

DISTANT BUT TOGETHER



2020 Annual Report



EMPOWER

A NOTE FROM OUR LEADERS



“You may not control all the events that happen to you, but you can decide not to be reduced by them.” Those words of Maya Angelou come to mind as we look back on 2020.

With the sudden onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, everything changed. We could no longer go freely to our favorite places, stand in a crowd, go to parties, hug our loved ones, or send our children to school. We all got used to wearing masks and staying at least six feet from the people around us.

For more than a year, so much seemed beyond our control. The real question is, did we allow ourselves to be reduced by the pandemic, or did we insist on something better?

The answer, to us, is clear. The creative, determined people who make up the Empower family insisted on something better. We invite you to join us in reflecting on the challenges and successes of a year that looks best in the rear-view mirror.

Thank you for supporting Empower and its mission.

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DSPS: The Forgotten Essential Workers

While much of the world shut down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Empower's essential workers continued to report for duty.

Our 10 Community Housing sites continued to operate 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Due to New York State directives, people living in Empower houses were unable to go out or have visitors for several months. This situation put even more pressure than usual on our Direct Support Professionals.

In normal times, DSPs support people's personal care, nutrition, healthcare and medications, and recreational needs. During the pandemic, DSPs had to do even more. They provided fun activities, arranged video and voice calls with family members, and kept people's spirits up. Working right alongside our DSPs



were our dedicated team of nurses, clinicians, residential managers, and medical liaisons. They all worked tirelessly to keep people safe and engaged.

In 2005, the average wage for Direct Support Professionals was 33% above minimum wage. Today, the average DSP wage is less than 2% above minimum wage. This injustice is a direct result of constant funding cuts

from New York State over the past 12 years. Our society was quick to call DSPs "essential workers" during the pandemic -- and Empower is pushing hard to demand that state policymakers back those words up with dollars in the coming years.

Thanks to all Direct Support Professionals and other Community Housing staff for the phenomenal work they do.

From day services to group homes, staff adjust to new responsibilities



On March 18, 2021, New York State suspended all daytime services for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. People living with family had to stay home. People living in residential facilities couldn't leave. Under the circumstances, we needed all hands on deck in our residential sites. So, we asked our day services staff to work in residential sites until our day centers could reopen.

a single one of them quit or refused to serve. They helped with activities, cooking, personal care, and even painting and cleaning, to brighten those long days for the people we support.

"At first, it was really overwhelming," said one of our day services staff, "but the staff really came together and worked to make us feel comfortable."

Empower will always be grateful to our dedicated day services staff for taking on these new responsibilities during an uncertain time. We couldn't have done it without them.



They were reluctant at first, but they quickly realized that people were counting on them. Day services staff reported to our Community Housing sites every day for four months. Not

SPECIAL DELIVERIES keep people connected

While many of our day services staff were reassigned to Community Housing sites at the height of the pandemic, a few stayed behind and focused on the people who live in the community with family members.

Empower staff prepared and delivered weekly goodie bags to people's homes, filled with activities, information and snacks. Our staff also made regular phone calls to check on the well-being of people we support, and to lend an ear to those who needed to talk. Empower offered weekly bingo games and other group activities through video chat to keep people connected.

Here is what we heard from a parent of two brothers who attend Empower day services: "Everything was closed, and I had to tell the boys that they had to stay at home. They were sad, they were confused, and there were uncertainties in the air. Those goodie bags gave them cheer. The boys looked forward to getting those. The calls that we got from your staff

were awesome. It was something we looked forward to, and we thank those who prepared the goods and those who dropped them off. They were brave enough to go to each and every house. Thank you to everyone who prepared them."



Supporting families through emergency respite

The pandemic forced Empower to scale back our in-home and community-based respite services for families. However, we continued to offer emergency in-home respite for families with critical needs. Our respite workers took a risk by working in people's homes. We knew it was all worthwhile when we saw texts like this one, which we received from a grateful parent.

I'm not sure we could survive this without you. I can't express what having her work with our family during this has meant.

CLOSER THAN EVER: partnerships make the difference

At Empower, none of us knew exactly how to lead through a pandemic. Partnerships with other organizations made the difference.

Here are six examples of how our community united in the struggle against COVID-19:

Operation Sewing Squad: Throughout 2020, it was difficult to find Personal Protective Equipment -- including masks. Operation Sewing Squad was a group of volunteers who responded to the PPE shortage by producing masks and providing them to front-line organizations. Volunteers donated the materials, made the masks, and distributed them free of charge. Empower received hundreds of masks from these generous volunteers to protect our workforce. For more information, visit <https://www.facebook.com/groups/OperationSewingSquad>.

DDAWNY: Empower is a proud member of the Developmental Disabilities Alliance of Western New York. At the outset of the pandemic, DDAWNY held conference calls twice a week for its 40 member agencies to share information and best practices. DDAWNY also participated in group purchasing and distribution of Personal Protective Equipment to reduce the cost for individual agencies. The moral and logistical support offered by DDAWNY has been invaluable to Empower and the people we support.

