



RENEWING TRUST

in a Time of Division



ANNUAL REPORT
FISCAL YEAR 2024



Our Mission

We give people the means to strengthen relationships, deepen belonging, and renew hope in their communities.

Our Vision

We envision a world of thriving communities strengthened by difference, connected by trust.

Select FY24 Partners





About Reflective Structured Dialogue

OUR EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACH

Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD) is an evidence-based and research-driven methodology that can transform relationships, deepen belonging, dispel stereotypes, and reduce polarization.

RSD helps build trust and connections across differences of identities, perspectives, and values in order to foster more inclusive cultures, solve problems collaboratively, and make systemic change possible.

Through ongoing research and innovation, Essential Partners (EP) has continued to refine and innovate the RSD approach. The past 10 years have seen the Dialogic Classroom pedagogy emerge for middle grades, high school, and higher education classrooms, providing our next generation of leaders with the capacities needed for an open, diverse, inclusive democratic society to flourish.

Recent grant funding has also allowed EP experts to develop Essential Photovoice, blending advancements in mobile technology with visual media and RSD.

A Note from the Executive Directors

It's cliché to say this has been an unprecedented year. But that is precisely what we have experienced.

The October 7th attacks and ensuing conflict upended every partnership that was already underway and raised a tidal wave of need all across the United States. Polarization around the conflict continues to reverberate in civic institutions, college campuses, nonprofits, schools, workplaces, public libraries, and congregations of every faith tradition.

In these tumultuous moments, we are especially grateful to our visionary founders and dedicated practitioners. Their courageous work around Israel-Palestine provides decades of wisdom and experience to draw upon today. These insights inform every aspect of our approach to the current conflict.

We expected this year to be dominated by the election. We planned guides and resources, free public programs, pro-bono consultation, coaching, and robust Community of Practice support. And despite the intense pressures of the war, conversations about the election have continued apace. We've helped hundreds of teachers, campus leaders, and communities navigate political division.

Of course, we know that these polarizing flashpoints also heighten and complicate local challenges, of which there are many: colleges facing legal difficulties, students still recovering from pandemic closures, housing shortages, and other economic pressures.

Discussions of a town budget transform into arguments about the election just as conversations about Israel-Palestine are shaped by local context and individual relationships. Our ability to help people navigate both local and international conflicts underscores the brilliance of our founders and the power of our Reflective Structured Dialogue approach.

RSD is not just a model for hard conversations. It is a way of living, working, and learning together. When we can navigate challenges with openness and care, we can recover our humanity, curiosity, and sense of community together.

Read about our work this year, from support around Israel-Palestine and the 2024 election to campus culture change efforts and local public health collaborations, in this FY24 Annual Report.

KATIE HYTEN & JOHN SARROUF
CO-EXECUTIVE DIRECTORS



Our Impact, 2019–2024

14,000 CATALYSTS TRAINED IN
280 CORNERSTONE PARTNERS ACROSS
42 STATES + WASHINGTON DC,
PUERTO RICO, CANADA + MEXICO



40,000+

Free donor-funded guides, exercises, classroom curricula, and resources downloaded

2,300+

deep collaborations, open enrollment workshops, summits, coaching sessions, and public programs

850,000+

Americans whose lives have been affected by an EP-trained changemaker

AFTER AN EP INTERVENTION...

95

95% of participants feel more respected by the “other side”

91

91% feel more understood by people on the “other side”

85

85% feel they better understand people on the “other side”

OUR SUSTAINED IMPACT, 6 MONTHS LATER...

90

90% of people have been a part of successful conversations across differences

87

87% of people report improvements in previously negative relationships across differences

80

80% of people report that their community has become closer and more cohesive as a result of this work

A close-up, textured view of the Israeli flag, showing the red, white, and green stripes and the blue Star of David. The flag is draped and folded, creating deep shadows and highlights that emphasize its fabric texture.

IMPACT STORY: UNPRECEDENTED POLARIZATION

The Israel-Hamas War in Gaza

“The Israel-Hamas war in Gaza has hit our community particularly hard, and we have had to navigate many difficult conversations on the issue.... the EP model gets to the core of the issue in a way that creates empathy and moves the conversation forward.”

