Rasmuson Foundation Sabbatical Grant Program Assessment

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Prepared for Rasmuson Foundation by Agnew::Beck Consulting
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Introduction

Rasmuson Foundation's Sabbatical Grant Program began in 2005. Over the past decade, the program has supported 66 leaders in Alaska's nonprofit and tribal sectors, providing them with the opportunity to step out of their professional and community commitments for a two to six-month break. The program also provides technical support to their organizations during the leader's absence. Many program recipients report that they return to their organizations following the sabbatical with renewed energy and an altered perspective on their work.

This assessment documents the many ways the sabbatical program has improved the nonprofit sector in Alaska by investing in critical leaders, and identifies the ripple effects of that investment in their organizations and communities. This assessment also provides some suggestions for building on the program's successes to deepen and broaden its positive impacts.

Rasmuson Foundation's Sabbatical Grant Program is one of only a few similar programs in the United States. It was originally developed to recognize and reward leaders of organizations that provide critical services such as domestic violence shelters, crisis respite centers and other safety net social service organizations. Some of these leaders were at risk of leaving the sector due to the accumulated toll of long hours and intense responsibilities. The program continues with this original focus and has since added additional recipients from a wide variety of organizations, from healthcare to arts to housing organizations, serving communities of all sizes across Alaska.

Photo by Rowena Palomar

Rasmuson Foundation typically grants six sabbatical awards per year. While the focus of the award is the individual leader, the grant is made to the organization with an agreement that the leader remain with that organization for at least one year upon his or her return. The applicant organization applies for funding, outlining a plan and budget that specifies how the organization will function in the leader's absence, including the assignment of an interim CEO or equivalent. Rasmuson Foundation engages the Foraker Group to provide support and technical assistance to recipient organizations before, during, and after the sabbatical.

"… the sabbatical is not just the CEO's experience; it is the organization's experience."

Assessment Method

Rasmuson Foundation contracted with Agnew::Beck Consulting in 2016 to conduct an assessment of its sabbatical grant program. The assessment sought to better understand the experiences of past recipients of the program, and how the program has influenced individual recipients, their organizations, and the communities they serve. To complete the assessment, the consultant team sought input from past participants on ways to improve, strengthen and expand the program to best support Alaska's nonprofit sector. The following questions guided the assessment:

- How has the sabbatical program affected recipient organizations and individuals over the past decade?
- Is the program serving the current needs of Alaska's nonprofit sector in the best way possible?
- Are there other ways the Rasmuson Foundation could build on or deepen engagement with organizations to expand the influence of the sabbatical program?

The consultant team conducted 35 key informant interviews in Alaska communities, in person when possible or by phone when not, to learn directly from the program's past recipients. The interviews were structured as informal conversations, following a set of guiding questions about each person's sabbatical asking them to reflect on their experiences and the effects of the program on their organization, staff, and the communities they serve. The consultant team also conducted a small number of interviews with staff from recipient organizations who filled leadership roles during the sabbatical. Agnew::Beck also conducted an online survey for past recipients who were not available for an interview.

In addition to primary data collection, the team conducted research of similar sabbatical programs, employer policies, and other best practices regarding planned leaves of absence. Learning more about the structure of other foundations' sabbatical programs provided instructive comparisons and ideas for increasing the influence of the Rasmuson Foundation's program. While the team did not conduct a formal review of best practices, the recommendations and ideas presented here are informed by these explorations.

Rasmuson Foundation previously commissioned an internal assessment of the program, following the first (2005) and third (2007) cohorts of recipients. In 2009, Rasmuson Foundation, Foraker Group and a sample of Alaska executive directors and interim directors participated in a national assessment of peer programs across the country commissioned by the Durfee Foundation. This assessment is the second internal study of the program, and the first to specifically focus on the long-term effects of the program.

Outcomes

The benefits of the Rasmuson Foundation's sabbatical grant program are most transformative for the individual leaders, however, there are many important benefits that radiate out to the recipient organizations' staff, board members, and the communities they serve.

Individual	**Mental, physical, and emotional rest, recovery and renewal** Recipients enjoy a rare opportunity of an extended period to seek new experiences, focus on personal priorities and relationships, and reflect on their core values and life goals. Most returned and stayed with the organization longer than the required minimum one year, and many remain in their positions today.
Staff	**Disrupts a recipient organization's status quo, creating growth opportunities and constructive challenges** Senior staff often take on new roles and responsibilities during the sabbatical. The absence of the leader challenges staff to test their abilities, find solutions to issues that arise, and depend more on one another. Many recipients reported that following the sabbatical, senior staff often keep their new responsibilities, rather than returning to the pre-sabbatical structure.
Organization	**Planned disruption to increase resilience and plan for transitions** Board and staff plan for the CEO's absence and discover ways to build organizational sustainability, staff capacity, and begin succession planning.
Nonprofit Sector + Community	**Renewed commitment to mission and work** Leaders in Alaska's nonprofit sector replenish their energy and commitment to the critical missions of their organizations, resulting in increased retention and continuity. The recognition and reward for the work of nonprofit leaders underscores the value of the sector to Alaska communities.
	Better service to clients and community Leaders bring back knowledge and insights from their sabbatical experiences that invigorate the sector. When they apply these experiences upon their return, improvements in their organizations result in better service to the community, and increased efficiency.

Improvements

Overall, the sabbatical program is a very well-managed and meaningful program for recipients. The consultant team identified the following suggestions for minor improvements to the program:

Individual	• Continue to make clear that the nomination and application are two distinct steps that must both be completed for the application to be considered. • Consider evaluating different types of applicant organizations separately to ensure both breadth and depth of influence in Alaska's nonprofit sector. • Use videoconference for all interviews, to facilitate more complete communication between applicants and the interview team, and review questions to acknowledge the sensitivities and feelings of "guilt" or "unworthiness" some applicants experience. • For applicants not selected, provide personal outreach within the month following the initial notification to address any concerns or misperceptions.
Develop relationships between past and current applicants and recipients	• Reinforce and encourage the development of a cohort among sabbatical awardees each year. • Support applicants' pre-sabbatical planning processes by promoting past recipients as a source of advice and knowledge. • Offer the suggestion to recipients to engage a retired past recipient to serve as interim CEO or mentor for senior staff during the sabbatical. • Provide additional reminders and tools for recipients that enable them to separate from work by not checking email or other organization communications. • Conduct structured exit interviews approximately one-month post-sabbatical.
Supporting Other Staff	• Develop a forum post-sabbatical for interim CEOs and other senior staff assigned leadership duties to reflect on their experiences, receive recognition for their efforts, and identify areas for professional growth. • Support organizations that have participated in the sabbatical program who are interested in designing their own internal sabbatical program for other senior leaders.
Organizational Support	• Continue to conduct an orientation with recipients, their board members and staff in person, and consider additional orientation contact points. • Reinforce the availability of the Foraker Group's services before and during the process, both to staff and board members.
Recruitment + Outreach	• Consider additional formal and informal ways to recruit applicants to continue to broaden the applicant pool, particularly from rural Alaska communities. • Continue to educate Alaska's nonprofit sector about the positive outcomes for both individuals and organizations from innovative personal leave practices such as sabbaticals. • Create a short summary of the benefits of a sabbatical for nonprofit and community-serving organizations.
Supporting Past Recipients	• Identify a policy or consistent approach for whether and how to consider return applicants who have already received a sabbatical. • Encourage and reinforce a healthy work-life balance after recipients return to work. • Promote cross-sector networking and provide relationship-building opportunities for sabbatical awardees and past recipients. • And most importantly, continue to offer this unique and rewarding opportunity!