CP State: As an affiliate of the Cerebral Palsy Associations of New York State, Empower participated in weekly video chats with organizations across the state. Learning from other organizations -- especially downstate



providers that had been hit hard by the first wave of pandemic -- equipped us to deal more effectively with COVID-19.

Niagara County Health Department: As you might imagine, Empower follows extensive regulations from state agencies to promote public health. Throughout the pandemic, the professionals of the Niagara County Health Department have been the "boots on the ground." We remained in constant contact, and they advised us almost daily on how to comply with all state and county requirements. We looked to them for guidance and followed their advice to the letter. They were accessible and supportive from Day 1.

Foundations: When the pandemic began, a group of local foundations

and individuals immediately teamed up to start the Western New York COVID-19 Community Response Fund. This collaborative effort has directed \$13 million in emergency grant funding to provider organizations throughout our region -- including Empower. Additionally, the Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation and the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo provided flexible grant funding to meet Empower's pandemic-related needs.

Board of Directors: Members of Empower's board of directors and senior leadership team volunteered to provide meals for many of our Community Housing sites for much of 2020. This generous gesture gave our staff the freedom to focus on other critical needs.

More empty bottles means more work at EMPTIES FOR EMPOWER

It turns out that more people working at home means more empty bottles and cans. Our two Empties for Empower redemption centers processed more than two million containers in 2020 -- a 23% increase over the previous year.

State restrictions meant that the people we support couldn't work at Empties for Empower for several months. But our hard-working staff kept the redemption centers running, with extensive safety precautions in place.

Thanks to the Empties staff and our loyal customers for a great year. To open an account and take advantage of 24/7 dropoff, visit <https://empower-wny.org/connect/empties-for-empower/>.



After four months in limbo, day services reopen with a focus on safety

When New York State gave permission for day services to reopen in July 2020, Empower was ready to make it happen. We had been engaging people we support, family members and staff in video forums to gather input on how to safely reopen. Based on that input, we put extensive safety precautions into place for our day habilitation and community prevocational sites -- and we have had great success in keeping COVID-19 transmission rates very low.

"I was happy that I was able to attend an online discussion about my apprehensions, my questions, about reopening," one family member told us. "Thank you for listening, and for installing some of the measures I suggested during the online discussions. I feel happy that the measures are in place. Everything is safe, everything is clean, and everything is being followed in terms of the guidance from the CDC and the state."

Grab 'n Go Coffee Cart at the Fashion Outlets FULFILLS A DREAM

Shoppers at the Fashion Outlets of Niagara Falls USA are enjoying a new “perk” as of October 1, 2020. The Empower Grab ‘n Go Cart, featuring coffee and a variety of beverages and snacks, is open at the mall on weekdays. The cart offers paid job training opportunities for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. It was originally scheduled to open April 1, but the pandemic delayed its debut.

The Grab ‘n Go Cart was inspired by Anthony Salvo, who participates in Empower’s job training services. After completing Leadership Niagara in 2019, Anthony wanted to take the next step toward his dream of owning a coffee shop. Empower worked with Anthony to establish a mobile coffee cart that will allow him, and others supported by Empower, to learn the ropes of food service.



“I had a dream to open a coffee cart because I knew it would help people with disabilities get community jobs.”

- Anthony Salvo

John Doran, property manager for Fashion Outlets, heard about the project as a member of Empower’s Advisory Council. He asked to meet Anthony, and quickly decided to get involved. Doran worked with his company, Macerich, which owns and operates the shopping center, to secure a one-year, no-cost lease.

“Empower’s Grab ‘n Go is just the kind of amenity our shoppers look for, and we’re delighted to help this impactful organization and one of its star participants get this new concept off to a great start,” said Doran. “We

value our relationships throughout the community and think Fashion Outlets of Niagara Falls USA is a terrific place to launch a new retail idea, like this coffee and snack cart – especially one that offers so many benefits to everyone involved.”

“I had a dream to open a coffee cart because I knew it would help people with disabilities get community jobs,” said Salvo. “I feel really great about opening the Grab ‘n Go Cart. Thank you, Empower, for this. I promise a good cup of coffee and a nice snack for a good price.”

EMPOWER Children's Academy shifts from remote to hybrid to in-person



Beginning March 16, 2020, Empower Children's Academy followed all state and county guidance by converting to fully remote learning. Our administrators, teachers, classroom aides, therapists and clinicians all pitched in to keep the preschoolers learning. Staff dropped off learning packets to children's homes, while we

set up an online classroom system that became the backbone of our preschool for the next several months.

We switched to a hybrid learning model in September 2020, with two days a week of in-person learning and three days a week of remote learning for all students. This model continued through May 10, 2021, when students were finally able to return to in-person learning five days a week.

We are truly grateful to the Children's Academy staff for their flexibility and ingenuity throughout the COVID-19 crisis, and to the families of our preschoolers for their patience. Here's to better days ahead!



Before everything changed: Celebrity preschool readers

Just before the pandemic put a stop to in-person learning, Empower Children's Academy began celebrating March as Dr. Seuss's birthday month with a series of celebrity readers. Shown here are Niagara County Sheriff Michael Filicetti and Niagara Falls Mayor Robert Restaino, who were among our special guests.



