

ANNUAL HIGHLIGHTS

2023 PETER & ELIZABETH
TOWER FOUNDATION



DEAR FRIEND,

As much as we may have craved a back-to-normal year in 2023, at the Tower Foundation we didn't want to entirely move on from the recent lessons stemming from racial violence and a worldwide pandemic. We tried to keep issues relating to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in front of the Board and staff. In practical terms, this was reflected in a DEI Learning Network consisting of both grant partners and funders, continuing analysis of applicant demographic data in the interest of making our grantmaking more equitable, and an invitation to community members to join program staff in the grant review process.

So many nonprofits in our funding communities impressed us with the ingenuity, flexibility, and perseverance with which they have weathered the pandemic and its still uncertain aftermath. We tried to honor that by trusting our grant partners to know best what they need to flourish, and by initiating a general operating grant program that awards nonrestricted funds over a five-year period. In that same spirit, this year's Annual Highlights shines a light on partnerships that have spanned many years. At the Tower Foundation, we have been witness to good ideas evolving into strong programs, sustained by funding collaboratives and even legislative action. Here, we celebrate many of these stories.

We would also like to celebrate the contributions to the Foundation of John Byrnes, longtime Trustee and Tower family member, who died last year of pancreatic cancer. From the Foundation's earliest days, John was a passionate advocate for young children, believing that all could thrive with access to quality supports and services. We hope that we honor John's passion in our continuing work.

So, here's to John and to partners old and new in 2024 and beyond.



Tracy A. Sawicki
Executive Director

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This year's Annual Highlights showcases some of the Tower Foundation's longest partnerships, our grant partners' evolution, and the ways the Foundation has evolved alongside them.

FEATURED ARTWORK

As a prolific painter, Elizabeth C. Tower loved everything about art—exploring it, talking about it, and spending time with those who make it. Her artwork was exhibited frequently throughout the 1960s and 1970s but rarely available commercially. Her work, displayed above and on the cover, is also featured on the Foundation’s website at TheTowerFoundation.org.

Elizabeth C. Tower (1920–2013), *Table with Window*, c. late 1960s, Oil on canvas, 15" x 12"



As grantmaker, partner, and advocate, the Tower Foundation strengthens organizations and works to change systems to improve the lives of young people with learning disabilities, mental illness, substance use disorders, and intellectual disabilities.

NATIONAL CENTER ON YOUTH PREVENTION, TREATMENT, AND RECOVERY



We've been familiar with Dr. John Kelly's work in the prevention field for a while. In 2011, Dr. Kelly, professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, joined a Tower Foundation Board of Trustees meeting to share an overview of the treatment and recovery landscape for youth with substance use challenges.

Dr. Kelly told us then that 90% of adults with addiction start their substance use before the age of 18, and 50% before the age of 15. With effective, earlier intervention, later problems could be headed off at the pass. In May 2022, the Tower Foundation cemented a partnership with Dr. Kelly through a three-year grant of \$1.75 million to establish a center, under his direction, that would be affiliated with Massachusetts General Hospital. The National Center on Youth Prevention, Treatment, and Recovery was born.

The Center's goals include:

- Serving as a supporting hub for youth-focused treatment research. This will include a 15-year longitudinal study of individuals on a recovery path.
- Coordinating an annual conference exploring the latest developments in prevention, treatment, and recovery. In 2024, the Center will host the first national conference of its kind in over a decade in Baltimore, Maryland.
- Training and technical assistance for treatment and recovery providers.
- Serving as a reliable source of information on the state of research and best practices. The Center recently launched a new website (www.youthrecoveryanswers.org) to support this goal.

SUPPORTING SUBSTANCE USE PREVENTION AND RECOVERY

PX21 PREVENTION COALITION

For more than 10 years, the Tower Foundation has supported the work of Prevention for the 21st Century (Px21). Px21 is a coalition of seven prevention service providers based in Erie County, New York, as well as other partner organizations, including the Erie County Department of Mental Health and the Institute for Community Health Promotion at Buffalo State University.

