

# HOW FOUNDATIONS ARE SUPPORTING GRANTEE STAFF WELL-BEING



JUNE 2024

*CEP Research Snapshots are brief, data-informed research publications designed to answer timely, specific questions that are relevant to funders. This is the second in the series.*

## KEY FINDINGS

- 1 Most foundation leaders report some degree of understanding about the well-being of staff at organizations they fund.
- 2 Most foundation leaders are concerned about burnout among staff at organizations they fund.
- 3 Half of foundation leaders report that their foundation is engaging in practices to support the well-being of staff at organizations they fund.

### TERMINOLOGY

**WELL-BEING:** Our funder survey defined well-being as the state of employees' mental and physical health, influenced by factors such as workplace relationships, organizational culture, pace of work, and staff engagement and empowerment.

**BURNOUT:** Burnout is defined by the World Health Organization as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed, leading to feelings of exhaustion, mental distance from one's job, cynicism, and reduced professional efficiency.<sup>1</sup>

### TOPIC OF INTEREST

In the Center for Effective Philanthropy's (CEP) report *State of Nonprofits 2024: What Funders Need to Know*<sup>2</sup> — released in May 2024 — nonprofit leaders reported widespread concern about their staff's burnout. In that same report, we found that three-quarters of nonprofit leaders see staff burnout as influencing their organizations' ability to achieve their missions. Research shows that a lack of support

<sup>1</sup> "Burn-out an 'Occupational Phenomenon': International Classification of Diseases." World Health Organization, May 28, 2019. <https://www.who.int/news/item/28-05-2019-burn-out-an-occupational-phenomenon-international-classification-of-diseases>.

<sup>2</sup> Christina Im, Seara Grundhoefer, and Elisha Smith Arrillaga, *State of Nonprofits 2024: What Funders Need To Know* (Cambridge, MA: Center for Effective Philanthropy, 2024).

for staff well-being can contribute to poor energy levels among staff, decreased productivity, and — especially in the case of nonprofits — increased difficulty retaining staff and filling job vacancies.<sup>3</sup>

This CEP Research Snapshot sets out to understand foundation leaders' perspectives and actions related to the well-being and burnout of staff at the organizations they fund.<sup>4</sup>

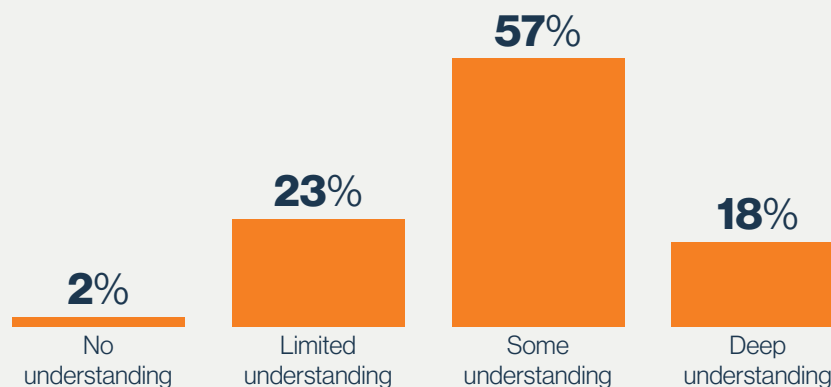
## RESULTS

### KEY FINDING 1

Most foundation leaders report some degree of understanding about the well-being of staff at organizations they fund.

Foundation leaders report various levels of understanding of the current state of staff well-being at the organizations they fund. The majority say they have at least some degree of understanding about staff well-being within the organizations their foundation funds, with just under 20 percent reporting that they possess a “deep” understanding (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1. Foundation Leaders' Understanding of Staff Well-Being at Funded Organizations (N=282)**



<sup>3</sup> Jeff Severns Guntzel and Nora F. Murphy Johnson, *Wellbeing Inspires Welldoing: How Changemakers' Inner Wellbeing Influences Their Work* (The Wellbeing Project 2020), [http://wellbeing-project.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/research\\_report.pdf](http://wellbeing-project.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/research_report.pdf); Im, Grundhoefer, and Smith Arrillaga, *State of Nonprofits 2024*.

