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A QUARTERLY UPDATE FOR *OUR* ESSENTIAL PARTNERS | SUMMER 2026

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EP in the News!

SORRY, OUR GUN POLICY DIALOGUES ARE NOT CLICK BAIT!



In today's public sphere—whether scrolling through social media or browsing the news—it's nearly impossible to escape content designed to deepen our national divide. Headlines and captions like "Lib Destroyed" or "MAGA Humiliated" offer quick outrage,

but they do nothing productive. **These viral "gotcha" moments don't change minds, heal communities, or build bipartisan policy.** They simply trick us into believing we are far more divided than we actually are.

Making space to recognize what we share in common may be less click-worthy, but it is the only way forward if we want a functioning democracy that can address our biggest challenges.

According to data from Pew Research Center, Americans agree on more issues than media and politics might suggest—even on some of today's most hot-button issues.

When it comes to Criminal Justice Reform, for instance, the public debate often frames this as a rigid choice between "law and order" and systemic reform. But majorities of both Democrats and Republicans support reducing mandatory minimum sentences for nonviolent offenses, expanding prison rehabilitation programs, and restoring voting rights for individuals who have completed their sentences.

On immigration, despite the media portraying this issue as a choice between wide-open borders or mass deportation, most Americans favor a balanced approach: strengthening border security while simultaneously creating a pathway to legal status or citizenship for Dreamers.

And, of course, there is the issue of gun rights and safety. It's presented as a zero-sum battle between repealing or protecting the Second Amendment, but majorities of Americans—including gun owners—support practical measures like universal background checks, red-flag laws, and restrictions for domestic abusers.

In this edition of our newsletter, you'll read about our recent gun policy dialogues. These conversations offer real proof that we can build bridges on even the most polarizing issues when we choose understanding over attack.

This work is a testament to the power of Reflective Structured Dialogue—a framework that seeks to humanize rather than demonize, proving that real connection is possible even in divided times.



Thank you for making this vital work possible!
With gratitude,

Claire Lindsay
Development Manager, Essential Partners

DONOR IMPACT SPOTLIGHTS



FEATURED STORY

BEYOND THE SOUNDBITES: HOW A RADICAL APPROACH TO DIALOGUE FORGED A BIPARTISAN GUN POLICY PLATFORM

For fifteen years, Dr. Michael Siegel researched the causes and impacts of firearm violence in the United States. As a Professor of Public Health and Community Medicine at Tufts University, he had a front-row seat to an increasingly toxic debate. Yet, tucked away in his survey data was a glaring paradox that made no sense.

"When we surveyed gun owners, they actually supported many of the proposals that people on the gun violence prevention side were pushing for," Dr. Siegel says. "It didn't make sense. **How could there be so much polarization when there's widespread agreement about solutions that could save lives?**"

Dr. Siegel recognized that the barrier wasn't a policy deadlock—it was an identity divide. Public health advocates rarely engaged gun owners, and most policymakers drafting gun safety laws had never held a firearm. To build something that could pass, he needed gun owners at the table. More than that, he needed an expert in bridging deep political divides.

He found that expertise in Essential Partners and Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD). Dr. Siegel reached out to EP's co-Executive Director, John Sarrouf. "He had a dream of bringing stakeholders together on Zoom to forge real state-level policy within six months," Sarrouf recalls. "I said, 'Let's do it.' We started designing long before there was any grant or participant list."

"I only had to make one phone call," Siegel says. "Within five minutes, I knew John was the right person, Essential Partners was the right organization, and RSD was the right approach."

ASSEMBLING THE UNLIKELY

The project, titled Bridging the Divide on Gun Policy, brought together two dozen participants representing a fierce spectrum of beliefs.

"These were not moderate people looking for a comfortable middle ground," says Professor David Yamane, a sociologist and participant. "These were people who, under normal circumstances, wouldn't even talk to each other."

