**

The budget for Durfee’s Sabbatical program has grown over the years, and we recognize that its scale may present a challenge to others considering replication. The Durfee budget includes many components that are highly beneficial, but not necessarily essential, to the program’s success. It is possible to launch a program with a smaller budget. This could be accomplished by offering fewer awards, reducing the professional development fund, or scaling back convenings. Partnering with one or more grantmakers to create a pooled fund is another option.

The most important thing to consider when launching a sabbatical program is committing to it for at least five years. As noted above, the program has ripple effects in the nonprofit communities that accrue over time, building the capacity of organizations and improving morale in the sector.

It is worth noting that Durfee has made inflation adjustments to the program every few years. The award was \$25,000 when the program was launched more than 20 years ago. The award should be calibrated to average executive director salaries in your region.

<i>Direct Program Costs:</i>	
Sabbatical Awards	\$60,000 x 6 = \$360,000
Staff Support Fund	\$15,000 x 6 = \$90,000
<i>Other costs:</i>	
Marketing, PR, printing, web, panel review	\$17,500
Awards Ceremony	\$20,000 (biannually)
Retreats & luncheons	\$12,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$559,500, not including staff costs</b>

*Work Plans and Hours*

Jan.	Website development, update application, creation of email databases for promotion, assemble selection panel	80 hrs
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Feb.	Provide telephone assistance to applicants, encourage alumni and others to recruit applicants	20 hrs
Mar.	Provide telephone assistance to applicants	20 hrs
Apr.	Process applications, bring selection panel together to select 12 finalists	60 hrs
May	Perform site visits to each of 12 finalist organizations, make calls to finalists' references	80 hrs
Jun.	Selection panel interviews finalists over a 2-day period, makes award decisions, follow up with declines and awards	40 hrs
Jul.	Prepare for and hold orientation meeting for awardees; on call for questions; perform baseline evaluation	20 hrs
Aug.	Prepare for and hold orientation meeting for interim directors who will take over for sabbatical awardees; on call for questions	20 hrs
Sep.	On call for questions	10 hrs
Oct.	On call	10 hrs
Nov.	On call	10 hrs
Dec.	On call; plan retreat	32 hrs
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>414 hrs</b>