DAVID YUSEM, DISTRICT RESTORATIVE JUSTICE COORDINATOR
OAKLAND UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT, CA

The breadth and depth of polarization triggered by the October 7 attack and subsequent Israel-Hamas War in Gaza has been unprecedented. Its consequences have reverberated from Congress to college campuses, public schools, and faith communities. Drawing on decades of experience with dialogues around Israel-Palestine—and thanks to crucial donor generosity—we have supported thousands of partners nationwide with free consultations, small-group coaching, training, and multiple free resources—including the [definitive dialogue guide](#). Polarization driven by this conflict threatens our communities, our institutions, and our democracy. We will continue to help repair trust, rebuild community, and revive the nation’s ability to live together with dignity.

SELECTED TESTIMONIALS: THE ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR IN GAZA

“I felt sure RSD would be the best tool for discussing the current Israel-Hamas War in Gaza. Rooting our conversations in our own experiences breeds empathy. When our students feel for each other, it makes conversations about difficult issues more challenging, honest, and valuable.”

“I used Reflective Structured Dialogue to facilitate dialogues about the war with students, faculty, and staff shortly after the war began. These dialogues defused tension on campus by allowing people an opportunity to respectfully air their deeply held convictions and feelings and feel heard by those who see things differently. I have also briefed colleagues at other schools and organizations on the principles of RSD when they asked me for advice on handling discussions about the war in their own settings.”

“The free guide propelled conversations among a group of members and may prove useful in future synagogue-sponsored dialogue efforts.”

“Because of EP, I have a deeper sense of being grounded in my own ethics, with an accompanying tool kit for trustworthy conversations and processes. I am able to share and embody a spirit of authenticity and openhearted as a facilitator.”