The cohort included a Kentucky State Senator, an Episcopal Bishop, a commercial firearms dealer, a writer for Recoil magazine, and high-profile advocates from opposing sides of the issue. Among them were Richard Aborn—President of the Citizens Crime Commission of New York City, a former prosecutor, and former President of Handgun Control, Inc. (now the Brady Center)—and Rob Pincus, Executive Director of the Personal Defense Network and a prominent firearms trainer.

Decades earlier, media ecosystems like Crossfire had pitted advocates like Aborn against gun rights defenders in explosive, high-decibel shouting matches. "Producers would scream in my ear, 'Engage! Interrupt! Get in there!'" Aborn recalls. "That built political support, but at a terrible price. We alienated the core constituency we needed: the gun-owning population that understands rights and responsibilities go hand in hand."



STARTING WITH HUMANITY, NOT POLICY

To dismantle decades of entrenched mistrust, the facilitators—Sarrouf alongside EP Associates Bob Stains, Ray Rawls, and Molly Zucker—refused to jump straight into legislative debate.

"We didn't start with policy," Professor Yamane explains. "We started with each other—our hopes, our dreams, our values, and our lived experiences. In that process, we stopped seeing each other as political adversaries and started seeing each other as fellow human beings."

For seasoned advocates, stepping into structured, vulnerable dialogue felt alien at first.

"I didn't believe in the process for the first couple of meetings," admits Rob Pincus. "But then it really started to work. People became far more concerned and conscientious about each other as people. It couldn't be about our ideologies or the organizations we represented. It had to be humans in the room."

Trust became the bedrock of the initiative. "Trust is the coin of the realm in politics," Aborn notes. "Essential Partners gave us a methodology that allowed us to drop our identities as advocates, develop that trust, and adopt a common mission."

EIGHT CONSENSUS PROPOSALS

Over eighteen months of intensive dialogue and technical drafting, the initial goal of reviewing three policies expanded into an ambitious, 67-page comprehensive legislative platform. The group produced eight core, highly detailed policy proposals designed to simultaneously protect public health and respect the Second Amendment:

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| 1. Prohibiting Factors for Firearm Purchase and Possession | 5. Child Access Prevention and Responsible Storage |
| 2. An Effective Background Check System | 6. Firearm Suicide Prevention |
| 3. Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPOs) | 7. Firearm Injury Prevention Education |
| 4. Dealer Regulation and Gun Trafficking Prevention | 8. Community Violence Intervention Funding |

"The goal going in was not to develop some pie-in-the-sky policy that would go nowhere," says Aborn. "The goal was to craft legislation that has a real, practical chance of passing in red, purple, or blue state legislatures."

A LOOK BEHIND THE SCENES

In May, Essential Partners hosted an exclusive donor panel featuring Dr. Siegel, Richard Aborn, and Rob Pincus to explore how this groundbreaking process has reshaped their outlook on the future of bipartisan policymaking.

During the event, participants shared candid reflections on how RSD transformed their approach to advocacy. When asked how participating in the project affected their belief in future bipartisan partnerships, the panelists emphasized that the process didn't require anyone to compromise their core principles—it simply gave them a human framework to listen, understand, and build together.

As Rob Pincus noted during the discussion, there is a deep societal hunger for this exact kind of breakthrough: "As much as we see the cynicism and polarization, I also think there are a lot of people looking to break through it. There's an appetite for it. There's a hunger for it."

Watch the Full Event: [Click here](#) to watch the complete recording of the May donor panel event to hear directly from Dr. Siegel, Richard Aborn, and Rob Pincus about their experiences and the future of this project.

The password is Bridge2026



TRANSFORMING THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION

While federal gun legislation often stalls in partisan gridlock, statehouses offer a viable path for meaningful reform. Siegel and Essential Partners are taking both the platform and the dialogue methodology directly to state leaders, building coalitions grounded in mutual respect.

