Reflect EVALUATION

Practice Guide

Strengthening the Nonprofit and Grassroots Ecosystem through Organizational Well-being Interventions

INTRODUCTION

Across the nonprofit sector, there is a growing recognition that the strength and sustainability of organizations are deeply connected to the well-being of the people doing the work. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed and intensified burnout across the sector, while ongoing funding uncertainty and budget constraints have continued to place pressure on organizations and their staff. In philanthropy, this recognition has been translated into multiple types of support, such as well-being grants, capacity-building programs, sabbatical support, and flexible general operating grants. Within nonprofit and grassroots organizations, it has also shown up in various ways, often as staff retreats, flexible work schedules, shared meals, and group social activities. For many organizations, well-being is no longer a "nice to have." It is central to sustainability, influencing whether organizations can recruit and retain staff, build a healthy workplace culture, and effectively support the communities in which they work.

Although philanthropy is increasingly recognizing the importance of supporting whole organizations, dedicated well-being resources remain limited relative to the scale and diversity of need. At the same time, organizational well-being does not begin only when a dedicated grant arrives. Nonprofit and grassroots leaders also make daily decisions that shape whether staff feel trusted, supported, connected, and able to do their work in healthy ways. This does not shift responsibility away from philanthropy. Funders still have an important role to play in resourcing the conditions that make nonprofit work more sustainable and sharing lessons across the field. It does, however, point to the need for practical guidance that helps organizations move from recognizing the importance of well-being to deciding what to try, how to begin, and what conditions need to be in place.

This practice guide is intended to help fill that gap.

From 2023–2026, the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation (Blue Cross NC Foundation) invested in the well-being of nonprofit organizations through one-time $10,000 grants to 104 grantees and funded an evaluation of the initiative. Conducted by Reflect Evaluation on behalf of the Blue Cross NC Foundation, this guide draws on evaluation findings to highlight how organizations sought to support staff well-being, strengthen workplace culture, and build organizational resilience during that period. The Foundation is grateful to the participating organizations whose experiences and insights informed this work and hopes these findings support continued learning and practical action across the nonprofit sector.

Drawing on insights from interviews and surveys with organizations that received well-being grants, this guide surfaces key design decisions organizations face when supporting the well-being of their staff. Rather than prescribing a single model, it outlines common approaches, highlights tradeoffs, and offers considerations to support more intentional, aligned decision-making.

WHO THIS GUIDE IS FOR

This guide is designed for nonprofit and grassroots leaders who are considering, beginning, or refining efforts to support organizational and staff well-being. This includes:

- Executive directors and senior leaders shaping organizational culture, staffing practices, and internal priorities;
- Supervisors and team leads who influence staff experiences through workload and team practices; and
- Staff responsible for planning or coordinating wellness, culture-building, team connection, or organizational capacity-building efforts.

The guide is organized into two sections.

First, **Getting Started** offers reflection questions and considerations for organizations that are newer to organizational well-being work or still determining where to begin. This section is intended to help leaders think through what the organization already has in place and what kinds of practices may be realistic given the organization's current capacity.

Second, the **Well-Being Practice Menu** highlights a range of no- or low-cost organizational well-being approaches identified across nonprofit and grassroots organizations that participated in this evaluation. The menu is not intended as a checklist or a set of universal best practices. Instead, it offers concrete examples and implementation considerations that leaders can adapt within their own organizational context, especially when significant ongoing financial investment is not available.

Getting Started

"There's no organizational document outlining a strategy surrounding wellness..."

Getting started with organizational well-being does not require a formal wellness program or a large new initiative. As a leader from one of the grantee partner organizations said, "There's no organizational document outlining a strategy surrounding wellness…And due to the resources available to our organization, and the transience of those resources, [implementing one] would feel performative." Across the organizations that received well-being grants, early efforts often began with noticing challenges staff members were facing, asking them what type of support would feel meaningful, and identifying realistic practices that fit the organization's size, culture, and capacity. The considerations below can help leaders approach well-being in a way that is responsive to staff needs and grounded in the organization's day-to-day reality.