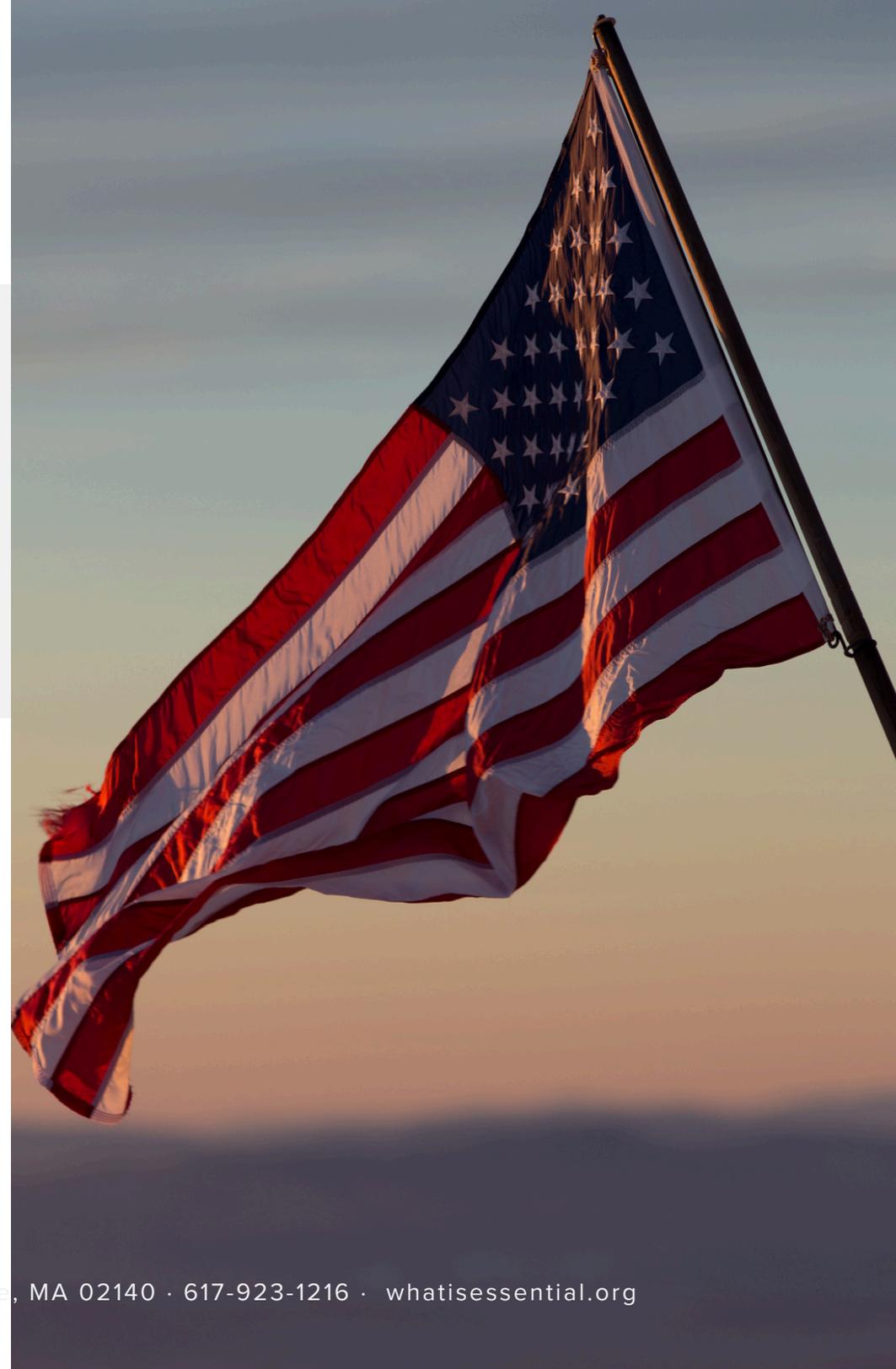
IMPACT STORY: PARTISAN POLARIZATION

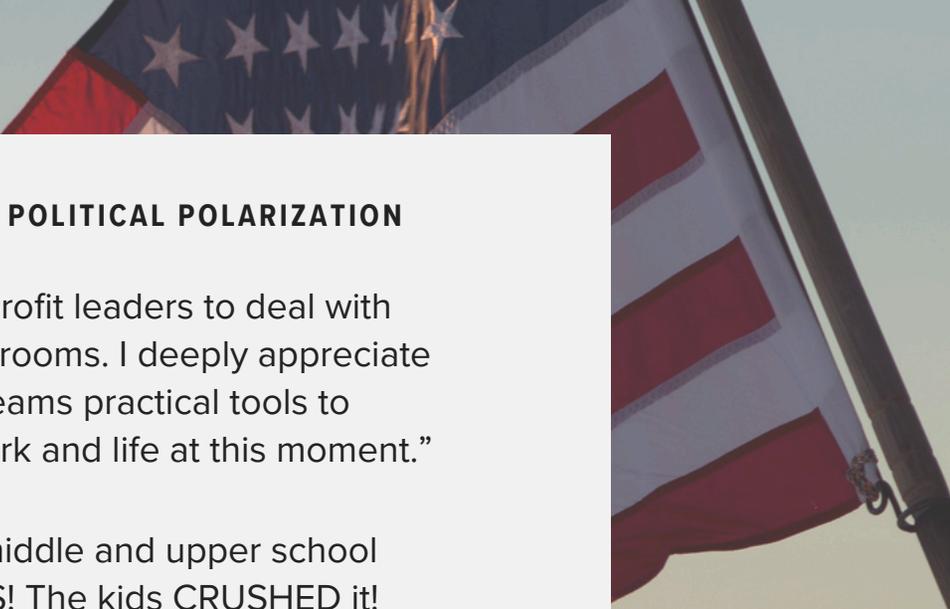
The Divisive 2024 Election

“RSD has made me realize that safe, thoughtful communication can happen in a world where these things can no longer be taken for granted. Your free guide has been an eye-opener for me and many of my colleagues when engaged in YMCA bridge-building activities.”

LEW NAPOLITANO, VOLUNTEER
YMCA OF PIERCE & KITSAP COUNTIES, WA

The changing candidates, political violence, court cases, threats, and racist tropes of this Presidential election season have bred chaos, division, and dysfunction in communities across the country. Thanks to generous donor support, we have responded with new free guides and resources, classroom curricula, and coaching—and by activating our Community of Practice. In more than 75 communities across 20 states, our Community of Practice members have pledged to lead dialogues about election and political partisanship where they live, work, worship, or learn. Equipped with our RSD framework, they are disrupting the cycle of polarization, inspiring hope and faith in our diverse democracy.