"We want to change the national conversation," Dr. Siegel says. "We want to change how legislation is written and how both sides view each other."

As polarization continues to dominate headlines, Bridging the Divide on Gun Policy stands as a proof of concept for a healthier democracy. It proves that when communities move past toxic debate structures and embrace structured, human-centered dialogue, true common ground isn't just possible—it's waiting to be claimed.

THE SUCCESS OF A CAMPUS DIALOGUE ABOUT AI

In a world rapidly adapting to the rise of artificial intelligence, the Lewis & Clark community recently created opportunities to gather not just to observe the technology, but to actively shape how we live and learn alongside it.

Lewis & Clark recently hosted an important series of Community Dialogues (CD) on AI, creating a vital space for students, faculty, and staff to engage in the ethical and practical questions of our digital age.

The series was designed to bring people together for a focused dialogue on the topic of AI, offering a structured yet open environment, aiming to surface tensions, share enthusiasm and apprehensions, and collectively examine how AI is shaping teaching, learning, and work at Lewis & Clark. Participants engaged in a small group format with peers from across campus, fostering the kind of cross-disciplinary conversation that exemplifies an L&C experience.

Across the sessions, the rooms were filled with a diverse cross-section of the campus—students, faculty and staff were open and curious to share and learn about AI's role in their learning and work experiences. Many attendees noted that this was their very first time participating in a Community Dialogue, and the experience sparked a newfound interest in the CD format as a way to wrestle with various topics as a community.

“The response to the process was overwhelmingly positive. What stood out most was the enthusiasm for the conversation and the shared desire to listen and understand others' experiences and positions when it comes to AI.

— Danielle Torres, Director of Community Dialogues, Lewis & Clark

According to Danielle Torres, director of the Community Dialogues initiative, “The response to the process was overwhelmingly positive. What stood out most was the enthusiasm for the conversation and the shared desire to listen and understand others’ experiences and positions when it comes to AI. It wasn’t a debate or discussion; sessions follow a scripted dialogue format that creates moments for attentive listening and deep reflection. The conversation in each session was organic, evolving and expanding as participants built upon one another’s perspectives. It was really wonderful to watch unfold.”

The discussions yielded a wealth of helpful ideas and important considerations surrounding AI on our college campus, including points related to course expectations, grading, creativity and art, office efficiency, future employment, student stressors, skill building, environmental impacts, and our liberal arts identity. The input generated during the dialogues will be shared with the L&C AI Advisory Group, which is made up of staff and faculty members working toward principled guidance of AI use on campus.

Meredith Goddard, co-leader of the L&C AI Advisory Group, partnered with Community Dialogues to launch the series. Goddard described the impact in this way: “The AI Dialogues feel like a step towards open, honest and thoughtful engagement around AI as a community that is much healthier than a culture of shame and silence. Moving forward, we plan to integrate the feedback that came from these dialogues to inform a grassroots effort to develop community-informed principles around AI use in ways that align with Lewis & Clark’s values and mission.”

The success of the AI series highlights Community Dialogues as a growing and essential initiative for the campus. By providing a platform where opportunity meets curiosity, the series has proven that we don’t have to navigate conversations—whether contentious, timely, or just plain interesting—in isolation. These outcomes reflect President Robin Holmes-Sullivan’s founding vision: that structured dialogue is a powerful tool for building a more connected and democratic campus community.

“It is inspiring to see students, faculty, and staff come together with such openness and curiosity to share their perspectives on AI. Community Dialogues create meaningful spaces for connection, reflection, and learning across our community. The energy in these conversations shows a clear desire for more opportunities to explore how AI shapes our classrooms, well-being, and shared values

— President Robin Holmes-Sullivan,
Lewis & Clark

Building on this, the future of Community Dialogues is focused on expanding dialogic principles and practices on campus, including upcoming summer 2026 facilitator trainings. Director Torres added, “As we look toward future opportunities and new topics, Community Dialogues will continue to look toward building capacity, reach and impact: as an example of how intentional dialogue can lead to clarity, connection, and a better understanding of the opinions and experiences that make up our community.”