Originally convened in 2009 to spearhead Erie County's prevention plan, Px21's members have continued their collaboration to advance the work of the prevention field through collective impact approaches.



The group has conducted several community substance use surveys, hosted regional prevention training events, collaborated on prevention messaging campaigns, and coordinated service delivery across member organizations.

Primarily targeting youth up to age 25, Px21's mission is to "build healthier individuals, families, and communities in Western New

York utilizing prevention science.” A Tower Foundation grant in 2013 helped build capacity in the fledgling organization by supporting data collection, testing media strategies, and offering training opportunities for prevention professionals in the community.

Several subsequent grants have helped Px21 by:

- Supporting development and execution of community surveys.
- Helping to launch Px21’s signature public awareness campaign, Talk it Over. The campaign, started in 2013, prompts parents to talk to their children about substance use while offering strategies to make these interactions more impactful.
- Supporting media buys and a range of messaging strategies (print, radio, tv, social media).
- Helping to launch environmental prevention campaigns targeting parent-child communications with themes such as mental health and marijuana legalization.



7

Learning Network Events in 2023

300+

attendees from Western New York and across the state

ENHANCING EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES

LIFTOFF: BUILDING SUPPORT FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEM REFORM

“People are seeing the gains we’re making toward a more equitable early childhood system. Year after year, more people are showing up to support reforms to fix this broken system because they want to make a difference in the lives of young children across the state.”

Rachel Bonsignore
Director, Liftoff Western New York

Liftoff Western New York is an Aligned Action Network of more than 30 funders addressing the biggest challenges facing Western New York’s early childhood system. Liftoff works with its community partners to connect children and families with developmental resources, accessible and affordable child care, and transportation assistance. The organization’s goal is to ensure all children are meeting critical milestones and reaching their full potential by the time they begin kindergarten.

[Continue the story](#)

ENHANCING EARLY CHILDHOOD SERVICES

POSITIVE EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING SKILLS (PEDALS)



In 2012, the Tower Foundation, working with the Health Foundation for Western & Central New York, launched PEDALS (Positive Emotional Development and Learning Skills). The program deploys coaches to early childhood programs to effectively implement and support the Second Step social emotional curriculum, to build teachers' skills in classroom management, and support child development by better identifying children with needs and connecting families with appropriate supports. Subsequent grants to the program have supported regional expansion, new implementation tools, and adaptations to the program model.

Now in its 12th year, PEDALS has:

- Benefited over 40,000 children in 820 classrooms.
- Trained over 1,700 early childhood professionals.
- Spread to Southeast Michigan and expanded its footprint in Western and Central New York.
- Adopted the Simple Interactions tool, developed by the Fred Rogers Institute, for strengthening bonds between children and caring adults in their lives.

OUR DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION (DEI) WORK

FEATURES OF OUR DEI WORK IN 2023



DEI LEARNING NETWORK

Since the fall of 2020, the Tower Foundation has convened a group of nonprofit grant partners to join Tower staff in a collaborative, peer-driven learning process focused on integrating DEI within their organizations in meaningful and sustainable ways. This began as a one-time invitation to participate in a virtual, equity-focused conference, but quickly, based on enthusiastic participant feedback, transitioned into an ongoing learning network that has convened regularly for three years. In the fall of 2023, the Tower Foundation brought the network together for a two-day retreat in Beverly, Massachusetts to give members a chance to connect, reflect, and deepen their practice.

This network has come to be essential to our equity journey, reinforcing for us how important equity is to the work of our grant partners. It has also helped us sharpen our facilitating and convening skills. In 2024 we will launch a new DEI learning cohort to engage new grant partners.