An American flag is visible in the top right corner of the page, partially cut off by the edge. The stars and stripes are clearly visible.

SELECTED TESTIMONIALS: 2024 ELECTION & POLITICAL POLARIZATION

“EP resources have helped us equip nonprofit leaders to deal with divisions on their teams and in their boardrooms. I deeply appreciate the work EP is doing to give people and teams practical tools to navigate some of the hardest issues in work and life at this moment.”

“We executed an election dialogue with middle and upper school faculties today. IT WAS A HUGE SUCCESS! The kids CRUSHED it! Honestly, I believe this was a game changer in terms of shifting the culture of the school AND promoting our dialogic initiative.”

“I teach an undergrad course called Facilitating Difficult Discussions and the capstone project is for students to facilitate small groups in a campus-wide deliberative discussion event. In Spring 2024 we centered one event around polarization in politics ... EP’s approach with questions significantly helps set the tone and purpose for the discussion and makes the deliberative discussions inclusive and overall positive for participants to share their views (no matter where they stand on these issues!)”

“We included a link to the partisan dialogue guide in our emails, which went out to community agencies, nonprofits, public officials, as well as all candidates for public office... We are tremendously grateful for these resources we can make available to the public!”



IMPACT STORY: ESSENTIAL PHOTOVOICE

Fetzer Funds Innovation

“The workshop gave me space and tools to dissect what I want my community to look like and how I can best love them. The diversity of the group really showed me how similar we all are, even through our differences.”

ESSENTIAL PHOTOVOICE PARTICIPANT
THEOLOGICAL HORIZONS, UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

Thanks to **The Fetzer Institute**'s vision and support, Essential Partners just completed a multi-year innovation partnership with [Interfaith Photovoice](#) that led to the creation of Essential Photovoice. This adaptation blends Reflective Structured Dialogue with components of photovoice. Essential Photovoice leverages visual media as an entry point to dialogues that disrupt polarization, deepen mutual understanding and strengthen community connections. Residents from thirteen communities were trained in the new approach and supported via a robust community of practice. This project showcases the power of a visionary funder to spur collaboration and innovation. The Fetzer Institute was instrumental in the creation of a groundbreaking dialogue model.