THANKS

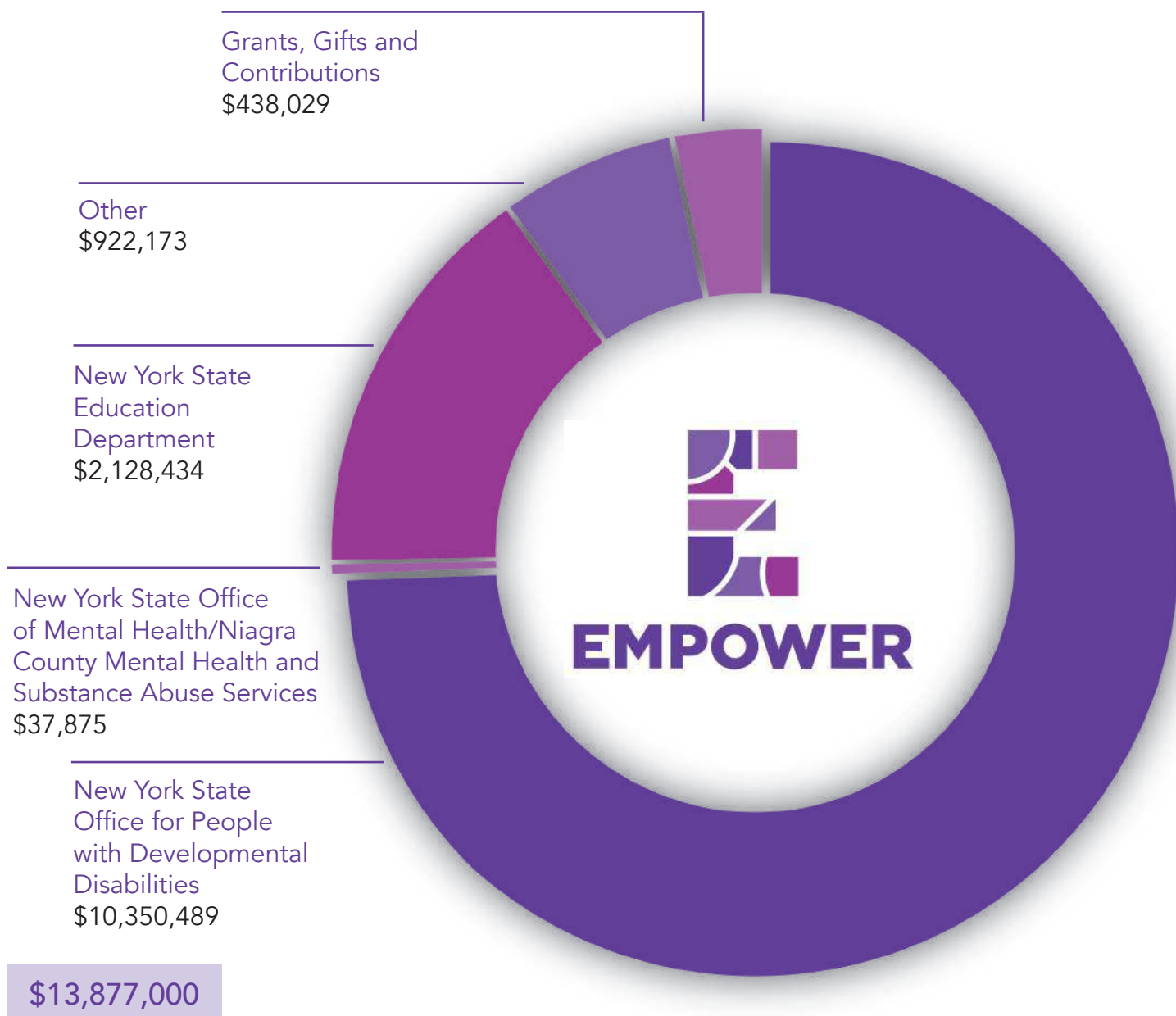
to all of our dedicated employees!

Throughout this annual report, you have read about many of our dedicated employees. There are many more to acknowledge: our drivers; our nurses and clinical staff; our job coaches providing supported employment services; our administrative staff working in human resources, training, finance and quality assurance; our small but mighty maintenance crew; and our senior leadership team, who directed our COVID-19 response with nimbleness and grace. Thanks to the entire Empower family for their incredible efforts throughout 2020.



FUNDING SOURCES AND FISCAL IMPACT

It is an understatement to say that 2020 was a complex year financially. We were unable to hold our annual fundraising events, and we lost significant revenue due to COVID-related suspension of services. Meanwhile, COVID-related foundation grants, as well as federal assistance through the Paycheck Protection Program and the Provider Relief Fund, allowed us to weather the storm. Some of those revenues are reflected here, while some will be recognized in 2021. Empower ended 2020 with a modest surplus.



2020 DONORS AND FUNDERS

Due to the cancellation of our fundraising events, many donors and sponsors who ordinarily would have contributed to **Empower** are not listed. We look forward to a larger list in 2021!

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