EXPLORING INTERSECTIONALITY

For several years at the Tower Foundation, we've thought about how multiple identities and individual circumstances both complicate and enrich our understanding of the people and communities that we work with. The notion of “dual diagnosis” led us to recognize that many young people with intellectual disabilities also face mental health challenges, or that young people living with mental health conditions are prone to turn to drugs and alcohol to deal with those challenges. But the recent, intensified national conversation about structural racism is pushing us to look at more intersectional realities. Racism and other “isms” used to divide and marginalize groups and individuals also intersect with our primary funding areas (intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, mental illness, and substance use disorders).

In November 2023, the Tower Foundation hosted an online conversation about the intersection of youth incarceration and substance use. Panelists representing several of our grant partners were invited to discuss the ways in which their work



with recently incarcerated youth is affected by substance use within this population. Rates of substance use disorder are significantly higher among incarcerated youth, and that has real implications for the people and agencies working to reduce recidivism and help formerly incarcerated youth successfully reintegrate in their communities. Additional webinars exploring intersectionality are planned for 2024.



95

Western New York social impact leaders reached since 2022

BUILDING THE NEXT GENERATION OF COMMUNITY LEADERS

INSTITUTE FOR NONPROFIT PRACTICE: DEVELOPING TOMORROW'S SOCIAL IMPACT LEADERS

“Barry was determined to make sure that social impact leaders had the necessary skills, robust networks, and were representative of the people they served, so that they were equipped to rise in their leadership and transform communities.”

Yolanda Coentro

President and CEO, Institute for Nonprofit Practice

The Institute for Nonprofit Practice (INP) was founded by Barry Dym, PhD, in 2007 to provide management and leadership development to current and future nonprofit sector leaders, fueling a more effective, connected, equitable, and diverse social impact sector. Growing from a 13-person cohort of Boston-area nonprofit leaders to a national organization with thousands of graduates, INP operates in cities around the country, including those within the Tower Foundation’s footprint in Massachusetts and Western New York. The Tower Foundation began supporting INP in 2010, a partnership that continues to this day.

Continue the story

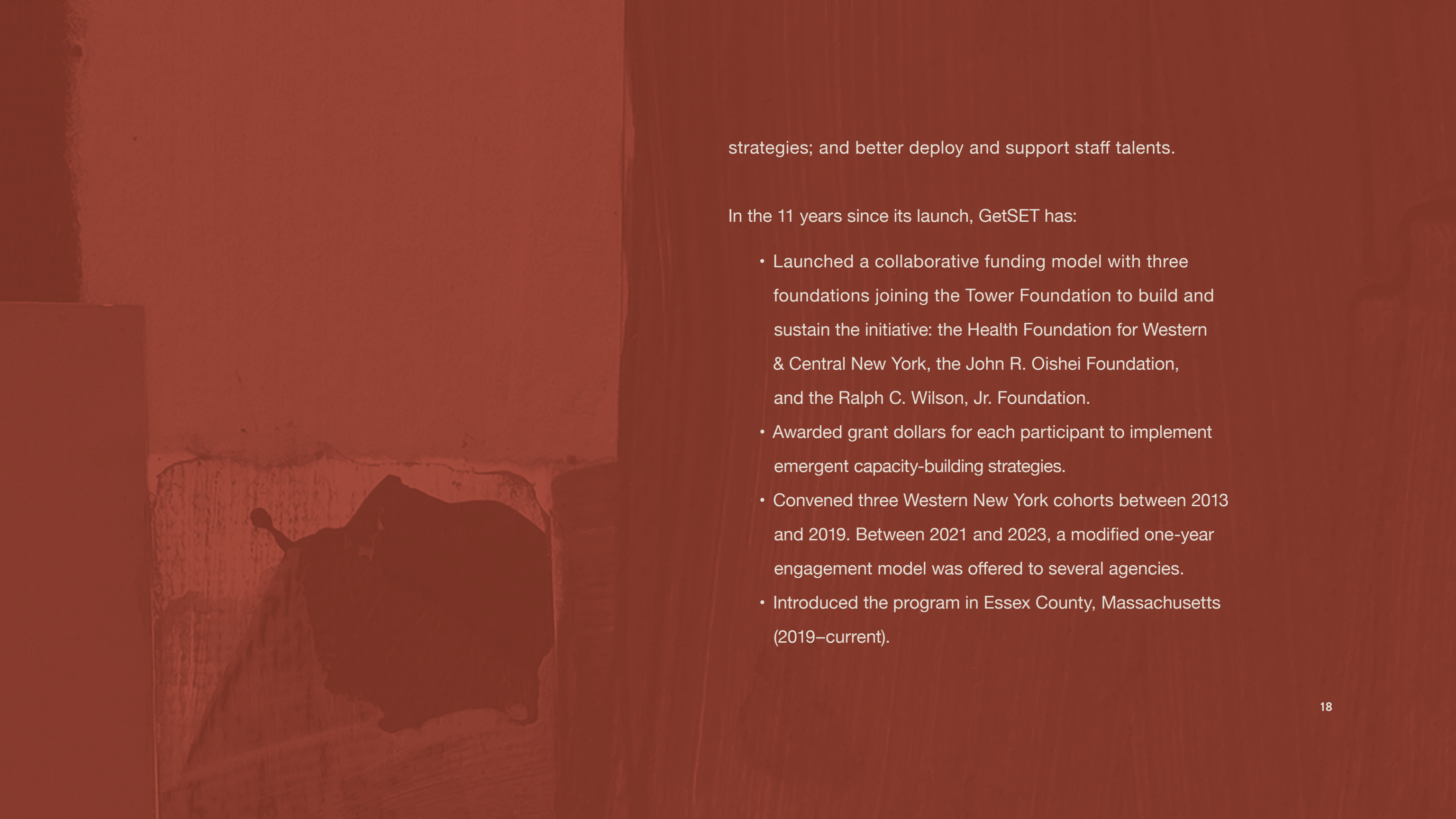
A person is seen climbing a dark, textured rock face. The person is positioned in the lower-left quadrant of the image, with their body angled upwards and to the right. They are wearing a dark shirt and light-colored pants. The rock face is composed of large, irregular blocks, and the overall scene is set against a dark, reddish-brown background.

