









ANNUAL REPORT

2025-2026

essential PARTNERS

A Note from the Co-Executive Directors

Our collaboration with the YMCA is special.

Like us, YMCAs center community and well-being. They model hope. They strive to help every person feel like they belong. They trust their local residents to know what they need, what will serve them, and how to build it themselves. And like us, the Y is a movement.

This year's annual report focuses on our national YMCA collaboration because it gives a clear picture of the scale of impact that's possible when you equip, support, and trust.

No two YMCAs use our Reflective Structured Dialogue approach in exactly the same way. Some began with community engagement about difficult issues. Others started in an effort to shift their internal cultures. Others, meanwhile, have used RSD to address policy challenges that have stymied them for years.

Some initiatives are national, like the Y Identity Project, which invites conversations about the Y's Christian mission. Others are distinctly local, but no less critical, like the Fort Wayne YMCA's peer-to-peer program to help youth who might be at risk of dying by suicide.

Over the past five years, we have equipped leaders at more than 20 YMCAs across the United States with RSD. Those centers reach more than a million Americans each year.

We often get asked about scale. How will we reach more people? How can we reach our lofty impact goals? How does training 50 people shift 100,000? It's an important question for any movement. But it's also been frequently misunderstood.

The question of scale is frequently answered with technology or light-touch interventions. These approaches focus on big numbers. They show without teaching. They excite without empowering. You can reach millions of people with a module or an App, but those interventions do not change the fundamental dynamics. Awareness alone isn't enough. A few passive virtual lessons aren't enough.

Essential Partners has spent almost four decades pursuing meaningful impact. We've tested and honed our approach, revised and adapted our trainings, measured outcomes, published research, and built a flourishing community of practice. Our work has taken hold on every continent, in the aftermath of civil war, in the midst of religious conflicts, between avowed enemies, across the most polarizing issues.

What we have learned comes down to this: nothing changes if people don't own the work.

We achieve impact at scale by investing in local leaders as the lynchpins of lasting change. Fifty well-trained people can change the lives of 100,000—when those people are teachers and clergy, community leaders and public officials; when they are empowered to guide and teach; when they're positioned to shape the way conversations happen; and when they commit to do the deep work for a generation and more.

For us, scale means investing in depth to unlock the breadth of change. That is what makes Essential Partners different.

In this report, you'll learn more about how we have done that through partnerships with YMCA centers across the United States.





Katie Hyten & John Sarrouf
Co–Executive Directors

“We can decide not to be polarized. We can be carriers of hope in practice. It’s not just a wish—you *can* do it.”

JANELLE NELSON, ASSOCIATION MISSION DIRECTOR
YMCA OF PIERCE AND KITSAP COUNTY (WA)







REFLECTIVE

Designed to make you think about your own life and experiences.

Invites each person to speak for themselves and not on behalf of others.

STRUCTURED

Uses structures like timed responses, pause between speakers, etc.

Disrupts dysfunctional patterns of conversation; invites new ways of speaking and listening.

DIALOGUE

Primary goal is to deepen understanding, improve communication, and build trust.

Different than debate (purpose is persuasion) and discussion (purpose is solution).

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

RSD builds trust and connections across differences of identities, perspectives, and values, helping foster more inclusive cultures, solve problems collaboratively, and make systemic change possible.

When the principles, structures, and tools of RSD are used regularly across a community, campus, school, or workplace, it changes the culture—dialogue, as one partner put it, "becomes the way things are done here."

Through ongoing research and innovation, Essential Partners (EP) has continued to refine and innovate the RSD approach.

The past decade has seen the Dialogic Classroom pedagogy applied in 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.

Further funding has supported the development of Essential Photovoice, blending advancements in mobile technology with visual media and RSD.



Essential Partners and the YMCA

Since 2021, Essential Partners has been able to empower leaders from more than 20 YMCAs in more than a dozen U.S. States. Stakeholders from each Y center were trained in Reflective Structured Dialogue, followed by expert support and coaching.

These Ys have identified an urgent need for healthier communication, particularly around questions that intersect with the shared values of the local Y community.