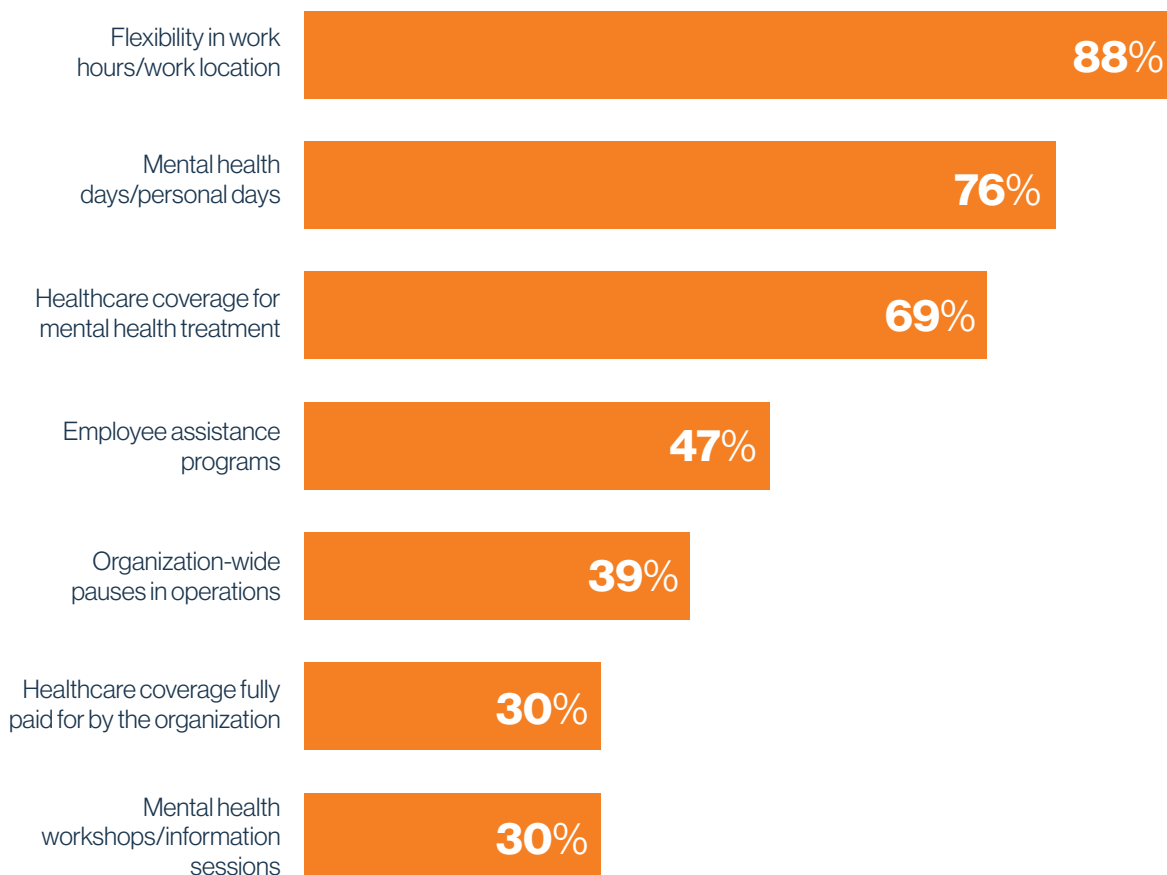
<sup>4</sup> Results from this report should be read with an important caveat — foundation leaders were surveyed between September and November of 2023, and therefore the data are most representative of that moment in time.

## NONPROFITS' UNDERSTANDING OF STAFF MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Results from CEP's 2024 *State of Nonprofits* survey suggest that many leaders of nonprofit organizations are regularly monitoring and assessing the state of their staff's mental health and well-being.<sup>5</sup> Nearly 80 percent of the nonprofit leaders we surveyed reported that their organization uses staffwide check-ins to understand the mental health and well-being of their staff, and more than half make use of staff surveys and assessments.

Nonprofit leaders also reported that they employ a number of practices and policies to support the mental health and well-being of their staff. The most common ones include offering flexibility in work hours or location, mental health or personal days, and coverage for mental health treatment (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Common Practices and Policies Nonprofit Organizations Use To Support Staff Mental Health and Well-Being (N=239)**



*Totals do not add up to 100 percent because leaders could select all that apply.*

<sup>5</sup> Im, Grundhoefer, and Smith Arrillaga, *State of Nonprofits 2024*. The methodology and sample for this survey can be found on our website [here](#).