BUILDING THE NEXT GENERATION OF COMMUNITY LEADERS

GETSET: SUCCESS IN EXTRAORDINARY TIMES

The Tower Foundation is an original funder of the GetSET initiative. Involved since the launch of GetSET in 2013, the Tower Foundation has helped connect more than 27 agencies in the health and human services sector to this two-year, cohort-based program that builds organizational capacity in the face of shifting service delivery demands and fiscal environments.

Participants receive individualized coaching, complete an organizational assessment, develop improvement plans, and come together with six to eight peer organizations for a range of collaborative learning opportunities. Program evaluators have found that participants sharpen their mission statements and value propositions; demonstrate stronger leadership at executive and board levels (board representation is required for each participant); plan successfully for new management



strategies; and better deploy and support staff talents.

In the 11 years since its launch, GetSET has:

- Launched a collaborative funding model with three foundations joining the Tower Foundation to build and sustain the initiative: the Health Foundation for Western & Central New York, the John R. Oishei Foundation, and the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation.
- Awarded grant dollars for each participant to implement emergent capacity-building strategies.
- Convened three Western New York cohorts between 2013 and 2019. Between 2021 and 2023, a modified one-year engagement model was offered to several agencies.
- Introduced the program in Essex County, Massachusetts (2019–current).

OUR COMMITMENT TO PARTICIPATORY PHILANTHROPY

At the Tower Foundation, we made our first foray into participatory philanthropy five years ago when we invited seven young adults living with disabilities to offer feedback on grant applications that were under consideration. We came to understand pretty quickly that the insights of young people with lived expertise in our funding areas are critical to our grantmaking, and that we needed a broader range of voices at the table with us.

In 2023 we advanced our participatory grantmaking agenda on two fronts: The Community Experts Team and our Community Grant Consultants.