“RSD complements the way that we obviously want to support community and how we want to be looked at when there are issues that are coming into the community,” says Jenelle Balstra, Learning and Training Manager for the Alliance of Massachusetts YMCAs and Northeast Learning Center, who participated in an EP training in 2026.

“RSD seemed an obvious, helpful tool both for how our own organization talks within about hard things and also as controversial things happen in the community,” says Tim Hallman, association chaplain of The YMCA of Greater Fort Wayne (Fort Wayne Y).

“We came out of that training saying ‘this is a way that we do work,’” notes Terri Harvill, chief social impact officer of the Birmingham Y. “This is not an initiative. This is a way we do our work.”

The Fort Wayne Y, Massachusetts Alliance Ys , and Birmingham Y are just a few of many local centers leveraging RSD to hold challenging discussions, to develop internal skills and capacities, and to weave a culture of belonging to amplify the mission of the larger Y movement.

2021

Pierce & Kitsap Counties YMCA launches its Bridge of Hope initiative and invites Essential Partners to train staff and community volunteers in RSD for their bridge-building efforts.

EP provides ongoing consultation and support for the Pierce & Kitsap Counties YMCA's initiatives: the "Conversation Café" Series, designing dialogues in virtual spaces, and the YMCA Christian Mission Dialogue (National Identity Project).

2022

Essential Partners is invited to collaborate on national internal YMCA of the USA conversations, in connection to Y-USA's bridge-building "Connected Communities" and "Team Up" initiatives.

2023

Pierce & Kitsap Counties YMCA establishes a licensing contract with EP to sustain the work independently.

2024

Essential Partners is awarded a grant from the American Arbitration Association Foundation, piloting and demonstrating the scalability of this model. In the first year of the grant, EP continued support for the Pierce & Kitsap Counties Y as well as four additional YMCAs:

- YMCA of Greater Richmond, VA,
- YMCA of Greater Cincinnati, OH
- YMCA of Greater Fort Wayne, IN
- Rappahannock Area YMCA, VA

2025

Essential Partners establishes a YMCA cohort of 100+ EP-trained YMCA leaders, meeting monthly to share successes and challenges, dialogue scripts, and further learning opportunities.

Essential Partners develops a relationship with the Massachusets Alliance of YMCAs, and facilitates a training for their internal staff.

2026

Through the recruiting assistance of the MA Alliance, EP facilitates a 2-day training for Y staff and community leaders from Ys across the state.

Further developing EP's relationship with the national Y-USA, EP facilitates a 2-day training for Y-USA staff and leadership.

Responding to requests from MA and Y-USA trainees, EP hosts an additional micro-training to deepen the learning and introduce dialogic practices to more staff.

Today, EP maintains a YMCA Community of Practice with 150+ facilitators, representing nineteen individual Y associations nationwide actively facilitating community dialogues.

BY THE NUMBERS

77% OF AMERICANS LIVE WITHIN 10 MILES OF A YMCA

89%

Of facilitators report that tools of dialogue are used consistently in their YMCAs, both in everyday life and to address tensions

5,168+

The expected reach of dialogue among facilitators, based on usage rates and average scale of reach of folks EP trained

83%

Of those trained report using the skills they learned in the first twelve months after their training

EP TRAINED 150+ LEADERS ACROSS 20 YMCAS

100%

Of YMCA facilitators now trust that people who have different backgrounds or opinions are also committed to helping their communities thrive

75%

Of YMCA facilitators now express their authentic beliefs, opinions and cultures, even when they differ from others. People share that they feel those things are taken seriously at similar rates.

60% to 78%

A year after their first training, 60% of trained facilitators in the initial cohort of YMCAs reported being a part of a successful collaboration across differences among people who would not have worked well together in the past.

This improved to 78% of trained facilitators in the second cohort reporting these successful collaborations just three months after training. This suggests a correlation of impact with increased engagement in EP's communities of practice.

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The YMCA of Greater Fort Wayne, Indiana

Founded in 1858, Indiana's YMCA of Greater Fort Wayne (Fort Wayne Y) has an extensive reach into the community. In a metro area of 400,000 residents, 80,000 belong to the Y. Between 20,000 and 30,000 more residents are "program participants."

"Our Y is well loved by the community," says association chaplain Tim Hallman, "and our Y loves our community back."