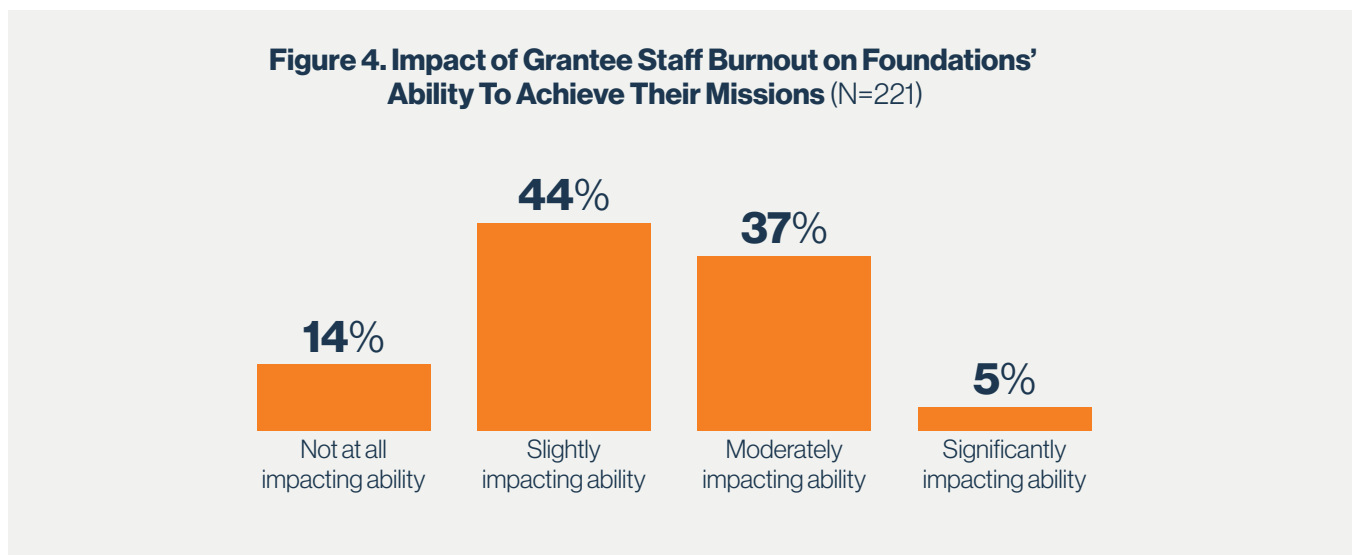
## KEY FINDING 2

Most foundation leaders are concerned about burnout among staff at organizations they fund.

The majority of foundation leaders report staff burnout at some of the organizations they support, with more than a third of leaders indicating that staff burnout is a concern for most or all of their grantees (see Figure 3).



Surveyed foundation leaders note that the consequences of burnout in grantee organizations are far-reaching. Foundation leaders clearly see the connection between burnout's effects on grantees' abilities to achieve their missions and funders' abilities to achieve their missions. More than 40 percent of respondents report that grantee burnout has a moderate to significant impact on their foundation's ability to achieve its mission (see Figure 4).



## NONPROFIT LEADERS' BIGGEST BARRIERS TO SUPPORTING STAFF WELL-BEING

We asked nonprofit leaders in our 2024 *State of Nonprofits* survey to share the biggest barrier their organization faces, other than a need for increased funding, to supporting the mental health or well-being of their staff.<sup>6</sup> Below are representative examples of their responses:

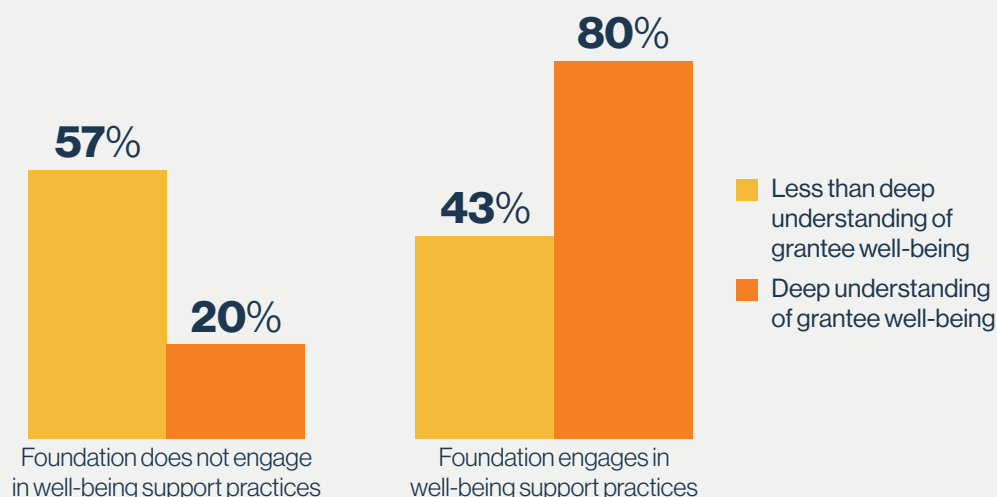
- ▶ “Staffing. In order to allow staff time for mental health days, leaves of absence, etc., I have to be able to cover their shifts with qualified individuals.”
- ▶ “Beyond funding itself, it would be the ability to use funding to hire more people to distribute capacity of efforts.”
- ▶ “Not having the time to dedicate to this support. Ideally, it would be great to give more days off and have half-day well-being retreats. But then the work doesn't get done and the funds aren't raised.”
- ▶ “There is no other bigger barrier [than funding]. It will always be about resources. Full stop.”

### KEY FINDING 3

Half of foundation leaders report that their foundation is engaging in practices to support the well-being of staff at organizations they fund.

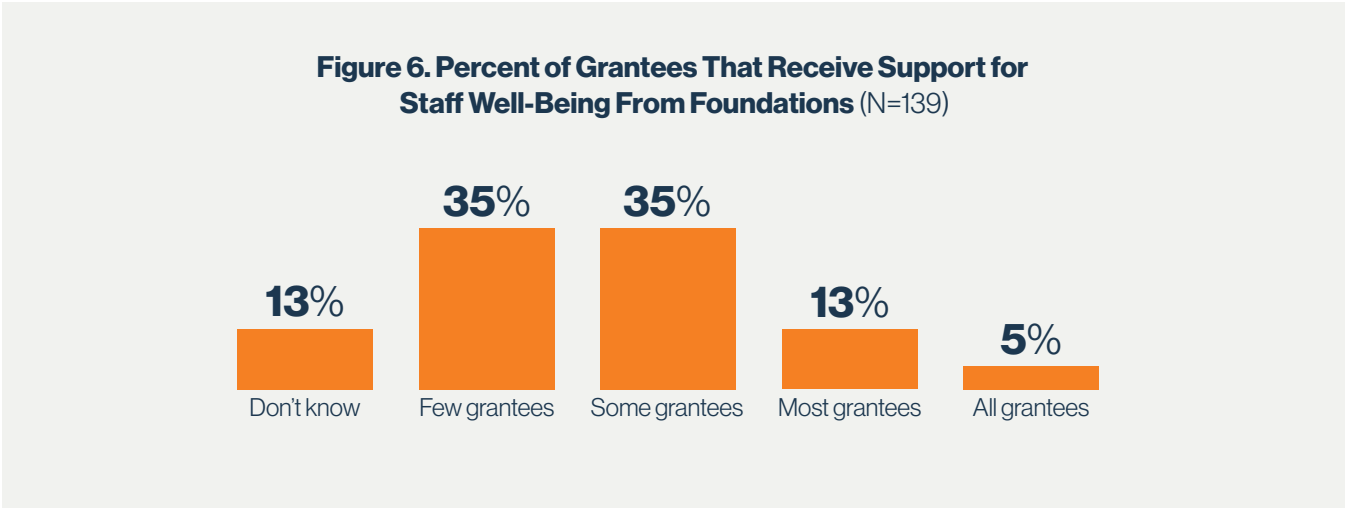
While most foundation leaders are concerned about burnout at the organizations they fund and how this may be affecting their foundation's ability to achieve its mission, half of the foundations we surveyed do not engage in any practices to support grantee staff well-being. However, our findings suggest that foundation leaders who report a deep understanding of staff well-being at organizations they fund are almost twice as likely to engage in practices to support staff well-being (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5. Percent of Foundations Engaging in Practices To Support Grantees' Staff Well-Being by Reported Level of Understanding (N=282)**