COMMUNITY EXPERTS TEAM

2023 marked the second consecutive year in which our Community Experts Team spearheaded an independent, member-crafted grant initiative, the Community Experts Fund. To date, \$415,000 has

been awarded to 21 agencies. In 2024, we will convene a group of young adults for a six-month grantmaking program. Team members come from our funding areas in Western New York and Eastern Massachusetts, bringing insights gained from lived experience in the Tower Foundation's funding areas (mental health, intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, and substance use disorders). Team members, generally 18 to 30 years old, have included students, peer mentors, participants in youth leadership programs, and both staff and clients of Tower Foundation grant partners. The Community Experts Team comes together, largely over Zoom, to explore the group's funding interests, build a custom request for proposals, run a competitive grant cycle, and award a slate of grants to community-based nonprofits in our funding areas.

COMMUNITY GRANT CONSULTANTS

In 2023, we invited two community members with lived expertise in the Tower Foundation's funding areas to join the grant review

PARTICIPATORY PHILANTHROPY

is a practice that explicitly includes the participation of community members with lived expertise in a relevant issue area (non-funders) and shifts power from traditional foundation decision-makers to participants during any part of the philanthropy process and in the organization more generally, including strategy, planning, design, grantmaking, implementation, communications, fundraising, and/or evaluation.

Participatory Philanthropy may include a variety of approaches to participation at different stages of the philanthropy cycle and includes Participatory Grantmaking as one approach.

process for the second of two Programs & Services grant cycles.

Catherine Baz and Phillip Mason, our first Community Grant Consultants, reviewed grant proposals alongside Tower Foundation Program Officers, essentially working as extensions of the Foundation's staff. The Community Grant Consultant role has helped us integrate participatory grantmaking philosophy into our day-to-day grantmaking.

The Community Grant Consultants participated in an orientation, independently reviewed every grant received, and joined staff for several hours of group discussion, concluding with group consensus about which grant applicants to invite to complete a full proposal.

Having community members in the room provided new perspectives on both individual applications and the process as a whole.

Ultimately, the 2023 review process resulted in \$1.1 million awarded to 13 nonprofits.

IMPROVING ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH CARE

PROJECT TEACH: TRANSFORMING PEDIATRIC MENTAL HEALTH CARE IN WESTERN NEW YORK

“By having the primary care doctor closely involved, we start to look at mental health issues just like we’d look at diabetes or another significant health concern. It helps to destigmatize mental health. There is no health without mental health.”

David Kaye, MD
Executive Director, Project TEACH

Initially supported by the Tower Foundation to expand access for children’s mental health services in Western New York, the Rapid Pediatric Psychiatric Consultation program laid the foundation for Project TEACH, a state-wide program that provides psychiatric expertise to health care clinicians, helping them meet the mental health needs of their pediatric and perinatal patients. Now funded by New York State Office of Mental Health, this innovative program provides mental health education, consultations, patient evaluations, and referral assistance to help clinicians respond to their patients’ mental health needs in the primary care setting.



[Continue the story](#)



IMPROVING ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH CARE

HEALTH LAW ADVOCATES: MENTAL HEALTH ACCESS *BEFORE* CHILDREN END UP IN THE JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEM

“The kids’ mental health system is complex. There are many different parts of the system that are supposed to help kids, whether it’s a school system, a state agency, or their insurance plan. Fortunately, our lawyers have a very specialized expertise to help families navigate it.”

Matt Selig, JD

Executive Director, Health Law Advocates

94%

of families in the Mental Health Advocacy Program for Kids reported facing barriers to mental health care like bureaucratic delays and insufficient transportation options.

40%

of children in the Mental Health Advocacy Program for Kids have been hospitalized for psychiatric challenges, and 39% have been seen by a crisis team.

Health Law Advocates (HLA) is a nonprofit public interest firm providing pro bono legal services for low-income Massachusetts residents who need help accessing or paying for medical services. The organization is committed to ensuring access to high-quality care, particularly for those who are most at risk due to such factors as race, gender, disability, age, or geographic location. Through its Mental Health Advocacy Program for Kids (MHAP for Kids), HLA connects young people with timely and appropriate mental health services.