START BY UNDERSTANDING STAFF EXPERIENCES AND NEEDS

Well-being efforts often began when leaders noticed that staff were stretched, feeling overwhelmed by their workloads, and/or operating under sustained pressure. This was often connected to the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, staffing shortages, leadership transitions, increased community need, or uncertainty in the funding environment. A useful first step when considering well-being programming is to pause and ask staff members what they would like to see. For example, staff who spend most of the day at a desk may need more opportunities for movement or ergonomic support. Frontline staff may need practices that account for limited control over their schedules. Remote staff may need more intentional opportunities for connection. Staff working in community-facing roles may need time and space to decompress after emotionally demanding interactions.

> "The biggest thing I've learned through this whole process is that everyone needs very different things and as flexible as you can be to meet those needs, that's going to be the most impactful…If you're hoping to invest in your team's well-being…[don't make] assumptions on what well-being looks to your team and get them involved in the decision making."
>
> -Grantee partner leadership

Before deciding how to structure well-being supports, many organizations used some form of staff input including surveys, informal conversations, planning committees, staff meetings, and direct feedback from supervisors. Anonymous options can be especially helpful when staff may not feel comfortable explicitly and directly sharing their well-being-related needs. At the same time, staff input should not become another burdensome process. Intentional listening can be informal. Often, staff appreciate the intention behind the effort more than the formality of the approach. A short survey, a few discussion prompts, or a structured conversation during an existing meeting may be enough to get started.

DESIGN FOR DIFFERENCE

One of the strongest themes across organizations was that there is no uniform, standardized definition of well-being. What feels restorative to one person may feel irrelevant or even stressful to someone else. Organizations responded to this in different ways with some offering flexible stipends and others creating organization-wide activities while also tailoring supports by department or division.

For organizations just getting started, this means asking both "What should we do?" and "Who will be able to access this?" A staff lunch may be meaningful, but not if some staff cannot leave their work post. A yoga class may be appreciated by some, but some may feel uncomfortable participating. Designing for difference does not mean every practice must meet every need, but it does mean being intentional about offering more than one pathway into well-being and paying attention to who may be left out.

> Different roles take just different things physically, mentally, emotionally. Being…more granular [with] what [one] department needs versus [another] department…is a good way to [show understanding of how] the whole organization works."
>
> -Grantee partner staff

CONSIDER WHAT ALREADY EXISTS

Many organizations that received the well-being grant used the funds to expand existing wellness weeks, social committees, staff retreats, flexible scheduling practices, or wellness stipends. This may be an important starting point for organizations with limited capacity. Small shifts--like a brief grounding practice at the beginning of a team meeting or built-in recovery periods after major events--can be valuable. While these practices may not require grant funding, they do require intention and consistency.

PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT FACILITATES PARTICIPATION

A well-being activity can be well-intended and still miss the people who need it most. Organizations in this evaluation had to think carefully about logistics: work schedules, off-site staff, frontline responsibilities, clinical duties, transportation, timing, location, communication, and whether staff could realistically step away from their daily work schedule. For organizations just beginning, it is important to consider the practical conditions that shape participation:

- Can staff participate during paid work time?
- Are there options for staff who work off-site, remotely, or in direct service roles?
- Is there coverage for staff who cannot easily step away?
- Are staff being asked to participate in something that may not align with their needs or comfort level?

These questions can shape whether staff experience well-being efforts as genuine support or as one more thing added to an already full workload.

" I feel like this grant and being able to focus on health and wellness is our oxygen mask. When you're on an airplane, they say 'put your oxygen mask on first before you put it on your children and the people next to you'. And I think that before this grant and with COVID, we were really good at putting everyone else's oxygen masks on, and we dealt with whatever we had left."