EP DONOR SPOTLIGHT

Leslie
Lawrence

Leslie Lawrence is a writer and teacher of writing. Her book, *The Death of Fred Astaire: Essays from a Life Outside the Lines* was published in 2016, and she has since been working on *My Years with The Goldbergs*, a hybrid memoir about how her obsession with Bach's Goldberg Variations has made her life more resonant.

Do you remember the first time you heard about Essential Partners? What was it about the organization that initially caught your attention?

Leslie: I'm pretty sure it was from reading an article in the Boston Globe about the abortion dialogues. It really caught me—the idea that these groups were actually talking to each other in a civil, respectful way. I hadn't seen any other examples of that. The article painted a very warm, human picture; these people had been meeting in someone's living room for a while and had truly come to like each other. That made a big impression on me.

Years earlier, in the 1980s, I took a psychodrama workshop with Laura and Dick Chasin. I was always fascinated by the human psyche. My orientation was shaped by my work as a writer and my own years in therapy, so I was excited about understanding how people work, how they think, and how they change their minds.

Using psychotherapy principles to build dialogue structures was a novel, innovative approach—especially at a time when therapy was still somewhat taboo. On top of that, founder Sally Ann Roth had been a couples therapist of mine, and I thought she was brilliant. So many threads came together.

Later, I ended up taking a few workshops, including one on the art of asking questions. Given my background in therapy and teaching, I thought I'd be a quick study, but the workshop was very humbling. I realized I still had a lot to learn, particularly skills that could help in both my teaching and my intimate relationships where we feel most vulnerable.

What inspires you most about EP's work and mission? Where does it resonate with your personal values?

Leslie: The most inspiring concept to me is that psychological insights can be applied to the public sphere to create positive change. This feels like such an untapped resource. I'm deeply inspired by the quality of the people at EP—the depth of their knowledge, their skills, and their ability to bridge divides.

When I was in my twenties, I was walking with my father in New York City. He was being reflective and sharing the things he cared about most, and he emphasized the importance of "conversation" and "communication." I loved him dearly, and he really instilled those values in me.

I've also come to appreciate the importance of local politics. I used to focus more on the federal level, but local politics is where it all starts, and equipping people with dialogue tools in that realm is wonderful. I remember talking to John Sarrouf about the gun policy project; hearing that these polarized groups actually agreed on so much was incredibly inspiring. As our culture has become more polarized, EP's work feels increasingly essential.

What are your hopes for the future of the organization?

Leslie: My hope is that this work can be scaled up, that EP can gain broader name recognition, and attract the funding needed to expand its impact. I have networks that would be deeply interested in Essential Partners, but many people simply haven't heard of it yet. This work deserves a feature on 60 Minutes, a documentary, an article in the Globe, or a segment on NPR. So many people would be fascinated.

I also think the culture as a whole is much more receptive to these tools now than in the past. When I taught at Tufts, I noticed students were far more savvy about psychology, and therapy in general has become much more normalized. There's also better communication within families now compared to when I was a teenager.

Most people today recognize that polarization and tribalism have gone too far. Whether we are addressing political divides or finding common ground, people want to understand each other better. Now is the time—the culture is ready for what EP offers. It feels better to humanize than demonize.

How have you personally been affected by EP, and is there a key learning or tool you use in your own life?

Leslie: I've learned to ask more open-ended questions—even simple ones like, "Tell me more." I focus on listening more, speaking less, and setting aside my own agenda when entering a conversation. It has helped me stay curious, be open to where the conversation leads, and stay mindful of how my words affect others.

When I've seen EP-style dialogue in action, it never feels like people are just following a rigid program. The respect built into the approach is real. It reminds me that everyone has a unique set of life experiences that shape their views. You can't understand someone after a one-minute conversation, and EP's tools help prevent me from generalizing.

