



**BIPOC ED
COALITION**
WASHINGTON STATE

Sabbaticals for BIPOC Leaders

CAPACITY BUILDING • HEALING • RENEWAL

BIPOC = Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, Pacific Islanders, and other People of Color

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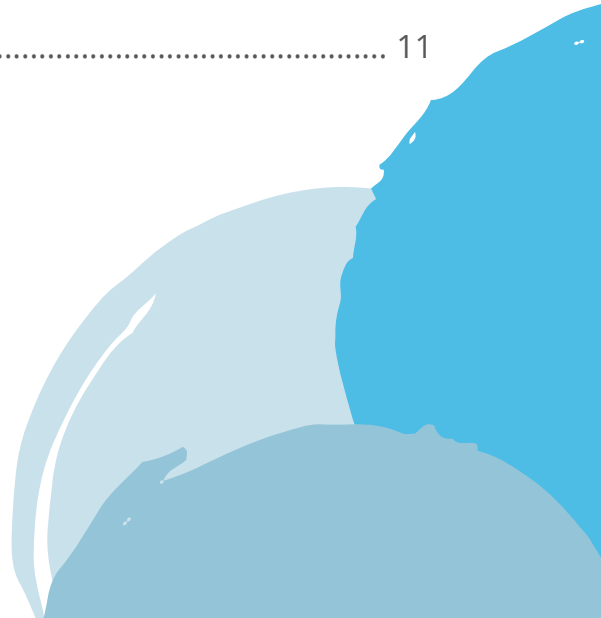
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"The times are urgent; let us slow down."

DR. BÁYÒ AKÓMOLÁFÉ,
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE EMERGENCE NETWORK

DISRUPTING SYSTEMS AND PRIORITIZING REST

The role of the BIPOC ED Coalition

Imagine thriving communities across Washington state, rooted in strong and sustainable social ecosystems in which Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) prosper. The BIPOC ED Coalition is realizing this vision by joining in solidarity to further wellness and restoration within our communities.

The BIPOC ED Coalition was created in 2020 as we saw the opportunity for nonprofit leaders of color across the state to deepen our collective work in healthy and strategic ways. In the midst of a global pandemic and deep outrage at the continued murders of Black and brown people by police, we were overwhelmed by the immense damage caused by systemic racism in our communities. More than 150 BIPOC executive directors joined our first call as we discussed ways to support each other, center health and wellness, and advocate for urgently needed funding.

An intentional balance of healing and advocacy has been built into the coalition's structure and goals. In turn, the BIPOC ED Coalition is recreating the fabric of society to nourish our collective well-being and create shared abundance for all. This multicultural, cross-sector collaborative of 200+ nonprofit leaders is working to create lasting sustainable change — and rest is imperative to realizing this change.

Racist systems have harmed BIPOC communities for generations

Centuries of white supremacy have produced economic injustice, food deserts, racist and anti-immigrant violence, disproportionate COVID-19 and other health impacts, and extreme psychological stress in BIPOC communities. Resources that belong in our communities are systematically diverted to white and wealthy communities. Social indicators of health, education, wealth, and housing are evidence that our systems continue to negatively impact BIPOC folks. This is no accident. It is by design, a strategic win for structural racism.

BIPOC leaders are exhausted. We address pressing daily needs with inadequate resources, and create cultures of justice and compassion in the face of oppression. We keep going while grappling with multigenerational trauma, structural economic and access limitations, and, very often, the burden of leadership without culturally aligned support. All of this while being repeatedly forced to negotiate legitimacy with the dominant culture.

Health inequities fuel the urgency of the need for BIPOC leaders

The cumulative impact of structural racism on health and well-being is substantial, and has been called the “weathering” effect. Researcher Dr. Arline Geronimus, who coined the term “weathering,” notes: “What I’ve seen over the years of my research and lifetime is that the stressors that impact people of color are chronic and repeated through their whole life course. ... And, that increases a general health vulnerability, which is what weathering is.”¹

In October 2021, the American Psychological Association (APA) formally acknowledged the harm it’s perpetuated: “Since its origins as a scientific discipline in the mid-19th century, psychology has, through acts of commission

and omission, contributed to the dispossession, displacement, and exploitation of communities of color.” Furthermore, the APA recognized its racist ideologies and behaviors are evidenced in the health inequities experienced by BIPOC communities.²