[Continue the story](#)

IMPROVING ACCESS
TO MENTAL HEALTH CARE

ERIE COUNTY ANTI-STIGMA COALITION

In the fall of 2015, a coalition of 16 Erie County, New York-based behavioral health providers, agencies, and funders began to take shape. The group, coming together as the Erie County Anti-Stigma Coalition, dedicated itself to addressing the negative perceptions that so many continue to have about mental health challenges and people who face them.

Tower Foundation staff were at the table in an advisory role from the coalition's first meetings. In fact, the meetings were often around our boardroom table. Following a contribution of \$10,000 in seed funding to support planning for the campaign, the Tower Foundation



awarded a two-year grant of \$200,000, joining the Patrick P. Lee Foundation and the Erie County Department of Mental Health as lead funders. Subsequent grants to the Coalition, still active in 2024, supported its media campaigns, research on local public perceptions related to stigma, and general operations.

Ongoing Coalition work includes:

- A public awareness campaign, Join the Conversation, launched in 2017. The campaign shares stories about living with mental health challenges through social media, television, radio, and local convenings.

- A website (www.letstalkstigma.org) featuring conversations with people about their mental health conditions, local resources, events, and an online pledge to end stigma. Over 4,000 people have taken the pledge.
- A series of Facebook Live events exploring mental health issues. Recent topics include Older Adults and Depression, Influential Voices in the Black Community Talk about Mental Health and Stigma, and Mental Health Challenges of the LGBTQ+ Community. Facebook Live events in 2023 had a total of 186,785 views.
- Surveys, beginning in 2016 and repeated as recently as 2023, gauged public attitudes towards stigma. The surveys have demonstrated some improvement in public perception. In 2023, 82% of respondents agreed that mental illness is not a sign of personal weakness (a 10-point gain from 2020).
- Recent expansion to a Niagara County, New York audience, supported by a New York State Office of Mental Health grant.



INVESTING IN EDUCATORS

POWER OF PLACE: CREATING CULTURES OF BELONGING IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

“When educators come together in a non-judgmental space, they can more easily engage in work that requires vulnerability and openness. Our theory of change is that when educators make the commitment to continuous learning, students will too.”

Jane Feinberg, PhD
Founder and Executive Director, Power of Place

Power of Place Learning Communities, originally a project of Full Frame Communications, took shape in 2018 to empower educators to better support all students, regardless of how they learn. Power of Place grew from relationships first formed in 2013 when the Tower Foundation joined a network of social entrepreneurs and funders that had come together under the Reimagine Learning Fund, a broad collaborative supported by venture philanthropy advocate New Profit. Reimagine Learning set out to generate new strategies for educating complex learners across the country.

20 School Districts

150+ Schools

69,000+ Students

[Continue the story](#)

INVESTING IN EDUCATORS

NIAGARA UNIVERSITY EARLY CHILDHOOD INITIATIVES



It all started in 2010 with a three-year grant to deploy a team that would help daycare facilities and early childhood educators across Niagara County, New York. Goals of the work included making early child care environments more welcoming, more age-appropriate, and more conducive to learning and skill development.

Coaches drawn from Niagara University's College of Education worked with 30 child care centers to assess classroom environments and instructional resources, enhance culture and teaching approaches, and improve the school readiness of children transitioning to kindergarten and preschool programs. Center classrooms were assessed using the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale and received grant dollars for new classroom resources and learning materials.

