

# Leadership Succession Planning

Interviews with Humboldt County Nonprofit and Public Service Agency Leaders



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Interviews conducted throughout 2017 by:

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**Abstract:** In early 2017, it came to the attention of the North Coast Grantmaking Partnership (NCGP) that a substantial number of extremely experienced Humboldt County nonprofit leaders appeared to be nearing retirement age. Members of NCGP were interested in learning if there is an impending transition of nonprofit and service agency leadership, and if so, when, how extensive, whether leaders and their organizations were preparing for that transition, and how they were approaching it. Two members of NCGP conducted interviews with local leaders identified as potentially nearing retirement age with the understanding that themes emerging would be used to inform the local funding community about the transition and identify potential supports that might be implemented to ensure that organizations providing important services in our community remain strong.

## Acknowledgements

The North Coast Grantmaking Partnership and Northern California Association of Nonprofits would like to thank all the leaders who made time in their tremendously busy schedules for an interview and for their candor and thoughtful responses.

It was an honor to spend time with leaders that are responsible for carrying the heart and soul of community while effectively operating unique and challenging business models. The talented, passionate, and dedicated leaders we had the opportunity to interview shared issues that were both deeply personal and organizationally critical. We are grateful for the honesty, transparency and vulnerability that was shared in service to the greater good of the sector. It is our hope that the understanding, analysis, creativity and opportunities reflected in this report are able to open conversations and develop resources and support for organizational leadership development and transitions.

– Amy Jester and Laura Olson

*Thank You!*

## **Interviewees**

By Laura Olson:

Anne Holcomb, Executive Director, Food for People  
Betty Chinn, Executive Director, Betty Kwan Chinn Day Center  
Cheyenne Spetzler, Chief Operating Officer, Open Door Community Health Centers  
Darlene Spoor, Executive Director, Arcata House Partnership  
Donalyn Sjostrand, Executive Director, Tri-County Independent Living  
Jane Hill, Retired Executive Director, Eureka Symphony  
Jeff Lamoree, Board Member, Sequoia Park Zoo Foundation  
Joyce Hayes, Executive Director, Humboldt Senior Resource Center  
Julie Benbow, Executive Director, Sequoia Park Zoo Foundation  
Libby Maynard, Executive Director, The Ink People Center for the Arts  
Lorey Keele, Community Services Director, Redwood Community Action Agency  
Nancy Flemming, Executive Director, Sequoia Humane Society  
Sally Hewitt, Senior Program Manager, Department of Health and Human Services  
Tom Schallert, Executive Director, Northern California Community Blood Bank  
Val Martinez, Executive Director, Redwood Community Action Agency

By Amy Jester:

Paula Arrowsmith-Jones, Ruthanne DeMirjyn, & Maryann Hayes Mariani,  
Management Team, North Coast Rape Crisis Team  
Dr. Gary Eagles, Retired Humboldt County Superintendent of Schools  
Rose Gale-Zoellick, Executive Director, Breast and GYN Health Project  
Rhonda Lewis, Executive Director, Fortuna Adventist Community Services  
Martin Love, Chief Executive Officer, Humboldt Independent Practice Association &  
North Coast Health Improvement & Information Network  
Ross Welch, Executive Director, Arcata Economic Development Corporation

## **Northern California Grantmaking Partnership Active Members:**

First 5 Humboldt  
Footprint Foundation  
Headwaters Fund  
Humboldt Area Foundation  
Mel and Grace McLean Foundation  
Patricia D. and William B. Smullin Foundation  
St. Joseph's Health System Humboldt County  
Humboldt Health Foundation (formerly Union Labor Health Foundation)  
Vesper Society

## Methods

Interviews were held throughout 2017 with 23 individual nonprofit leaders. Fifteen interviewees were executive directors/chief executive officers. The others were: one board member, one chief operating officer, one director, one senior program manager, a three-person management team, and an office of education superintendent. All were from different organizations with the exception of three with North Coast Rape Crisis Team, two with Redwood Community Action Agency and two with Sequoia Park Zoo Foundation. Nineteen agencies were represented providing a wide variety of community services which can be loosely categorized as, five safety net, seven health, two arts and culture, two animal, one economic development, one youth, and one community and environment.