The King County Community Health Assessment 2021–22 describes racism as a public health crisis. It notes that “While overall life expectancy of King County residents has not significantly changed, recent analyses reveal worsening racial and ethnic disparities in life expectancy. ... Communities of color are also overrepresented in COVID-19 cases, deaths, and hospitalizations.”³

This is consistent with state and even national data, per a National Academies of Sciences examination of health equity and inequity: “For racial and ethnic minorities in the United States, health disparities take on many forms, including higher rates of chronic disease and premature death compared to the rates among whites.”⁴ Citing disparities in rates of infant mortality, diabetes, and premature death from heart disease, the report makes clear that our systems disproportionately impact the health of BIPOC communities.

We cannot postpone the care and recovery of BIPOC leaders

BIPOC leaders spend so much time directing energy outward to support others. From COVID to climate change, from job insecurity to political disenfranchisement, the needs are real, they come fast, and they are all urgent. We recognize how hard this work is, how committed our BIPOC executive directors are, and how vital the need is for renewal.

The Building Movement Project (BMP) issued a 2020 report, *On the Frontlines: Nonprofits Led by People of Color Confront COVID-19 and Structural Racism*, drawing on data from 433 nonprofit leaders of color in 45 states and Washington,



D.C. The report's key findings emphasize that BIPOC-led nonprofits are mobilizing on multiple fronts, responding to community needs, which have been exacerbated by inadequate governmental support, and doing so without clear financial stability.⁵

Another key report finding is that: "The toll on nonprofit leaders of color, particularly women of color leaders, is immense. The overwhelming consensus is that the current climate is taking an immeasurable psychological, physical, and emotional toll, especially on women of color leaders."⁶

Leaders described facing increased demands, "non-stop" and "overwhelming" workloads; and women of color, in particular, reported increased expectations and demands for their emotional labor. In response to new challenges and surging stress, leaders of color discussed experimenting with new organizational practices and policies to support cultures of health and well-being, ranging from new leave policies to wellness stipends.

In the words of one leader who shared perspectives in the BMP report: "As we talk about recovery and resiliency, those words are attached to systems change. We know there's no going back to business as usual," says Keisha Browder at United Way of Santa Cruz County.⁷

Wellness is foundational to sustainable changemaking

BIPOC communities, BIPOC-led nonprofits, and BIPOC leaders have always had to fill in the gaping holes left by harmful systems. We are the same people who carry the medicine needed to realize a society that centers wellness and restoration. Now, more than ever, we are deeply in need of rest and renewal.

We must have the collective vision to support the humanity, health, and whole selves of BIPOC

leaders. We must recognize that wellness and self-care for BIPOC nonprofit executive directors is foundational to racial healing and social justice in communities.

Supported by data from other sabbatical programs for nonprofit leaders, our vision for BIPOC ED Coalition sabbaticals is grounded in the determination to enable and normalize rest and healing. Research shows that sabbaticals are a wise investment with multifaceted positive impacts. Sabbaticals support leaders in personal and professional renewal; increase leader confidence and connection with their vision; strengthen organizational capacity and succession planning; improve nonprofit board functioning; and help funders deepen relationships with nonprofit partners.

A commitment to wellness for BIPOC leaders challenges cultural notions of "leader as martyr." Burnout, exhaustion, and illness are not acceptable or inevitable norms. What would it mean for BIPOC leaders to be deeply resourced to prioritize self-care? How might sabbaticals enrich their sustainable leadership and what they could model for the next generation of leaders?



"Rest is not work's adversary, rest is work's partner."