Every year since this initial grant, the Tower Foundation has supported expansion of this work (now under the auspices of Niagara University's Levesque Institute) to include educator and parent training programs. The Grigg Lewis Foundation and the

2023 GRANTS AWARDED

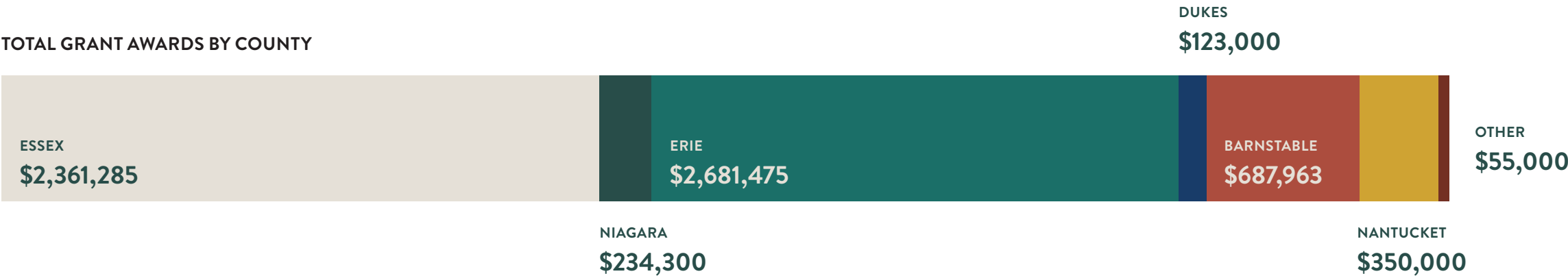
2023 GRANTS AWARDED

Visit TheTowerFoundation.org to explore grant recipients, program areas, and areas served.

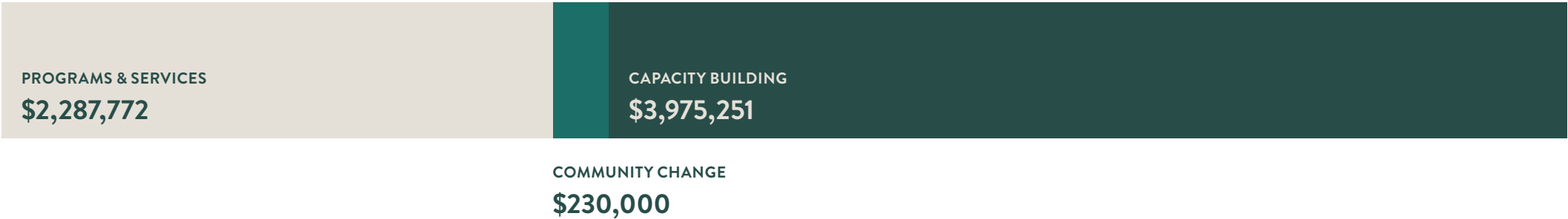
TOTAL GRANT AWARDS BY STATE

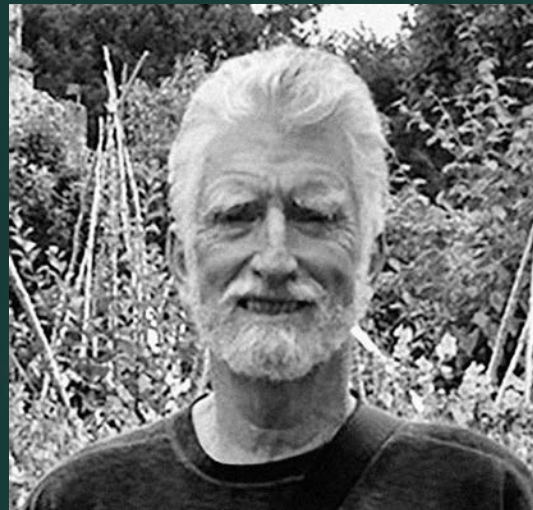


TOTAL GRANT AWARDS BY COUNTY



TOTAL GRANT AWARDS BY PORTFOLIO





John H. Byrnes

November 13, 1943—November 9, 2023

This year's Annual Highlights is dedicated to John Byrnes, longtime Tower Foundation trustee, Tower family member, and tireless advocate for young children. John's passion will guide and inspire the Tower Foundation's work to ensure all young people can thrive for years to come.



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TheTowerFoundation.org