Interviews were informal, not recorded and lasted approximately one hour. Interview questions were developed through an iterative process with NCGP members providing input as to the most important things to learn from the interview opportunities. Notes from interviews were transcribed and responses to each question entered into a spreadsheet. These were compared and analyzed for common themes which are reported in this paper. Interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

Interviewees agreed to have their names included pending their approval of a draft of this report.

## Results

### Experience

The 23 interviewees have a substantial number of years of experience at the management level in the organization they currently lead. Cumulatively they have over 430 *years* of experience in serving their communities in different capacities throughout their careers.

- Average years in current position: 14
- Range of years in current position: 2 to 39
- Total years' experience in current position: 317 years
- Approximately 404 years total agency management experience
- Approximately 430 years of nonprofit or service agency experience in total

## Retirement Plans

The majority of those interviewed are planning retirement in the near future and most have initiated some kind of formal or informal planning process. One is proactively working with their board on a specific transition policy for their retirement and another has developed a plan with the assistance of a consultant.



- 16 of the 23 interviewed plan to retire within 5 years, and more than half of those within 3 years, two said they won't ever retire and four are not sure about the timing.
- 12 leaders have discussed their retirement with their board (approx. 2/3) but only 6 with their staff (1/3).
- 19 leaders have begun to think about and/or plan for their retirement, both in their organizations and in their personal lives.
- 3/5 of those interviewed have discussed and/or have some kind of transition plan in place with their board.
- 3/5 have started working with their staff on transition whether or not the staff members actually know about the leaders' timeline for the retirement.

## Organizational Leadership Development

When the leaders were asked if they actively cultivate leadership, virtually all responded positively. Most are doing so consciously knowing of their impending retirement. How they go about that varied but some themes were,

- develop a leadership team,
- find people with energy and commitment and provide training and mentorship,
- support younger leaders in their family commitments,
- delegate when possible,
- support staff in supervisory roles,
- cross-train staff,
- build culture of succession planning in organization,
- actively seek out potential successors and cultivate and test their leadership,
- board development.

Trainings mentioned by some that are used to develop leadership were Cascadia Center for Leadership, Fred Pryor and NorCAN (Northern California Association of Nonprofits).

Six leaders talked specifically about “the overwhelm” of staff making it hard to support leadership development. Delegating responsibility to overworked staff felt inappropriate to them. It was noted that there are challenges to providing opportunities for leadership growth when an organization is small and doesn’t have many middle management positions.

Five leaders shared that they are supporting succession and retirement of other key staff members leading up to their own retirement.

Eight people shared that they are actively planning for and positioning a current staff member to assume the Executive Director role upon their retirement and five people shared that they’re planning to overlap with their successor.

## **Barriers to Succession Planning**

One interviewee cited that they did not have any barriers to succession planning, three identified only one key barrier, and nineteen noted numerous barriers. The most common barrier mentioned was time which was an issue raised by six of those interviewed. Following that in order of number of times mentioned were, finding the right person (11), training (6), pay rate (4), concern about capacity of the organization without them (4), fear of overwhelming board and staff (4), shifting organizational structure or model with succession (4), political implications (3) and letting go (2).

Non-competitive salaries and benefits came up several times during the interviews. Several leaders indicated that the inability of their organization to offer competitive salaries and benefits makes it a challenge to recruit qualified applicants, particularly from out of the area. Two executive directors shared that their board will likely have to offer a salary higher than they currently earn to replace them.