-Grantee partner leadership

Organizational Well-being Practice Menu

The organizations that participated in the Blue Cross NC Foundation Well-being Grants tried a wide range of approaches to support staff well-being. The practices in this section are meant to help nonprofit leaders think through possible approaches, implementation considerations, and some of the tensions and tradeoffs organizations experienced along the way. Each practice includes two framing elements:

- **Cost Level** refers primarily to direct financial cost. These categories are intentionally broad, and actual cost will vary based on an organization's size, staffing structure, and operational realities, including whether an organization is volunteer-led or volunteer-run. It is also important to recognize that even "no-cost" practices often require staff time or potential shifts in workflow which ultimately carry their own forms of cost and tradeoff.
- **Reinforcing Conditions** refers to conditions that appeared to support implementation in practice. These are not strict prerequisites, but factors organizations described as helpful to have in place, such as leadership alignment, staff trust, operational flexibility, communication practices, or dedicated physical space.

Across organizations, one theme emerged consistently: well-being practices were most meaningful to staff when they were reinforced through the broader organizational culture, leadership behavior, and day-to-day workplace practices.

HOW TO USE THIS MENU

Use this menu as a source of ideas and inspiration rather than a checklist of practices to implement all at once. Organizations in this evaluation approached well-being differently depending on their size, staffing structure, access to other financial and in-kind resources, prior experience implementing well-being practices, and staff needs. Some started with small changes embedded into the workday, while others invested in more structured activities or physical space improvements over time.

Browse by category or use the cost and reinforcing condition tags to identify approaches that may fit your organizational context. As you explore options, consider involving staff in identifying what feels most meaningful and realistic within your environment.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AND LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

Leadership modeling of rest and boundaries

COST LEVEL: NO COST | REINFORCING CONDITIONS: LEADERSHIP ALIGNMENT AND CULTURAL BUY-IN

Organizations can reinforce well-being by having leaders visibly model rest, boundaries, and realistic expectations around work. In this evaluation, organizations described practices such as leaders openly taking time off, encouraging staff to use paid-time-off (PTO), participating in wellness activities alongside staff, and acknowledging employees as whole people with responsibilities and stressors outside of work.

Staff often described these behaviors as signals that well-being was genuinely supported within the organization, not just discussed rhetorically. Participants frequently connected organizational well-being less to a single activity and more to whether leadership created an environment where staff felt trusted, supported, and able to speak honestly about their workload, emotional state, and any potential capacity challenges.

At the same time, organizations noted that leadership messaging can feel disconnected when workloads remain consistently high or staffing limitations make rest difficult in practice. Organizations interested in strengthening leadership modeling may benefit from considering how expectations around productivity and workload reinforce or unintentionally undermine messages about well-being.

Flexible scheduling and staff autonomy

COST LEVEL: NO COST | REINFORCING CONDITIONS: TRUST, ROLE CLARITY, AND COMMUNICATION

Introduce flexibility into when, where, and how staff complete their work. In this evaluation, organizations implemented practices such as remote work options, flexible schedules, adjusted hours following evening or weekend work, shortened workweeks, and greater staff autonomy over daily workflow and scheduling. Staff frequently described flexibility as one of the most meaningful forms of support because it allowed them to respond to caregiving responsibilities, emotional exhaustion, medical appointments, or personal needs in real time. Some participants also connected flexibility to trust and organizational respect, describing it as more impactful than some formal wellness activities or one-time events.

Organizations also surfaced important implementation considerations. Flexibility was not always experienced equally across staff roles, particularly among staff with frontline or operational responsibilities. Some staff also noted that increased flexibility can blur boundaries between work and personal time if expectations are unclear. Organizations interested in implementing flexible approaches may benefit from considering how flexibility is communicated, how boundaries are reinforced, and whether staff across different roles are able to access flexibility in meaningful ways.

Encouraging and normalizing PTO use

COST LEVEL: NO COST | REINFORCING CONDITIONS: STAFFING COVERAGE AND LEADERSHIP CONSISTENCY

Organizations can support wellbeing by actively encouraging staff to take leave, disconnect from work while away, and recover after demanding periods. Organizations in this evaluation often described practices such as encouraging PTO use, supporting bereavement leave, allowing flexibility following emotionally difficult events, and reinforcing that staff should take time to rest and recharge.