IMPACT STORY: PUBLIC EDUCATION

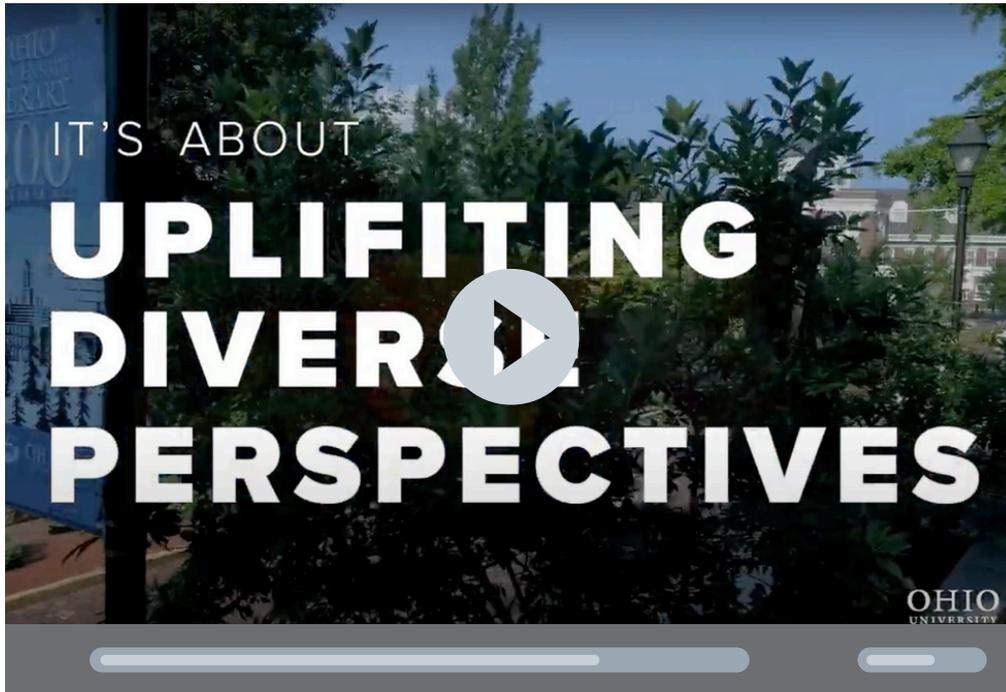
Reimagining the IEP Process

“The workshop was enriching, helpful, and necessary. In particular, I’ll be using EP’s question techniques to try to get to the heart of the issues that people present in meetings.”

SPECIAL EDUCATION COORDINATOR
CHELSEA, MA

Since 2020, demand has surged for Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), the special education plans that ensure students with disabilities can thrive. Too often, however, IEP meetings can be tense, straining the relationships between caregivers and schools. When educators, caregivers, and support staff are not aligned, students pay the price. With **Power of Place Learning Communities** and a network of public schools, we are working to reimagine how educators and administrators can facilitate IEP meetings to foster strong relationships and healthy communication among educators, caregivers, and staff. These are the hallmarks of exceptional education, and we are determined to make the exceptional the norm for students in Massachusetts and beyond.





IMPACT STORY: CAMPUS CULTURE CHANGE

Ohio University Makes Respect Visible

In 2021, Ohio University launched [Make Respect Visible](#), a campus-wide effort to build a school culture upon a powerful set of academic and community values:

- **Listen More, Judge Less**
- **Encourage Dialogue, Not Division**
- **Spread Ideas, Not Hate**
- **Remember that Every Voice Counts**



“The next phase will focus on establishing a campus-wide framework for engaging the community in difficult conversations and dialogues across difference.”

We have supported this inspiring initiative by consulting with leaders and training campus facilitators, including a core group of students who will lead campus dialogues about polarizing issues like the 2024 Election. The inaugural Make Respect Visible Week was held this fall. It included community dialogues, a public art project, and other events shaped by their collaboration with EP.

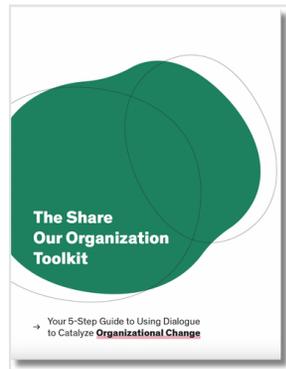
IMPACT STORY: ORG CULTURE CHANGE

Share Our Organization

“The entire toolkit was helpful. I really liked the Design Your Initiative template and adapted it for our staff retreat. The participants found it very useful in keeping them action-oriented.”

VANESSA ORTIZ, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF ORG DEVELOPMENT
THE INNOCENCE NETWORK

For 35 years, Essential Partners has proudly served as a thought partner and catalyst for peer organizations across the field of dialogue and deliberation. The new Share Our Organization toolkit is the latest example of the innovations that comes out of those partnerships. Co-created with the **Belfer Center for Innovation & Social Impact at the 92NY**, the donor-funded resource blends RSD with learnings from the Belfer Center’s Share Our America initiative. This powerful free toolkit, designed specifically for organizational culture change, has been downloaded by hundreds of nonprofit and business leaders around the globe already.





IMPACT STORY: PUBLIC HEALTH

Dialogue & Community Health

“The respect and cooperation among leaders was breathtaking. Utilizing RSD to facilitate these conversations allowed for each organization to express their greatest needs and collaborate on ways to work together going forward.”

KATHY ECKLES, ASSOCIATE
ESSENTIAL PARTNERS

By engaging leaders from local service-based organizations in open dialogue, the **Gloucester Health Department** hoped to create a more comprehensive understanding of the complex challenges faced by the community. A series of facilitated dialogues brought together 28 leaders from 24 organizations serving Gloucester. Participants discussed their most important services, the needs they encounter, and their biggest post-COVID challenges. Based on the insights gathered from the dialogues, the public health department developed a comprehensive report to drive more effective solutions. Through an innovative, community-driven, dialogic approach, the public health department was able to identify the most effective strategies and resources for addressing the community's most urgent needs.

