

Your Guide to Going Green in Nonprofit Operations



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The global Covid pandemic led many nonprofit teams to think anew about the possibilities associated with remote work. Many teams concluded that some roles would be fulfilled by remote staff for the indefinite future. A small percentage of organizations went fully virtual.

How much of a factor was your carbon footprint in those discussions?

Even if environmental impact hasn't been a major consideration in decisions related to where your staff live and work, our world's changing climate will increasingly make the environment more of a factor in decision-making. Now is a great time to factor environmental considerations into your thinking about the staffing and delivery of key programs.

Improving energy efficiency can help nonprofits lower operating costs, free up resources to advance their core missions, be good environmental stewards in their communities, and improve the health and wellness of employees, volunteers, and people who use their services, [according to the Environmental and Energy Study Institute](#).

In some cases, your organization may already be doing things that make your operations greener, like enabling remote and hybrid work options that reduce or eliminate employee commutes. Environmental awareness might simply require you to bring a new lens to discussions your nonprofit is already having.

Here are some steps your nonprofit can take to become greener and more energy-efficient.

Facilities

If you're making decisions now about whether to buy or rent buildings for your nonprofit's future needs, apply a climate lens to those decisions.

Assess the costs and benefits of having a physical space, including environmental ones.

- Reflect on the expected levels and frequency of in-person activity your programs require.
- Evaluate whether a remote or hybrid model could lower your organization's carbon footprint and

strengthen employee retention without reducing access to services for your clients and community.

- Explore options, including downside risks and upside opportunities for shared space in existing buildings. Could you co-locate with a partner, open an office at a coworking space, or hold in-person programs at a community center?

If you need a physical space, consider environmental considerations in choosing the location.

- Look for buildings that are well-served by public transit or in walking distance of communities you serve to minimize the environmental impact of staff and clients traveling there.
- Seek locations that are near key partners or vendors when possible, to decrease travel times.
- Explore options for using or constructing environmentally friendly buildings, such as LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification.
- Consider options for using or producing renewable energy, from solar panels to tapping into wind or solar energy through the grid.

If you own or rent a building you'd like to make more environmentally friendly, consider these options from the Environmental and Energy Study Institute.

- Programmable thermostats can save on energy when a facility is empty.
- Consider replacing incandescent and fluorescent bulbs with high-efficiency LEDs.
- Replace damaged insulation and seal air leaks around windows and doors.
- Consider whole-building retrofits like high-efficiency HVAC systems. If you're investing in a new building or need to replace a system, these may cost more up front but save money in the long run.

Travel/Transportation

[About 90% of the carbon emissions from business trips](#) come from air travel, and many nonprofits have set targets to reduce their environmental impact. Here are some ways to do that when members of your organization's team travel, based on NRMCC research and [information from Columbia Climate School](#).

- Consider driving as an alternative to short-haul flights.
 - Pay attention to the details: A solo business traveler who drives might produce more carbon emissions than they would if they booked a single seat on a short flight.
- Encourage your team to choose accommodations close to your meeting, and walk or take public transportation if possible.
- When you can, travel at times of milder temperatures and less air pollution.
- Keep travel plans flexible. Consider alternative routes, transportation modes and accommodations in case of delays or emergencies.
- Buy refundable tickets.
- Support the economy by choosing locally owned restaurants and accommodations.

Fleet Management

If your nonprofit has a fleet, spend some time thinking about your transportation needs in the context of climate change. By 2030, electric cars will represent 60 percent of vehicles sold in the United States, China, and the European Union, [according to the International Energy Agency](#). As electric cars and hybrid gas-electric vehicles grow in popularity, they bring fleet managers new opportunities and challenges. Here are some things the [U.S. Department of Energy recommends considering](#) as you evaluate what kind of vehicles to buy. If you go electric, federal, state and local incentives could help offset the cost.

Things to consider when assessing vehicle needs:

1. How far will your nonprofit drive its vehicles?
2. Will you mostly drive the vehicles on highways, or in stop-and-go city traffic?
 - A battery-powered electric vehicle may be suited to drives of 100 to 300 miles a day, with the option to plug in at night.
3. What environmental factors must your vehicles stand up to? Temperatures, terrain?
4. How and where do you plan to charge your vehicle, and how much will that cost?
5. What is the dealer's battery replacement policy? How much will batteries likely cost?
6. Are enough of the vehicles available to meet your needs? What vehicle maintenance and support options exist, and can the vehicles be serviced locally?

Operations

Almost every aspect of your nonprofit's operations uses environmental resources. There are many ways to minimize that environmental impact with care. Here are some opportunities.

- Use energy-efficient appliances and office equipment.
- Offer your staff incentives to use public transportation or bike to work. Transit accounts allow your employees to set aside money on a pretax basis to pay for eligible transit expenses.
- Take part in community programs to recycle paper, plastics, glass, metals, and any other materials you can.
- Reduce paper use by making documentation and communications digital when possible.
- Buy office supplies and products that use recyclable and sustainable materials.
- Work with local vendors and suppliers when possible to decrease transportation emissions and benefit your local economy.
- Create an internal committee to spearhead green initiatives and involve the staff in sustainable practices.
- Consider emissions in your organization's information technology approach, including AI. Data centers use enormous amounts of water, and [ChatGPT's daily power use has been estimated](#) as nearly equal to that of 180,000 U.S. households.

You Can't Do Everything, But Everyone Can Do Something

Doing your part to make your nonprofit's operations and facilities greener in the face of climate change will take time. We recommend you tackle this challenge in phases. You could pick one area of focus from this article and dive in. Or, if you already have a scheduled facilities review or overhaul of your travel policies, it makes sense to start there.

Don't feel like you must do everything yourself. Almost every nonprofit has staff members or volunteers with a passion for contributing to a healthier planet. They may have unique skills and talents to bring to this work—like a process-oriented approach that could help you set up a recycling program, or an engineering background that could help you evaluate facilities. Put out a call for staff members interested in helping your organization go greener, and you might be surprised what you find. Their involvement in something they're excited about could mean they stay with your team longer.

Make sure to give volunteers for your green team resources, support, and feedback. No one wants to supply a lot of ideas that disappear into the ether. Together, identify things you can do to make your operations greener, and do them well. The process should bond your team together and make you more informed citizens of the nonprofit sector—and the world.

Rachel Sams is Lead Consultant and Editor at the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She is EV-curious but, as a resident of the West with its long distances between population centers, experiences range anxiety. Reach her with thoughts and questions about going green in nonprofit operations at rachel@nonprofitrisk.org or (505) 456-4045.