Staff who engaged in these practices often described time away as most restorative when they believed leadership genuinely supported their absence and when they were not returning to overwhelming backlogs or

pressure from coworkers. While feelings of restoration were present, they also expressed how difficult it can feel to step away from mission-driven work, particularly in organizations serving communities experiencing crisis or hardship.

Some challenges related to staffing capacity and workload coverage did emerge. In smaller organizations especially, staff absences sometimes increased pressure on remaining team members or led staff to feel guilty about taking leave. Organizations interested in strengthening time-off practices may benefit from considering workload coverage, cross-role training, and how organizational culture shapes whether staff feel truly able to disconnect.

Planned recovery periods after intensive work cycles

COST LEVEL: NO COST | REINFORCING CONDITIONS: OPERATIONAL PLANNING AND WORKLOAD AWARENESS

Intentionally create slower periods or opportunities for recovery following especially demanding stretches of work. Practices such as lighter scheduling after major events or campaigns, intentional recovery periods following crisis response work, and acknowledging the emotional and physical impact of peak workload periods were described by grantee partners as helpful to their well-being.

To staff, these practices recognized that endurance and emotional capacity fluctuate over time. Some participants noted that simply acknowledging intense periods and planning for recovery afterward helped reduce the feeling that constant overwork was the organizational expectation.

At the same time, organizations acknowledged that external funding timelines, staffing shortages, and ongoing community needs can make recovery periods difficult to offer consistently. Organizations interested in implementing recovery periods may benefit from identifying where slower periods can realistically be built into organizational timelines, even if full organizational shutdowns or extended recovery periods are not feasible.

INTEGRATED WORKDAY WELL-BEING PRACTICES

Built-in daily breaks, breathing, and meditation

COST LEVEL: NO/LOW COST | REINFORCING CONDITIONS: SUPERVISOR SUPPORT, OPERATIONAL FLEXIBILITY, STAFF COMFORT

Look for opportunities to build short periods of decompression and stress regulation into the workday itself. For Well-being Grantee Partners, this included practices like encouraging lunch breaks, supporting staff to step away after difficult interactions, and creating opportunities for quiet reflection. Some organizations also incorporated breathing exercises, meditation, grounding techniques, mindfulness activities, or resilience-focused stress management practices into daily routines or staff gatherings. In several cases, organizations brought in facilitators or trainers to guide staff through meditation, trauma-informed wellness activities, or emotional regulation practices.

Staff often described these moments as meaningful because they reduced pressure rather than adding another obligation. Participants discussed the value of being able to briefly regroup after emotionally intense interactions or learn practical techniques for managing stress throughout the workday. Some staff also described continuing to use breathing or grounding practices outside of work after being introduced to them through organizational wellness activities.

Staff comfort levels to engage in mindfulness activities varied. Some participants appreciated structured mindfulness or meditation activities, while others preferred quieter or more individualized approaches to decompression. Organizational leaders also observed that activities could begin to feel performative, repetitive, or difficult to sustain when staff were already overloaded or when participation felt expected rather than optional. Organizations interested in integrating recovery and mindfulness practices into daily work may benefit from keeping participation flexible and considering how workload realities shape staff capacity to engage.

Walking breaks and walking meetings

COST LEVEL: NO COST | REINFORCING CONDITIONS: FLEXIBILITY AND ACCESSIBLE PARTICIPATION

Incorporate movement into the workday through walking meetings, walking challenges, wellness walks, or encouraging staff to briefly leave their desks throughout the day. Several organizations in this evaluation used movement-based practices because they were relatively easy to implement and adaptable across different work environments.

Staff often described walking and movement as an easy way to improve their well-being. It did not require specialized equipment, prior fitness experience, or significant planning. Participants also connected walking activities to stress reduction and informal relationship-building with coworkers.

However, movement-related activities may be experienced differently across staff roles and physical abilities. Staff who engaged in physically demanding work sometimes experienced "wellness movement" differently than staff in desk-based positions. Organizations interested in incorporating movement-based well-being practices may benefit from keeping participation flexible and avoiding assumptions about how staff experience movement or physical activity.