ALEX SOOJUNG-KIM PANG,
AUTHOR OF *REST: WHY YOU GET MORE DONE WHEN YOU WORK LESS*

SABBATICALS AS A PRACTICE

Rest disrupts and recreates all at once

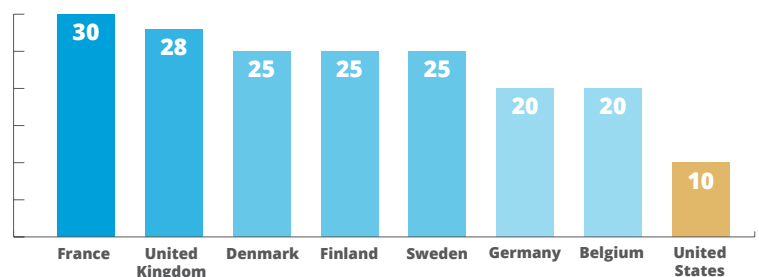
As a society, we have been working to address the impacts of inequities without redesigning the structures and systems that create and perpetuate them. Change starts with shifting the narrative that rest is earned or deserved. Rest is essential, as essential as food, yet within racist, patriarchal, and capitalistic systems, the exhaustion of BIPOC executive directors has been the status quo.

We are very familiar with cultural messages that praise work and look down on rest. Yet, we know that rest is vital for many aspects of physical and mental health, ranging from immune health⁸ to increased concentration and attention.⁹ It is intuitively easy to understand that rest fosters renewal and joy. Yet, there's resistance to making rest a cultural norm even though it would lead to a shift in organizational policies.

The U.S. work culture incorporates rest less than many countries at similar levels of development, and this American commitment to overwork *reduces* workplace effectiveness. Data from the

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) affirms that more work hours lead to lower productivity, and that the most productive countries, like Germany and France, ensure more than 30 days of vacation.¹⁰

Average Private Worker Paid Vacation Days



A Center for Creative Leadership paper notes that "Working too many hours actually impedes productivity. ... The costs are there — they are just hidden. Without enough time to recover from work, the resulting exhaustion impedes productivity, leads to accidents, illness, emotional dysregulation, and mistakes. The reason behind the diminishing productivity can be explained by what social scientists call the effort-recovery

model. This model emphasizes that recovery is essential after a period of extended effort. ... Recovery practices are an important aspect of workplace resilience. Overwork results in health problems, which turn into absenteeism, turnover, and increased insurance costs. Productivity requires managing the balance between effort expended and recovery required.”¹¹

Sabbaticals as a practice respond directly to these issues, redefining productivity and creating time and space for sleep, physical activity, and mental, emotional, and social recovery.

We are at a cultural inflection point: Black women are reclaiming rest

To gain insight into how BIPOC leaders are doing generally, there is value in focusing on the experience of Black women, who occupy a distinct place in both this country’s history and at the forefront of BIPOC leadership. Their particular perspective opens a window onto the realities facing our extraordinarily diverse community of BIPOC leaders.

Black women frequently experience a blend of intersectional oppressions and erasure. They often go unseen in their intersectional identities, expected to sacrifice and suppress the *specificity* and *fullness* of their truth in order to aid the wider interests of one of the collective identities they carry. But told to be invisible, they refuse to disappear.

Amanda Miller Littlejohn is an executive coach who works with professional Black women. She writes in a recent *Washington Post* article: “Black professional women are exhausted. They’re finally claiming the time to rest.” She observes that, “This year my current and former clients have all said in one way or another that they’re tapped out. They’ve started to intentionally reclaim their rest.”¹²

She quotes psychiatrist Reba Peoples, who points out how Black people choosing to rest must navigate the legacy of traumatic history: “We live



in a culture that values productivity, so we’re measured by that capacity to produce. But for Black people, that idea goes even deeper because our [enslaved] ancestors were literally valued based on their capacity to produce labor. ... So it was dangerous to rest, and we’ve had that encoded into our DNA. Many other BIPOC leaders with their unique intersectional identities and histories — whether as refugees, undocumented people, LGBTQIA+, differently abled, and many other forms of identity — can recognize this in their own journey, that it is not safe to rest.”¹³

An inflection point marks the changing shape and direction of a curve, and Black women are saying we are now at such a point in our culture. There is an opportunity to leverage this changing curve for transformative healing in the lives of BIPOC leaders and BIPOC communities.

Sabbaticals for BIPOC leaders normalize a healthy narrative

In a culture rooted in white supremacy, prioritizing the deep inner renewal of BIPOC folks dismantles normalized oppression. Recognizing historical and present-day inequity, it is a radically reparative act to support BIPOC changemakers in cultivating deep rest on their own terms.

Sabbaticals are a powerful form of healing, practice, and exploration. During a sabbatical, BIPOC executive directors can cultivate inner renewal. They can restore their energy and spirit, and reconnect with their health, joy, and vision.