Trained in 2024, the Fort Wayne Y has focused its RSDs on community issues such as teen isolation, senior participation in community spaces, and homelessness—all conducted through the lens of the Y's local context.

In one particularly moving case, the Fort Wayne Y used dialogue to engage the community after a teenage staff member died by suicide.

Hallman reflects: "It got us thinking about 'how do we talk about something really hard like that? How are teens doing? What ways are they feeling alone and isolated, cut off with maybe nobody to talk to?'"

After leading a dialogue, the Fort Wayne Y created a teen leadership summit. Teens learned how to be "bridgebuilders" and gained tools to reach out to other teens who seem, in Hallman's words, "cut off, alone, not sitting with anyone."

Hallman continues to lead these bridgebuilding RSDs, helping participants navigate isolation and loneliness, whether they see this isolation when they serve other teens in summer camps or when they return to school in the fall.

“RSD seemed an obvious, helpful tool both for how our own organization talks within about hard things and also as controversial things happen in the community.”

TIM HALLMAN, ASSOCIATION CHAPLAIN
THE YMCA OF GREATER FORT WAYNE (IN)



YMCA of Pierce & Kitsap Counties, Washington

Founded in 1883, the YMCA of Pierce and Kitsap Counties (PKC Y) serves more than 130,000 people in Washington State. PKC Y offers fitness and art programs, before- and after-school, and three early learning centers.

Through its Bridge of Hope initiative, PKC Y hoped to function as "a third place"—a space where residents could gather to talk about issues that matter in deeply meaningful ways.

Since being trained by Essential Partners in 2021, PKC Y has led dialogues on topics like bullying, homelessness, guns, partisan politics, and AI.

"I listened to these people start to conflict, start to hoard the conversation, start to try and fix a problem, or change someone's mind," says Sean Lambaird, Association Mission Coordinator. "Then I saw RSD sneak its way in, ever so elegantly, to facilitate structure, to facilitate understanding and curiosity, and to build connection on that foundation."

"I saw people go from that point of tension to them respecting each other," Lambaird explains. "I thought, 'This is exactly what I need to be a part of.'"

"This is the DNA of the Y," says PKC Y Mission Director Janele Nelson. "You respond to the needs of the community. This is not new for us to go, 'what's going on? Wow, we should help people with that.' That's how everything starts with the Y. It's responding to a need, so this is very much YMCA work."

Recently, the PKC Y has been incorporating RSD into its internal culture. The goal is for the principles of RSD to be "embedded" into the culture of the Y so it can improve the way the larger community navigates differences, discusses important issues, and understands what it is to belong.

“Most people just don’t talk about anything anymore. They just don’t have the opportunity. It’s not safe.”

JANELE NELSON, ASSOCIATION MISSION DIRECTOR
YMCA OF PIERCE AND KITSAP COUNTIES (WA)



The YMCA of Greater Richmond, Virginia

Virginia's YMCA of Greater Richmond (Richmond Y) serves more than 200,000 residents across 17 branches throughout the diverse greater Richmond area.

The Richmond Y is one of the leading Ys nationally in terms of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, with a focus on employee resource groups, staff support, and space for staff to feel connected.

Beyond the gyms, pools, camps, and sports, the Richmond Y works in what it calls "community impact and health." It partners with local organizations to step into spaces where YMCAs have not traditionally been seen as leaders, such as immigration.

Many refugees relocate to Virginia, and the Richmond Y is a key part of Help 1RVA, a collaboration of organizations that prepare spaces and places for people relocating from other countries.

In 2024, the Richmond Y brought EP in to lead a training. Jamal Riley, Association Chaplain, was particularly excited.

"I'm the face for YMCA of Greater Richmond in spaces of interfaith opportunities across our organization," Riley explains. "How do I connect with the Islamic community, with the Jewish community, the Sikh community? How do we begin more opportunities to connect with other faith groups"

RSD seemed like a perfect tool to create spaces where different views, values, and experiences would be welcome.

"Our mission is to put Christian principles into practice through programs that build a healthy spirit, mind, and body—for all," he concludes. "That 'for all' is critical to where we are stepping into spaces that allow people to feel seen, valued, and heard."