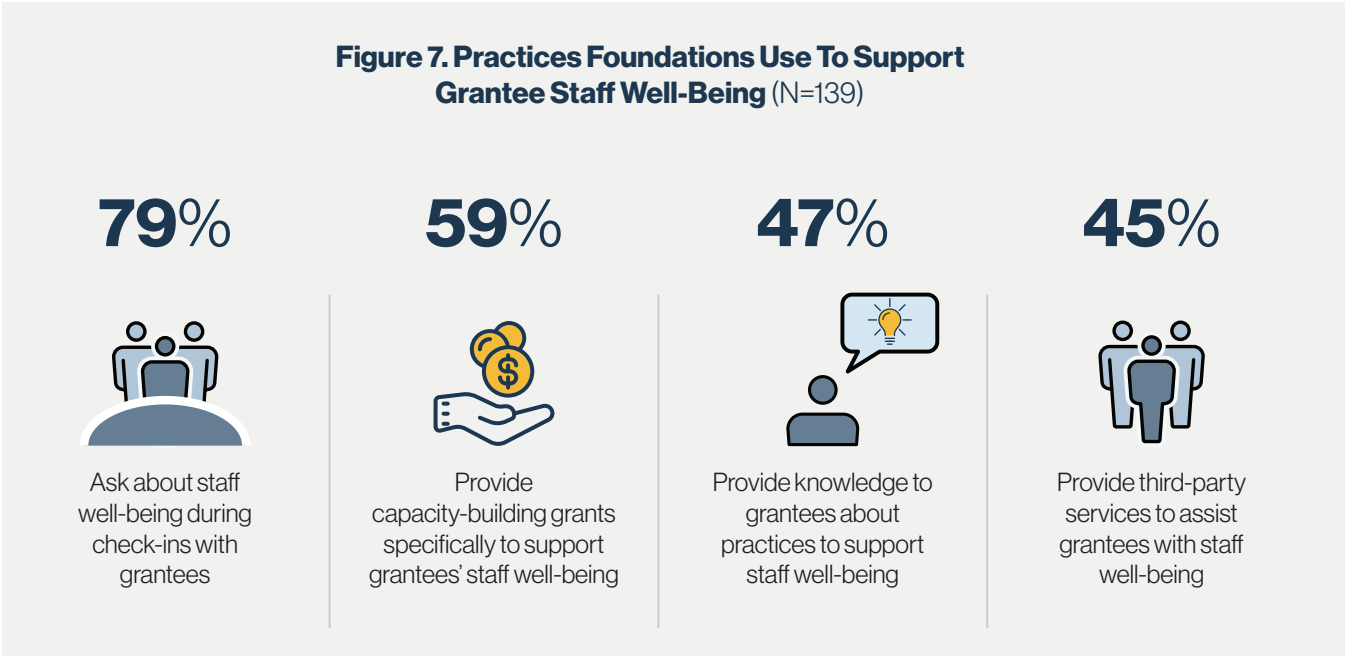


<sup>6</sup> Im, Grundhoefer, and Smith Arrillaga, *State of Nonprofits 2024*. The methodology and sample for this survey can be found on our website [here](#).

Of the foundations that do provide grantee support for well-being practices, very few indicate that their foundation provides support for most or all of the organizations they fund (see Figure 6).



Practices vary for foundations that report engaging with organizations they fund on the issue of staff well-being. The most common practices implemented by foundations we surveyed include asking about staff well-being during check-ins with grantees, providing well-being capacity-building grants, providing knowledge to grantees about staff well-being practices, and providing third-party services to assist grantees with staff well-being (see Figure 7).



**CONCLUSION**

Overall, our data show that most foundation leaders indicate some degree of understanding of the current state of staff well-being among their funded organizations. The majority of foundation leaders are also concerned about the extent and impact of staff burnout at the organizations they fund. However, only about half of foundations are engaging in practices to support grantee staff well-being.

## RESOURCES FOR STAFF WELL-BEING

The following resources are useful for foundations, individual donors, and nonprofit leaders wanting to learn more about assessing and supporting well-being practices in the workplace.



**“Fund the People** works to maximize investment in the nonprofit workforce, envisioning a nonprofit sector that is equitable, effective, and enduring. Fund the People influences the attitudes and behaviors of funders and fundraisers in order to ensure widespread adoption of talent-investing across the sector.”<sup>7</sup>

Fund the People’s [latest podcast series](#) focuses on how funders can support nonprofit organizations experiencing worker shortages and burnout.



