

Servant Leadership

An Interview with Beth Rusnock,
President, National Life Group Foundation

EDITORS' NOTE Beth Rusnock assumed her current post in 2011. Rusnock, who joined National Life Group in 2006, led the company's corporate branding initiative and both life insurance and annuity marketing. Prior to joining National Life Group she worked for ING in both Connecticut and Pennsylvania.



Beth Rusnock

FOUNDATION BRIEF For almost 170 years, National Life (nationallife.com) has worked hard to deliver on its promises to millions of people with a vision of providing peace of mind in times of need. It's the company's cause, stemming from a deep passion to live its values to do good, be good and make good, every day.

Since its inception in 2006, the goal of the National Life Group Foundation is to do good in communities across America with a focus on Vermont and Texas where the company is based.

Will you discuss how critical purpose is to National Life Group's culture?

We have been purpose-driven since 1848 when the company was established. Under the leadership of Mehran Assadi, our current Chairman, CEO and President, we have taken a servant leadership approach. This brought us together to focus on a common purpose and cause.

At National Life, we fall back on our mission, our vision and our values. Our vision is to bring peace of mind to everyone we touch; our mission is keeping our promises; and our values are to do good, be good and make good.

Over the past few years, we've learned that clarity of mission, vision and values makes it much easier for those who work for and with us to come together and understand where their due north is.

At the heart of our organization, our vision and what I think of as our purpose is to bring peace of mind to everyone we touch. This goes for our policy owners, for our agents, for those in our community, and for each other as we work together.

Interestingly, although not surprisingly, when we all focused on our purpose and our engine really began to hum, we then began to experience double-digit growth in a flat industry, and that has held true for the past six years.

How closely is the company tied to the Foundation and is there crossover between the two?

All donations go through the National Life Group Foundation. The Foundation was only established in 2006, although National Life had been doing good well before then.

For example, in 1992, there was a major flood in Montpelier, where we're headquartered. Many small businesses in downtown Montpelier were completely flooded. National Life sent representatives from the company out in boats to give business owners a check to help them get back on their feet.

The company also installed solar panels on our roof and more recently on our adjacent Vermont property. Plus, we have a biomass boiler and use other opportunities to go green like encouraging the use of alternative transportation.

The good the company does and the good the Foundation does go hand in hand.

How critical is it that the areas the Foundation supports align with the business or are those areas driven by employee interests?

Both. The Foundation focuses primarily on kids and families. The rationale for that is in our business, we feel we protect families from the unexpected in life.

It seemed natural to have our core focus be on nonprofits that help kids and families. That's roughly 60 percent of our support. We even expanded our commitment this year by announcing we want to lead an effort in Vermont to end childhood hunger in collaboration with other funders, nonprofits and businesses. The fact that we doubled our Foundation's budget in 2018 will help us jump start this initiative.

The other 40 percent of our giving is everything else, including education, the environment, arts and recreation, and health and human services. We have a community giving campaign where we match our employees' donations to their nonprofits of choice up to \$1,500 annually. They can choose any nonprofit they like.

We have many team members who are generous and care a lot about certain causes. We want to support this generosity and help them do good too.

We also provide 40 hours paid volunteer time for our employees every year and encourage them to take that. Many times there is a nice alignment with the nonprofits we support with grants since they also often need volunteer support. Many of our employees volunteer at those nonprofits.

How important is it for the Foundation to have clear metrics in place to track impact?

In our business, metrics are important across the board. We track the Foundation and our philanthropic activities closely. This includes everything from measuring volunteer hours that our employees log to the amount we have given nonprofits.

Our community giving campaign, for instance, lasts from November to December. This past year, our employees donated \$200,000 to their nonprofits and we matched that. When we first started this campaign, employees donated \$18,000. It's critical for us to see this kind of growth and activity. We've discovered that, while we're incredibly pleased with the growth and the program over the past four years, the question is about how we measure success.

Many of the nonprofits we work with are using a Results Based Accountability model, and we're starting to look at this model as well.

How important is it to communicate the Foundation's work with National Life's employees?

We think it's incredibly critical to communicate our engagement with nonprofits to our employees.

We regularly share details with them about the impact our Foundation has as well as the programs we have that do good for others. These include LifeChanger of the Year, which recognizes and rewards school employees, Do Good Tours, which are stops throughout the country led by local agents and support nonprofits in their communities, and our Do Good Fest, which is the music festival held on our back lawn. Last year, we had 7,500 people join us to enjoy fabulous music, local food trucks, stroll through our nonprofit village, and take in the gorgeous Vermont sunset. Over the past four years, we've raised almost \$100,000 for the cancer patient fund at our local hospital through the Do Good Fest.

All the programs I mentioned are not only communicated to our employees, but are typically supported by them. For example, the Do Good Fest is managed and run by our employees who aren't event planners but do an amazing job bringing the day together.

What we found was that when employees know that the companies they work for care about their communities, those are the companies people want to work for. These are also companies people want to buy from.

If a company says they really care about their communities, they need to show it. National Life is one of those companies that can deliberately, repeatedly and honestly demonstrate that we do good. ●