Wellness check-ins and mindfulness during meetings

COST LEVEL: NO COST | REINFORCING CONDITIONS: STAFF COMFORT AND FLEXIBLE PARTICIPATION

Embedding brief wellness-oriented practices into meetings and existing routines may help integrate well-being into the normal workflow. For Well-being Grantee Partners, this included activities such as emotional check-ins, breathing exercises, mindfulness moments, stretching, prayer, gratitude practices, and short grounding activities during staff meetings.

For some staff, these practices created opportunities to pause, regulate stress, or transition more intentionally into demanding conversations and tasks. Organizational leaders also noted that integrating well-being into existing routines reduced the burden of asking staff to participate in additional after-hours wellness activities. Not every staff member experienced these practices positively. Some participants preferred more private or individualized approaches to wellness. Others described participation fatigue when activities became overly repetitive. Organizations integrating wellness practices into meetings may benefit from keeping participation flexible, periodically gathering anonymous staff feedback, and remaining attentive to comfort levels and engagement over time.

CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY PRACTICES

Shared meals and social rituals

COST LEVEL: LOW COST | REINFORCING CONDITIONS: INCLUSIVE PLANNING AND FLEXIBLE PARTICIPATION

Creating opportunities for informal connection outside of task-oriented work was a common wellbeing strategy across organizations in this evaluation. Practices included shared lunches, potlucks, cookouts, spirit weeks, birthday celebrations, holiday gatherings, and informal team-building activities.

Staff frequently described these activities as opportunities for relationship-building and community in otherwise stressful work environments. Some participants emphasized that informal gatherings helped reduce isolation, strengthen trust among coworkers, and create moments where staff could interact outside of their formal organizational roles.

Social activities did not resonate equally with everyone, however. Scheduling outside work hours, centering activities around food, or assuming all staff prefer highly social engagement may unintentionally exclude some employees. Organizations interested in strengthening connection practices through shared meals or other social rituals may benefit from offering multiple ways to engage and recognizing that staff experience relationship-building and social interaction differently.

Outdoor gatherings and nature-based activities

COST LEVEL: LOW | REINFORCING CONDITIONS: ACCESSIBLE OUTDOOR SPACE AND FLEXIBLE PARTICIPATION

Supporting well-being by creating opportunities for staff to spend time outdoors or engage with nature during the workday emerged as a meaningful practice in several organizations. Examples included picnic tables, outdoor lunches, gardening, walking paths, river outings, and designated outdoor reflection spaces.

Many staff described outdoor environments as calming and connected time spent outside to reduced stress, clearer separation from work demands, and more relaxed interaction with coworkers.

Accessibility and participation considerations also emerged. Local climate, transportation, physical ability, and scheduling all shaped how staff experienced outdoor activities and spaces. Organizations interested in incorporating nature-based wellbeing practices may benefit from considering whether spaces are physically accessible to staff with differing abilities, how seasonal weather or climate may shape usability throughout the year, and what opportunities the surrounding natural or built environment realistically offers.

WORK ENVIRONMENT AND OCCUPATIONAL SUPPORTS

Dedicated wellness rooms and quiet spaces

COST LEVEL: LOW | REINFORCING CONDITIONS: AVAILABLE SPACE AND OPERATIONAL FLEXIBILITY

Designating spaces where staff can briefly step away may help reinforce well-being as part of the everyday work environment. Organizations in this evaluation created wellness rooms and quiet spaces that included calming lighting, comfortable seating, yoga mats, sensory items, books, and reflection areas.

Staff often saw these spaces as permission to pause within otherwise fast-paced environments and used wellness rooms after emotionally intense client interactions or during periods of stress and exhaustion.

Frontline or operational staff sometimes had fewer opportunities to step away during the day than individuals in other roles. Organizations considering dedicated wellness spaces may benefit from thinking beyond what goes in the room to how the space will actually be used. Consider where the space is located, whether it feels private enough for staff to decompress, whether frontline or off-site staff can realistically access it, how staff with differing sensory or physical needs may experience the space, and what norms will make it acceptable to step away during the workday. It may also be helpful to plan for upkeep, scheduling, and communication so the space does not become underused, unclear in purpose, or available only to staff with the most flexible roles.