In terms of organizational readiness for transition, most have no outside support for a transition, but,

- one received funding for a transition plan from a state agency,
- one participated in development of a curriculum for leadership development with an affiliate group,
- one received management assistance mentorship from an affiliate group.

### **Barriers Cited**

“Time. Staff transitions are extremely time consuming.”

“I don’t want to bring in someone from out of the area that is not a fit.”

“Letting go!”

“I would like to delegate to develop leadership and the skills needed, but my staff has full plates.”

## Assistance Needed for Succession Planning

Interviewees suggested a wide variety of things needed by their organizations to support succession planning, some practical and others extremely challenging. Among the challenging suggestions were:

- Time (6)
- Higher salaries to attract outstanding applicants (5)
- Housing (3)
- Internal system of leadership development (2)
- Strengthening middle management (1)

One interviewee pointed out that in addition to attracting out-of-the-area candidates, higher salaries are needed for small nonprofits to compete with higher paying local agencies for staff. Two leaders noted the need for help with retention of people from outside the area.

Other assistance suggestions most frequently cited were:

Training (14), and specifically requested were:

- How to develop people into managers (2)
- Workshops on more specific transition topics
- Class at Humboldt State University for NPO Management
- Certificate of proficiency
- Executive Coaching
- Continuous class in NPO Management
- Supervisor training
- Dealing with difficult people
- Human resources and hiring
- Training specific to the service provided by organization

Executive Director roundtable or support group (5)

Building board confidence, including facilitated conversations with the board (4)

Mentors (3)

Support for documenting and archiving history/institutional knowledge (2)

A resource for agencies to seek applicants (2)

Recruitment assistance (1)

Money for planning – consulting and staff time (1)

Money for overlap of outgoing and incoming staff (1)

Exposure to current executive's networks (1)

## Increasing Diversity

Leaders were asked whether they had considered increasing diversity during their transition.

Only one of the people interviewed is specifically including diversity goals in their transition planning. Many discussed the diversity of their board and staff and their organization's efforts to increase diversity in recent years. However, 13 of those interviewed shared that either their board, staff or both were not very diverse. Four leaders said that their organizations are diverse and five said their board and staff reflect the communities they serve. Six of those interviewed said it is difficult to increase diversity in their organizations, and several mentioned lack of diversity in the applicant pool, and just needing to find the most qualified person. One interviewee noted racialized discrimination in housing practices as a barrier to recruiting and retaining talent.



### Diversity

“We are trying to find diverse board members but we just need board members.”

“It’s important to us, we serve everyone.”

“We are not too diverse but we reflect the community we serve.”

“We have to demand diversity!”

## Assistance Needed for Increasing Diversity

When asked, what kind of support would be helpful toward increasing staff and/or board diversity, the most common response was increase connections with Humboldt State University which was mentioned by seven interviewees (College of the Redwoods was mentioned twice). One interviewee identified mentoring as a potentially helpful resource, another suggested supporting professional development for bilingual and bicultural community members and a third identified the need to support people from out of the area in staying here. The only other suggestion offered was to increase the diversity of qualified applicants. Nine interviewees did not have a suggestion or declined to state. One interviewee noted that it would be a mistake to focus on what supports are needed to increase diversity.

In their responses, several leaders talked about the importance of diversity and three shared that their organizations demand it in hiring and/or board recruitment. One mentioned their organization keeps and monitors diversity data. Most indicated they are aware of the need to increase diversity in their organizations and some indicated they are actively looking for ways to do that.

## Mentors

Leaders were asked if they had a mentor. Twenty answered with a resounding yes, fifteen of whom shared that they had more than one mentor and many cited several by name. The majority of those named are known locally as individuals that intentionally act or are viewed as mentors.

Most of those interviewed shared that mentors were important in their career development and many fondly told stories about their mentors and how someone they looked up to changed their lives. Interviewees indicated mentor support provided things like, knowledge, encouragement, faith in them, someone to look up to, and skill development.

