



Potential Solutions

Problematic Practice

Organizer compensation is lower than the basic cost of living.

Sustainable Practice

Check the MIT Living Wage calculator for your area.

Make sure the lowest pay is above the cost of living for a single adult with one or two children, to cover not just immediate necessities but self-investments such as retirement savings and education.

Aspirational Practice

Consider basing pay levels on need, not only experience and responsibilities.

For example, consider moving staff with dependents, disabilities, student loans or other expenses higher in the pay range for their job title.

(Be careful not to use a protected category such as race or gender as the basis for pay or benefit differentials. Compensation differences can't cross the line into discrimination.)

Consider across-the-board raises, as in this story, to above-living-wage levels, as this nonprofit did.

Some staff compensation is lower than prevailing rates at comparable organizations.

To research others' pay for similar positions, use tools such as JVS's Job Quality Survey; "Find Salaries" on Indeed.com; National Committee on Pay Equity; the Bureau of Labor Statistics Occupational Outlooks; and meet prevailing wages, if possible.

Look beyond prevailing wages for organizers, a historically undervalued occupation, and set pay instead based on parity with other mission-essential job categories, such as development.

Years go by without raises, causing pay to fall behind the cost of living.

Give annual COLA raises equal to or exceeding the inflation rate.

If there were past years without raises, calculate how much the cost of living rose then, and adjust pay to catch up.

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Potential Solutions

Problematic Practice

Ratio between top and bottom pay grows over the years due to percentage raises.

Sustainable Practice

Give flat dollar amount raises (instead of percentage raises) to gradually reduce internal pay inequities.

Aspirational Practice

A 2:1 or 3:1 maximum ratio means that a raise for the ED requires raising the lowest paid first.

When the budget doesn't allow raises for all, prioritize the lowest paid.
Set a maximum ratio between lowest and highest pay.

Some organizations, such as the Sustainable Economies Law Center, pay all staff the same gross amount.

Pay inequity exists between jobs with comparable skill and responsibility, but typically done by different genders and/ or races.

There may also be inequities based on funding sources, nepotism, credentialism (requiring degrees unnecessarily) or other unfair reasons.

Have a clear written policy for pay levels, specifying job-related reasons for different levels, such as job responsibilities.

Aim for parity in valuing all external relations functions. Just as development staff might be rewarded for fundraising track record and relationships with donors and funders, reward organizers for community relationships, lived experience with the organization's issue(s) and for cultural roots that garner trust with community members.

Regularly compare actual compensation with the compensation policy. Immediately give raises to eliminate any unfair differences.

Do a full comparable worth audit, with help from the National Committee for Pay Equity or a pay equity consultant. Raise the pay of undervalued job titles.

Often pay ranges are not included in position postings, and compensation varies by applicants' requests. Those who negotiate higher pay tend to be highly educated white men and other self-confident people, as well as friends and family members of hiring managers.

Always put pay ranges in position postings (for both staff and contractors). Don't negotiate above the range.

In interviews, don't ask for previous pay or for pay expectations.

Decide in advance the criteria for where someone will fall in the pay range (e.g. years of experience, amount of expertise, need).

If staff size allows, two different people should do the hiring process and the final contract negotiations.

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Problematic Practice

Benefit mix doesn't meet the needs of some categories of employees, such as older staff approaching retirement, parents in need of childcare, and those with student loans.

If the employer contributes to employees' accounts (e.g. HSA, retirement, flexible benefits) on a percentage basis or matches employee contributions, that favors affluent staff.

Most small nonprofits offer no retirement accounts at all, not even empty ones where employees can make pre-tax contributions.

One reason is that EDs and other administrative staff sometimes lack the expertise in setting them up.

Interns are often exploited, with minimal or no pay, and given tasks with no educational dimension, which violates IRS rules.

While volunteers are the lifeblood of many community-based organizations, the difference between a volunteer and an intern is that volunteers are not bound to a job description or a certain schedule, but are free to choose their roles. It's unjust for anyone with specific required shifts and responsibilities not to be paid.

Compensation policy is an afterthought, undiscussed and disconnected from the organization's values and mission.

Sustainable Practice

Invite staff input into benefit plans.

Remember that it's more affordable to the employer to fund cash-like benefits (HSAs, childcare reimbursements, student loan payments, transit passes, retirement accounts) than to increase paychecks, which incur employer taxes.

Set up Health Savings Accounts (HSAs) and commuting cost accounts as allowed by the IRS, so that employees can contribute money pre-tax.

Check out Just Futures' user-friendly 401(k) plan for the nonprofit sector with social-justice-oriented investments (currently in process).

Set up retirement accounts even if the employer doesn't contribute, so that staff can contribute pre-tax.

Pay student interns at least the amount that the organization believes the minimum wage should be (e.g. \$16/hour), unless their college pays them.

Make sure interns get an educational experience, as required by law.

If the organization provides stipends or expense reimbursements to some volunteers or board members, consider a needs-based sliding scale so low-income people get more.

Build in regular discussions of overall compensation practices, such as at annual retreats. Don't wait for organizers and other staff and contractors to complain, but proactively notice inflation and inequities.

Aspirational Practice

Explore variable needs-based benefits, as ERISA allows. Use flexible benefits plans (see Roadmap report for suggestions) to best meet individual staff needs.

Affluent employees with no qualifying needs could voluntarily decline to draw on their accounts.

Make employer contributions to benefits and retirement accounts at a flat per-employee level.

Investing in organizers and other staff means supporting their long-term futures by substantial retirement contributions, without requiring a staff match.

Compare types of retirement accounts (401(k), SEP, SIMPLE and state-facilitated plans); choose one with socially screened investments that doesn't burden employees with high fees.

Set up retirement accounts to allow bigger contributions by older workers closer to retirement, legal as long as they don't favor higher-paid staff.

Consider creating fellowships with educational programming as well as work responsibilities, paid at entry-level professional levels.

The board can set an aspirational goal for future, e.g. "We aim to pay within the top 20% of our field, so we can recruit and retain the best diverse talent."