Small workspace and environmental improvements

COST LEVEL: LOW | REINFORCING CONDITIONS: FACILITY FLEXIBILITY AND STAFF INPUT

Organizations can support wellbeing by making relatively small changes to the physical work environment. Organizations in this evaluation introduced standing desks, walking pads, dimmable lighting, plants, comfortable seating, calming artwork, wellness signage, and other visual reminders related to mindfulness or stress reduction.

Rather than functioning as one-time activities, these environmental changes continuously shaped how staff experienced the workplace. Several participants described these upgrades as meaningful because they embedded wellbeing into everyday organizational environments rather than treating it as something separate from work itself.

Physical environment improvements alone, however, did not address broader workload or burnout concerns. Organizations interested in environmental upgrades may benefit from viewing them as one part of a broader wellbeing strategy rather than a stand-alone solution.

Shared wellness equipment and supplies

COST LEVEL: LOW | REINFORCING CONDITIONS: SHARED SPACE, ACCESSIBILITY, AND MAINTENANCE PLANNING

Making shared well-being resources available may increase access to practices staff might not otherwise use outside of work. Organizations in this evaluation purchased yoga mats, exercise equipment, sensory tools, and other communal wellness resources. Some staff described these resources as helping normalize well-being activities during the workday rather than viewing those practices as something that should only happen outside of work or on personal time.

Comfort levels and access varied across organizations and staff roles. Some employees felt more comfortable using communal wellness resources than others, and some had fewer opportunities to access shared spaces during the day. Organizations considering shared wellness equipment may benefit from assessing whether staff are interested in and likely to use the resources before purchasing them, whether there is appropriate and accessible space to house them, and what ongoing upkeep, sanitation, and maintenance will require over time. While some shared wellness resources may have relatively low upfront costs, maintenance and replacement needs can accumulate and should be considered as part of longer-term planning.

Healthy snacks and hydration

COST LEVEL: LOW | REINFORCING CONDITIONS: UPFRONT PLANNING AND CONSISTENT ACCESS

Providing snacks, hydration stations, tea, coffee, fruit, or other nourishment-related support during the workday was a relatively common well-being practice across organizations. Some stocked shared kitchens or break areas with snacks and beverages, while others incorporated hydration or nourishment into wellness weeks or staff gatherings.

Staff often described these supports as small but meaningful reminders that the organization was thinking intentionally about their comfort. In some cases, access to snacks, beverages, or quick nourishment also helped staff manage long or emotionally demanding workdays.

Food-related support requires thoughtful planning around dietary restrictions, cultural preferences, storage, replenishment, and ongoing cost. While relatively low-cost individually, recurring food and beverage expenses can accumulate over time, particularly in larger organizations or programs intended to be consistently available to staff.

Closing Reflections

"The lack of public policy that makes well-being accessible to everyone puts more burden on workplaces to…fill that gap, [and] I think that can be an opportunity for workplaces."

-Grantee partner staff



" Employers and especially… foundations can help…advocate so that [well-being is] more accessible to more people."

-Grantee partner staff

The approaches included in this guide are not intended to function as a checklist or universal model. Organizational well-being work is deeply contextual. What feels meaningful, feasible, or sustainable for one organization may not translate directly to another. Instead, this guide is intended to help leaders think intentionally about where to begin, while also encouraging them to try something manageable, learn from it, and build from there.

Nonprofit and grassroots organizations can support well-being through the practices and cultural norms they create internally. At the same time, organizational well-being is shaped by broader sector and systemic conditions. Nonprofit and grassroots organizations should not be expected to resolve these conditions alone. As organizational well-being continues to gain attention across the sector, the opportunity moving forward is twofold: to begin strengthening well-being within organizations in practical, context-specific ways, and to continue advocating for the resources, policies, and philanthropic practices needed to address the systemic conditions that make nonprofit work difficult to sustain.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina Foundation.