### Mentors

“Every superwoman has a mentor.”

“I’ve had many and that’s important for NPO Managers.”

“I find people good at what they do and connect with them.”

## Becoming a Mentor

When asked if they would consider becoming a mentor after retirement, either for organizations with new executive directors, to those engaged in succession planning, or to support other elements of leadership development, 18 responded yes, one said no, one said maybe, and the others were not ready to think about it. The majority of those interviewed said they already planned to remain active in the community (14 plan to stay in Humboldt County after their retirement, though some plan to travel). Four interviewees indicated that they love the idea and three suggested coordinating and



matching mentors with organizations or individuals that would benefit from mentoring. One interviewee had already identified a coordinated mentorship opportunity they planned to pursue after retirement and one said they planned to get on boards (“and torment people one on one”).

## Observations

Almost none of those interviewed are retiring early. For several, their current position is one they are planning to continue into their retirement or expect to continue rather than retire. Some have financial challenges that are a barrier to retiring due to low pay, extensive family commitments, and low or no retirement offered by their organizations. Most of those interviewed love what they are doing and believe it is meaningful work that has significantly shaped their lives. Because it is part of who they are, considering retirement is difficult. One leader said, “My choice would be to just not leave. The organization’s history should not get lost and I have institutional knowledge.” Another commented, “They will have to take me out in a box!”

Many leaders recognized the need for increased staff and board development and preparedness. While there is common agreement about the need to increase board and staff diversity, many leaders are unsure of what internal changes may need to take place to make that happen.

Leaders shared concrete ideas about what could be done to better prepare their organizations and the community for their transitions and some are already in the process of working through transition planning. It was clear that the leaders interviewed hold an extraordinary amount of knowledge and expertise (430 years’ worth of experience cumulatively) and it is important for their organizations and the broader community to consider appropriate supports in the coming years of transition to ensure our local nonprofit and public service agencies remain strong.



## Next Steps

The draft report will be shared with interviewees. While the comments from each interview are confidential, they were considered in aggregate and, to the best of the authors' ability, reflected in this report without specific attribution. The interviewees will be asked whether the reflections included in the report seem to accurately portray what they shared of their experiences and perceptions regarding their peers. Comments and suggestions will be accepted. Plans for distribution of the report will be shared with the interviewees and interviewees will give permission for their names to be listed on the report.

Once the report has been reviewed by interviewees and any modifications made, a final draft will be shared with the Northern California Grantmaking Partnership and posted on the website of the Northern California Association of Nonprofits. Additionally, a media release will be distributed to local sources.

The Grantmaking Partnership will discuss the report and consider its implications given the number of leader transitions imminent and suggestions made by those interviewed. Using the report as guidance, a design team of nonprofit leaders will develop priorities for supports that could be deployed. We are confident that this report will provide valuable insight and be a catalyst for the development of succession planning assistance in the near future.



## APPENDIX A

### Interview Questions

- How long have you been with the organization?
- Will you be retiring in the next 5 years? If yes, do you have a date in mind?
- Does your board know when you are planning to retire? Does your staff?
- Has your board or staff done any transition planning, and if so, what?
- Have you personally done any planning for transition, and if so, what?
- Are you actively cultivating new leadership within your organization? If so, how?
- What do you consider the biggest barrier for you in succession planning?
- What support would be helpful to you/your organization in managing your transition and leaving your organization strong?
- Have you considered increasing [racial, social, ethnic] diversity in your staff, particularly leadership, during the process of your succession? How about for your board?
- What kind of support would be helpful toward increasing your staff diversity? Your board diversity?
- Do you know of other EDs who are near retirement or otherwise considering leaving their positions? Can you share their names? Do you think development of a peer group of these leaders would be helpful to you or them?
- Did you have a mentor in your career? After your retirement would you consider acting as a mentor either for organizations with new EDs or those in succession planning? What would motivate or incentivize you to do so?