Financial Report

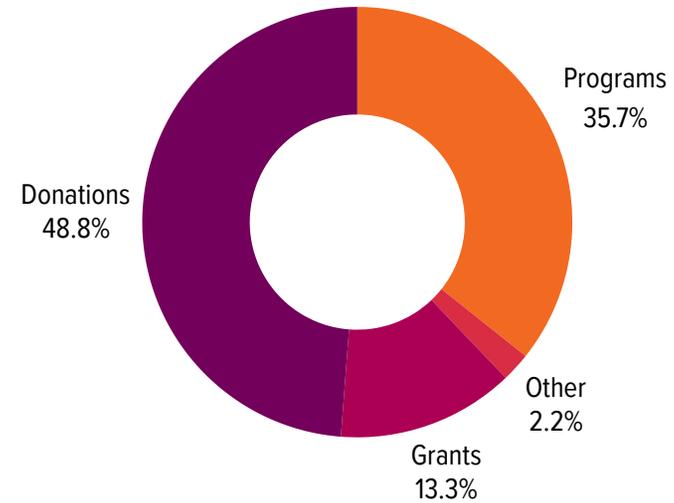
No report quite captures the scale of the crisis this year the way these financial charts do.

Not only was there an atmospheric rise in the amount of programmatic work conducted, there was an equally immense outpouring of philanthropic generosity. This year, individually and institutionally, donors unlocked our ability to respond to the crisis with support for existing and new EP community members.

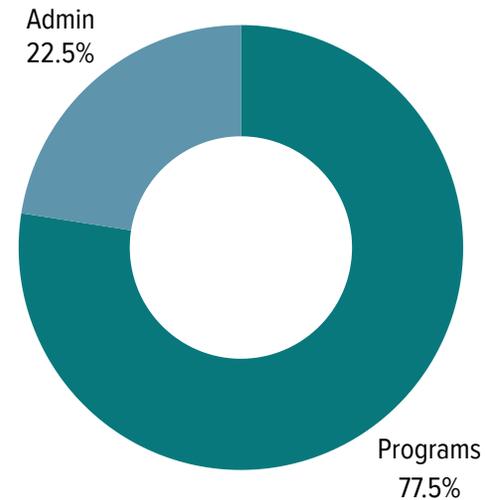
Those donations funded hundreds of consultation and coaching calls, long-term pro bono partnerships, free or low-cost workshop registrations, major new resources, and additional programmatic support to existing partners across the country.

This year, our funders made so much possible—hope, repair, connection, community. When people needed us, our donors made it possible for us to answer the call.

FY24 REVENUE: \$2,536,604

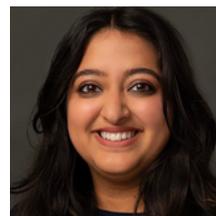
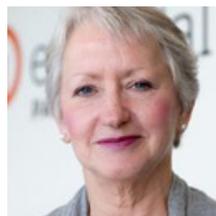
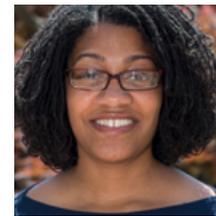


FY24 EXPENDITURES: \$1,931,199



Our Expert Practitioners

Located across the country, our practitioners bring diverse experience to their work with Essential Partners. They include veteran educators, lawyers, mediators, and faith leaders.



Our Leadership

The Essential Partners Board of Directors draw on diverse professional backgrounds to provide oversight and organizational guidance, with the co-Executive Directors serving in an ex-officio capacity.



Katie Hyten,
Co-Executive Director



John Sarrouf,
Co-Executive Director



Brendan Abel,
Board Chair



Carole Kaspar
Board Vice Chair



Darwensi Clark,
Board Secretary



Robert O'Hara,
Board Treasurer



Damien Lally,
Board Member



Nisha Mongia,
Board Member



Aba Taylor,
Board Member



Shikha Warnick,
Board Member



Kelsie Wilkins,
Board Member



Molly Zuker,
Board Member