Collectively, we must normalize a healthy framework that will support leaders in stepping away from clock time into deep time — enabling them to reflect and connect with their own rhythms, perceptions, and processes. We need to tell more stories of BIPOC leaders nourishing themselves, returning stronger and bringing back gifts of clarity, energy, and sustainability to their communities.

From the BMP report, Kavita Mehra of Sakhi for South Asian Women notes: “At times, it feels overwhelming and intense to represent something to so many people. And, it is easy to forget that as leaders, we often come into this work with our own complicated histories. Through this journey, I am learning to take a step back, process, and be kind to myself.”¹⁴

To spark genuine change, systems of wellness must become a baseline expectation so BIPOC leaders have the opportunity to generate creative approaches as they draw upon their own deep inner resources.



"Shifting culture is necessary for systems change. Rest results in strength. Healing creates energy. ... Dreaming leads to transformation."

MARIA DE LA CRUZ,
PRESIDENT, HEADWATERS FOUNDATION FOR JUSTICE

SUSTAINABLE CHANGE THROUGH SABBATICALS

Sabbaticals catalyze renewal and leadership development

Sabbaticals help leaders to both rest and see anew. Time away supports rejuvenation and opens creative thinking and new possibilities that expand executives' leadership capacity.

According to *Creative Disruption: Sabbaticals for Capacity Building & Leadership Development in the Nonprofit Sector*, commissioned by several foundations, including the Barr Foundation and the Durfee Foundation, sabbaticals are one of the most effective and cost efficient ways to prevent burnout from the stresses and demands of nonprofit leadership. For BIPOC nonprofit leaders navigating racism and racist structures, they are especially critical.¹⁵

This 2009 report found that a sabbatical can be "a relatively inexpensive but highly productive capacity-building tool that yields measurable results." Of 61 sabbatical awardee respondents, 56 percent were BIPOC nonprofit leaders. In surveys and interviews, many respondents reported rejuvenation and renewal, with the

majority describing positive changes persisting for a year or more post-sabbatical.¹⁶

Eighty-seven percent of respondents reported increased professional confidence, and the majority also reported improved relationships with staff, board, funders, and community. The sabbatical enabled three quarters of the respondents to enrich their existing vision or form a new vision for their organization.¹⁷

Almost a decade later, a 2017 follow-up report from the Durfee Foundation, *From Creative Disruption to Systems Change*, looked back at 20 years of the Foundation's sabbatical program for nonprofit leaders. The Foundation began awarding sabbaticals in 1997 and, by 2016, 100 nonprofit leaders had taken sabbaticals with Durfee support. The 2017 data confirmed the earlier report's findings, and additionally identified the value of sabbaticals for sustaining leaders in their roles, broadening their perspective about leadership in their organization.¹⁸

Of survey respondents, over 80 percent reported post-sabbatical improvements in energy for leadership and social connection, and over 70 percent described improvements in health and leadership confidence.¹⁹

Sabbaticals shift organizational culture

Sabbaticals help move workplace cultures. The practice creates better work-life balance for employees and broadens leadership within organizations. The *Creative Disruption* report found that executive director sabbaticals increase organizational capacity, as interim leaders and other staff expand their skills and ability to take on greater responsibilities.²⁰

Sabbaticals also foster succession planning, helping organizations become prepared for navigating leadership transitions or unforeseen challenges. In the *From Creative Disruption to Systems Change* report, 60 percent of survey participants reported stronger governance and board effectiveness after engaging in the sabbatical process.²¹

The report concluded that sabbaticals “represent an effective and cost-efficient way not only to revitalize leaders’ passion and interest in their work, but at the same time increase the capacity

of their organizations, develop a second tier of leadership, reframe vision, transmit executive skills to staff, improve board governance, and stimulate closer relationships with funders.” The report asserts that sabbatical programs “offer an extraordinary opportunity to make a demonstrable, positive impact in the lives of nonprofit leaders, their staff, and the communities they serve.”²²

Respondents noted enduring shifts in perspective about leadership; almost 75 percent described an organizational culture shift toward increased work-life balance; and 79 percent of respondents viewed the sabbatical as directly supportive of the professional development of other staff and upcoming leaders.²³

Sabbaticals are a lever for whole systems change

These individual and organizational shifts lead to greater systemic shifts. Embracing sabbaticals is recreating the fabric of society to nourish our collective well-being and generate shared abundance for all.