I have deep respect for the team at EP and their commitment to accessibility. Their work aligns closely with my own passions: understanding how people change, improving how we communicate, and making the world a better place.

RESOURCE UPDATE

A NEW EP GUIDE FOR AMERICA @ 250

On the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, the United States stands at a crossroads. The nation faces critical dilemmas and existential challenges. It will take every person's voice and imagination to build a political culture where we can overcome them together.

That is the promise of dialogue in this moment. Whether it's a facilitated small group conversation or a lively talk over coffee, dialogue is the most important vehicle for the views, hopes, and values of everyday people.

Dialogue lays the foundation for everything that comes next in politics, from navigating disagreements to collaboration and movement-building. It dictates what issues matter most, which platforms will be considered, and how we will treat people with different views, values, and identities.

To have a stronger democracy, we need to practice healthier dialogue.

Reflective Structured Dialogue defuses polarization, roots us in our values, humanizes people with different views, and creates a space for authentic connection. It helps us lean toward one another in hard times and remember our common bonds during conflict.

This guide uses a streamlined version of our approach to help you bring together neighbors, friends, classmates, and coworkers to talk about what the United States means to you.

Talking about your experience and values is a starting point for healthier conversations about specific topics and policy choices. The goal is not to change minds or win arguments, but to see one another as greater than the sum of our differences.

Included here are tips for healthier communication and five sets of dialogue prompts, each with a purpose statement. Choose the one that feels right for your context.

If your community, campus, school, or institution needs more support around this conversation, our expert practitioners are always here for a phone call. Reach out for a free consultation.

We believe in you, the people.

[CLICK HERE TO DOWNLOAD
OUR NEW RESOURCE](#)



EP IN THE NEWS!

“A BETTER WAY TO ACHIEVE MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING” TED TALK BY EP ASSOCIATE MONTRESSA WASHINGTON

In a riveting TEDx Talk, Dr. Montressa Washington, an Associate and Practitioner at Essential Partners, highlights the role of structured dialogue in creating space for genuine and authentic conversations that go beyond fear, defensiveness, and misunderstanding. She describes EP's Reflective Structured Dialogue approach as a practice that positions groups to achieve mutual understanding and improve communication. It invites communities to talk about their lived experiences rather than solely trying to change each other's minds.

In her talk, Dr. Washington shares her positive experiences implementing classroom dialogue to teach complex issues, help students become aware of their values, and show them how their values shape their beliefs and how their beliefs shape their decisions.

Whether in classrooms or in communities, the use of timed responses, structured go-arounds, introspective questions, and many more significant aspects of EP's Reflective Structured Dialogue approach helps us build the muscle to have hard conversations, show up as we are, and share our lived experiences to better understand each other.



“23 PEOPLE. OPPOSING VIEWS ON GUNS. ONE SUPRISING OUTCOME.” UNCOMFY PODCAST WITH JULIE ROSE



In this podcast episode, Julie Rose spotlights Essential Partner's Bridging the Divide on Firearm Policy initiative in an interview with BJ Campbell and Dr. Eric Fleegler. Although Campbell and Fleegler hold vastly different views on gun policy, they gained insight into each other's beliefs and experiences through this initiative.

It brought together 23 gun policy experts over the course of a year to identify policy issues they could all agree on.

Both Campbell and Fleegler were skeptical about the effectiveness of Essential Partner's dialogue practice but were pleasantly surprised after drafting several agreed-upon policy recommendations by the end of the process. They described many “aha” moments, the relationships forged, their shared belief in ensuring the safety of all Americans, and the group's hope for the future. This initiative is a strong example of the many ways Essential Partners creates safe spaces for difficult but necessary conversations.

THANKS FOR READING—AND FOR SUPPORTING OUR MISSION.