**“The Wellbeing Project** is a global network that works to deepen the knowledge base for well-being at the heart of social change, learn and act together to support change-makers and their organizations, convene summits to galvanize a well-being culture regionally and

globally, and mainstream a well-being and social change narrative.”<sup>8</sup>

The Wellbeing Project hosts a [global learning community for funders](#) to explore the link between inner well-being and sustainable social change, experiment with implementation, and contribute to a philanthropic culture shift.



**“One Mind at Work’s** goal is to help members build mentally healthy cultures, improve the design of their workplaces to benefit individuals and teams, grow access to mental health services and support, and engage in innovation.”<sup>9</sup>

One Mind at Work published its [first report](#) exploring the results of its Mental Health at Work Index, using organizations’ self-assessments of their mental health programs, earlier this year.

<sup>7</sup> <https://fundthepeople.org/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://wellbeing-project.org/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://onemindatwork.org/>

## FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT

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## METHODOLOGY

For this CEP Research Snapshot, the Center for Effective Philanthropy conducted a survey of foundation leaders (see Table 1).<sup>10</sup>

**Table 1. Survey Data Collection**

Data Source	Timeframe	Number of Foundations
Survey of foundations	September – November 2023	283

## SURVEY ADMINISTRATION AND RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Two hundred and eighty-three foundations responded to our survey fielded September through November 2023. The response rate was 34 percent.<sup>11</sup> For demographic information about surveyed foundations and the responding leaders, see Table 2.

**Table 2. Survey Respondent Demographics**

<b>Race [multiple select] (n=274)</b>	
White	75%
Black or African American	11%
Hispanic or Latina, Latino, or Latinx	6%
Asian or Asian American	5%
Prefer not to say [mutually exclusive]	4%
Multiracial or Multi-ethnic	3%
Native American, Native Alaskan, or Indigenous	2%
<b>Person of Color (n=275)</b>	
Yes	21%
No	75%
Prefer not to say	4%
<b>Gender [multiple select] (n=274)</b>	
Woman	62%
Man	36%
Prefer not to say [mutually exclusive]	2%
<b>LGBTQ+ Community Member (n=273)</b>	
Yes	6%
No	92%
Prefer not to say	3%

(Table continued on next page)

<sup>10</sup> This research was part of a larger study that included other topics. The full methodology for this survey and sample development process can be found on our website [here](#). A copy of the survey instruments can also be found on our website [here](#).

<sup>11</sup> Survey was sent to 832 individuals, with a final sample of 829 (base) and a full/complete sample of 283.



**Table 2. Survey Respondent Demographics** (continued)

<i>Program Area of Funding [multiple select] (n=274)</i>	
Education	74%
Human services	68%
Health	67%
Arts, culture, and humanities	62%
Social justice	56%
Environment and animals	54%
Public, societal benefit	53%
Religion	22%
Other	21%
International/foreign affairs	10%
Mutual/membership benefit	8%

## **ANALYSIS**

The unweighted quantitative survey data from foundation leaders were examined using a combination of descriptive statistics and chi-square analyses. An alpha level of 0.05 was used to determine statistical significance for all testing conducted for this research. Effect sizes were examined for all analyses. Only analyses resulting in a medium effect size are reported, unless otherwise noted.

Quotations from open-ended survey responses are included in this report. These quotations have been selected to be representative of themes in the data.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH**

It is certainly possible that the leaders who chose to respond to this survey lead foundations that have spent more time thinking about issues of well-being and burnout. From our data, we have no way of knowing this. We do know that there is no difference between foundations that did and did not respond when it comes to asset size, annual giving amount, or geographic location within the United States. However, community foundations and former CEP clients were slightly more likely to respond to the survey, and corporate foundations were slightly less likely to respond to the survey.<sup>12</sup>

As is true of survey research in general, it is not possible to draw causal conclusions from this data. We are not able to know, for example, whether a deeper understanding of grantee staff well-being drives the practices funders use to support well-being or if funders' existing practices have resulted in this deeper understanding. We only know that the concepts reported are statistically related.

<sup>12</sup> These statistical relationships were of a small effect size. The data presented in this report have not been adjusted for response bias.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION**



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