“What is particularly special about offering and supporting a three-month sabbatical for nonprofit leaders is that it can be a lever for whole systems change,” the *From Creative Disruption to Systems Change* report asserts. “Like the proverbial pebble thrown in the pond, sabbaticals quickly and organically create lasting change at the personal (attitude/perspective), structural (job descriptions changed, teams restructured), and system (leadership, mission/ impact) levels.”²⁴

A 2020 evaluation report, *The Nonprofit Sabbatical as a Catalyst for Capacity-Building*,²⁵ drew upon data from 19 organizations over five years of sabbatical programs. This report’s findings are strongly aligned with those described above, as participating executive directors described increased satisfaction, confidence, energy, and time for reflection. The post-sabbatical data again



pointed to multifaceted impact:

91%

of board and staff reported executive directors as more rested and rejuvenated post-sabbatical.

83%

of interim leaders reported gaining skills and knowledge for the future.

80%

of board and staff reported new leadership capacity was built in the organization.

74%

of board and staff agreed that the staff were more effective after the leader took a sabbatical.

100%

of organizations created a temporary succession plan.

As evidence of enduring benefit to organizations and systems, from data gathered nine to 24 months post-sabbatical, executive directors described: less stress, greater self-awareness, and increased creativity and curiosity. Organizations bore witness to their own evolution with: increased cultures of well-being, greater shared leadership, a stronger bond between board and staff, and more autonomous and connected staff.²⁶

Overall, the findings affirmed that well-structured sabbaticals simultaneously address distinct but related organizational needs. Executive directors were able to rest deeply and renew their well-being and vision while, in their absence, interim leaders expanded their skills and capacity to hold increased leadership responsibility. Boards widened their understanding and deepened their connection with staff. In addition to sparking succession planning, the sabbaticals offered organizations a short-term, real-time experience of functioning without the executive director. It was a way to practice navigating organizational change. These rehearsals left organizations

readier for future transitions, whether anticipated or unanticipated. The report states: “Sabbaticals, when implemented thoughtfully and with both the executive director and the organization in mind, can serve as a catalyst for capacity building that can ultimately strengthen and sustain nonprofit organizations.”²⁷

BIPOC ED-focused sabbaticals offer a rich opportunity

A sabbatical initiative will enable us to engage in groundbreaking learning and data collection that is wholly focused on BIPOC executive directors. What sabbatical *processes* best respond to the unique needs of BIPOC leaders, their nonprofits, and their communities? What sabbatical *benefits* are most impactful for BIPOC communities?

As we learn and gather feedback, the first cohorts of BIPOC executive directors on sabbatical will not only be claiming time for their own deep renewal — and supporting the growth of their organizations — their reflections will also be a service to future BIPOC sabbatical participants.

Investing in sabbaticals is good for funders too. Funders benefit by building relationships and building trust with nonprofit leaders, as well as by gaining insight into community needs and perspectives.

In summary, this BIPOC ED sabbatical initiative will support BIPOC executive directors in urgently needed rest and renewal, strengthen organizations, empower next-generation leaders, learn and gather BIPOC-centered data, and deepen connections among organizations and funders. The sabbatical initiative will help nurture sustainable, healthy BIPOC-led nonprofits that continue to deliver vital services and support for BIPOC communities, as we move forward in extraordinarily challenging times.

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To learn more and explore together how we make sabbaticals the norm, contact us at

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The BIPOC ED Coalition is a multicultural, cross-sector collaborative of 200+ nonprofit executive directors working in solidarity to promote wellness and restore resources in our communities across Washington state. Responding to the need for a safe and affirming space for BIPOC leaders to come together and fortify ourselves and our organizations, four social changemakers — Andrea Caupain Sanderson, Ananda Valenzuela, Jodi Nishioka, and Victoria Santos — united to create the BIPOC ED Coalition in June 2020. We envision thriving communities across Washington, rooted in a strong and sustainable social ecosystem in which Black, Indigenous, and People of Color prosper.



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