

"Research Sabbatical Gives Charity Leaders Time to Pursue Fresh Ideas." Chronicle of Philanthropy 19.17 (June 14, 2007): NA. Academic OneFile. Thomson Gale. University of Texas at Austin. 25 June 2007

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Julian Huerta can't imagine taking months off from his job at Foundation Communities, an Austin, Tex., charity that develops low-cost housing and provides services to homeless families.

"Being away for long periods of time doesn't seem worth it," he says. "The work piles up and I'm more stressed when I return."

But Mr. Huerta, his group's director of community services, did benefit from a shorter break, one that allowed him to escape the demands of the office but also acquire knowledge to help his charity carry out its mission more effectively.

He participated in a sabbatical research program offered by the Humanities Institute at the University of Texas at Austin. The program pays for nonprofit executives to take up to 160 hours of paid time off. The grant recipients are supposed to use the time off to pursue job-related ideas and questions too expansive to be dealt with during the regular work week.

"My research project was to look at best practices around the country for providing housing and supportive services for homeless families and kids, and to decide which could be applicable to Austin and our organization," Mr. Huerta says.

With a grant of \$5,000, he was able to take two separate weeklong trips to Seattle and New York to visit and interview groups that provide housing and services to homeless people there. In addition, for three months, Mr. Huerta spent Fridays at the university library, conducting further research on how other organizations help homeless families. Along the way, he received guidance from two university faculty advisers, one an architect and another a social worker.

Although, Mr. Huerta says, the efforts to integrate housing and other services for the homeless that he examined don't easily translate to Austin's social and political environment, he believes

his research will ultimately help Foundation Communities refresh its approach to helping its clients.

### 'From the Ground Up'

The idea for the Community Sabbatical Research Leave Program was first broached by Austin-area nonprofit leaders at a 2004 conference hosted by the university's Humanities Institute.

"The idea definitely came from the ground up, from these leaders saying they needed an opportunity for research and capacity building," says Katy Young, a spokeswoman for the Humanities Institute, which joined forces with the university graduate school's Professional Development and Community Engagement Program to offer the grant.

Six grants were awarded in 2005, and three more were given last year. So far, all grants have been for \$5,000 apiece (covering 160 hours of leave) although grants are also available for nonprofit leaders seeking half that amount of time and money.

Grantees have included a legal-aid lawyer, who used his research time to develop a Spanish-language course for his peers working with Spanish-speaking clients, and an expert in sexual-assault prevention, who quantified the financial consequences of the crime on the state as a way to spur public awareness.

"In many cases, we are hearing back from grantees that their research sabbaticals have enabled significant changes in the work they do," says Ms. Young.

She notes, for instance, that a recipient used her time off to write a plan to help other localities copy an after-school program she founded in Austin; now versions of her program have been started in other Texas cities.

"There's something unique about the nonprofit world, a big level of guilt for wanting to take time off," Ms. Young notes, which may make traditional sabbatical leave a hard sell for potential grantees as well as potential grant makers. "Our sabbatical provides a good balance, enabling leaders to take time away from the office but still to contribute strongly to the organization and its long-term viability."