“Reflective Structured Dialogue is such a great tool for implementing what we say we want to do. We’re for *all* people.”

JAMAL RILEY, ASSOCIATION CHAPLAIN
YMCA OF GREATER RICHMOND (VA)

Just the Beginning.

This collaboration between Essential Partners and the YMCA has unlocked the potential of both movements to meaningfully improve the lives of hundreds of thousands of people in communities across the United States.

This is just the beginning.

“Part of our North Star, as we think about how we create more connected communities at the Y, is definitely the goal of reducing isolation, increasing connection, and helping people really see that the YMCA can be a place where they can come together,” says George Zavala from YMCA of the USA.

“Part of the Y’s mission is social responsibility: How are we responding to our community that has all these needs? It’s a long game sometimes,” reflects Sean Lambird, PKC Y. “It’s one of the greatest lessons I’ve learned in this role: Sometimes you’ve got to play the long game. Keep at it every day. Hope.”

Essential Partners is now working with these YMCAs—and with new local Y partners—to secure funding for broader adoption of RSD across the Y movement. EP will continue to provide support for stakeholders using RSD in their local contexts, both within YMCAs and in the community.

Help make collaborations like these possible through a generous gift.

For a larger gift or to discuss planned giving, contact EP Development Manager Claire Lindsay: claire@whatisessential.org.

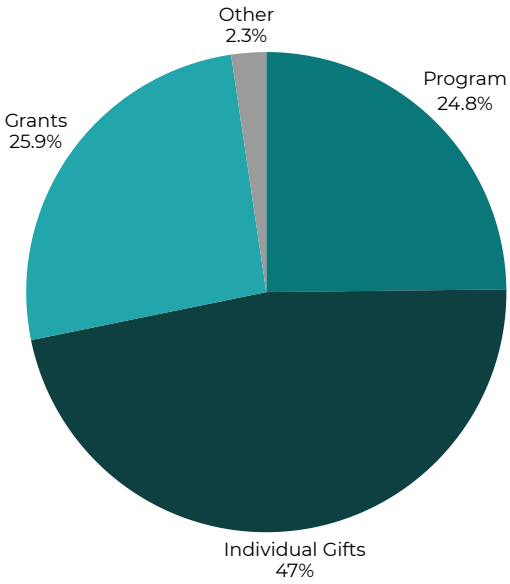




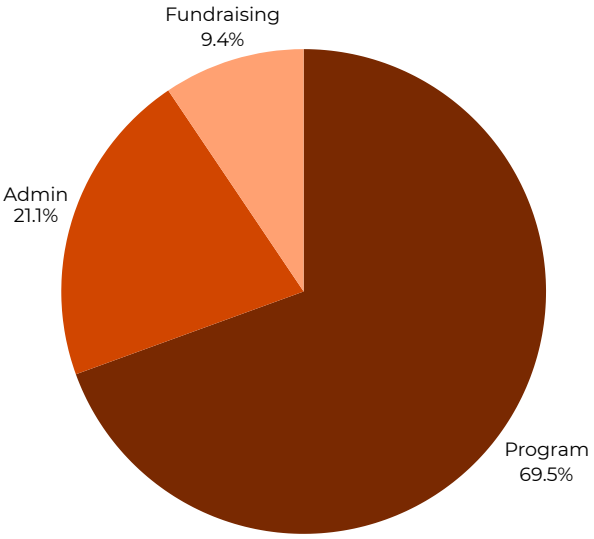


FINANCIAL REPORT

FY26 REVENUE: $2,580,089



FY26 EXPENDITURES: $2,203,004



The financial health of Essential Partners remains strong.

Robust multi-year grant funding from foundations and unrestricted individual giving bolstered a fiscal year marked by uncertainty in several of EP's core markets, such as higher education. Grant funding was particularly critical, subsidizing collaborations with more than X colleges and universities.

Despite that uncertainty—or perhaps driven by it—overall interest in EP's core services and mission continues to grow across all key sectors.

Looking ahead, EP plans to make strategic investments in infrastructure and staffing to expand both its mission impact and financial sustainability.

If you'd like to support our mission and impact, contact Claire Lindsay, Development Manager, claire@whatisessential.org.

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