

21

WAYS THAT

21

MATTERED

ANNUAL REPORT 2021



EMPOWER

support services to help you live your best life

2021: A YEAR THAT MATTERED

For all of us, 2021 was a year of transition. "Normal" life returned in starts and stops. We were still dwelling in COVID's long shadow, but we also started to think about other things again.

This annual report looks at 21 ways that 2021 was a consequential year. We thank all who made this past year a good one: funders, collaborators, board members, donors and supporters, and of course, our incredible team.

Here's hoping that 2022 will be even better!

21 WAYS THAT '21 MATTERED

1 EMPOWER BATTLES THE PANDEMIC WITH SHOTS IN ARMS

As we entered 2021, our top priority was to help people get vaccinated against COVID-19. Working with a variety of partners – including the Niagara County Health Department, Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center, and Parkview Health Services – we did just that.

People with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and workers who support them, were among the first to be eligible for the vaccine. Within a matter of weeks, we were able to vaccinate every person living in our Community Housing sites who wanted it. We helped their family members get into vaccine clinics, too. Then we turned our attention to our employees, and we worked all year to get shots in arms – including booster doses when they became available.

Now, in 2022, there is more evidence than ever that COVID vaccines are an incredibly powerful tool against serious illness, hospitalization and death. We are proud to have helped so many people protect themselves.

2 EMPOWER BRINGS WORK/LIFE SOLUTIONS TO NIAGARA COUNTY

In the spring of 2021, we learned about Work/Life Solutions, an innovative service offered by the United Way of Buffalo and Erie County in conjunction with Evans Bank. We immediately knew we wanted to offer it to our employees. Thanks to a grant from the Empower Foundation, we launched Work/Life Solutions on July 5.



Through Work/Life Solutions, a resource coordinator connects Empower employees with services and support for

personal issues that might affect their work performance, such as food insecurity, homelessness, childcare or transportation challenges, domestic violence, or mental health challenges.

Through Evans Bank, Empower employees can get personal loans to address their financial challenges. The loan can be repaid through payroll deduction, which is reported to credit bureaus monthly to improve or establish credit. Financial literacy education is also available.

In less than a year, Work/Life Solutions has become a highly-used benefit at Empower. We are proud of this partnership, and we're delighted to see how much it has helped our hard-working staff!

21 WAYS THAT '21 MATTERED

3

EMPTIES FOR EMPOWER HITS NEW HEIGHTS

Bottle and can returns were up 30.5% at our Empties for Empower redemption centers in 2021. The location at 4701 Military Road processed 1,822,931 containers – a 37.3% increase from the previous year. The location at 3571 Niagara Falls Boulevard processed 1,306,694 containers – a 22.1% increase. That's a total of 3,129,625 containers processed in a single year – the first time we've passed the 3 million mark! Our sincere thanks to all of our Empties customers.



To learn more and even sign up online, visit empower-wny.org/connect/empties-for-empower. You get your full deposit back and support a great cause – and you have access to 24/7 dropoff!

4

EMPOWER CHILDREN'S ACADEMY RETURNS TO IN-PERSON LEARNING

On May 10, 2021, we finally returned to in-person learning five days a week in the Empower Children's Academy preschool program. After 6 months of remote learning and 8 months of hybrid learning, it was wonderful to get back to full-time, in-person instruction!



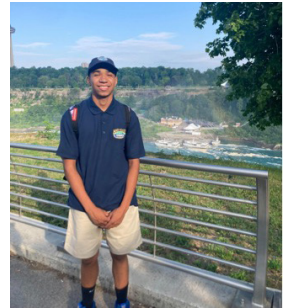
Here is one of our students enjoying a holiday celebration in the preschool.

5

STEPS TO WORK OFFERS PAID WORK EXPERIENCES FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

2021 brought new energy and growth to Empower's Steps to Work program. Through Steps to Work, Empower partners with local high schools to offer work readiness skills and paid internships to students. Empower has been working with Niagara Wheatfield High School and Niagara Academy since 2017.

Steps to Work is funded by New York State Adult Career and Continuing Education Services-Vocational Rehabilitation (ACCES-VR), which is part of the New York State Education Department.



Participating students attend 10 classroom sessions on job readiness, including resume building, interviewing skills, job applications, and how to keep a job. Students are then offered paid summer internships with local employers, based on their individual interests. Empower's employment specialists provide job coaching throughout the 8-week summer internship period.

Above is a picture of Joey on his first day as an intern with the Maid of the Mist Corporation. Other participating employers have included CBI International, the YWCA of the Niagara Frontier, Hoover's Dairy, Woodcock Brothers Brewery, and the Town of Niagara Parks Department. Some students have been hired as permanent workers and have successfully maintained their positions.

We look forward to growing the program in the coming year, with the addition of Starpoint High School. 2022 will also bring an exciting new partnership with the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation!

We are always looking for new summer internship placements. If you are interested, please contact Empowered to Work Job Placement at (716) 299-0851.

21 WAYS THAT '21 MATTERED

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EMPOWER CLINIC TAKES A FINAL BOW

After steadily scaling back over several years, the clinic at Empower closed for good on June 30, 2021. At the time of its closure, the clinic was still providing podiatry, audiology and physical therapy services; the dental clinic had already closed in 2016.

The Empower clinic was a labor of love, but it almost always lost money. In past years, funding in other areas was enough to balance deficits in the clinic. Unfortunately, a decade of funding cuts from New York State left Empower unable to keep absorbing these losses.

Before closing the clinic, Empower arranged for patients to transfer to other clinics in the community. We thank the patients, providers and staff who were part of our health services family for so many years.

7

CQL ACCREDITATION IS RENEWED FOR ANOTHER THREE YEARS

After a weeklong virtual visit in May, Empower earned a 3-year renewal of our Basic Assurances Accreditation from the Council on Quality and Leadership. This international accreditation shows that Empower has effective systems in place to deliver excellent supports for people with disabilities.



We chose to seek this accreditation because we recognize that quality is a mission that is never accomplished. We can always do more, and we can always be better. Our partners at CQL challenge us to continuously raise the bar. Thanks and congratulations to the dozens of staff members,

volunteers, board members, and especially people we support, for all they did to earn this prestigious honor.

8

EMPOWER CENTERS DIVERSITY, EQUITY AND INCLUSION

Thanks to the efforts of an agency-wide workgroup, Empower raised the bar on its diversity, equity and inclusion efforts in 2021.

Empower's Community Housing sites, day programs and preschool students have all participated in ongoing activities highlighting the diversity of our community. Below is an art project created by people in our day program in Niagara Falls.

Meanwhile, Empower has started a training program in diversity, equity and inclusion for all supervisory staff, to create a more inclusive work environment at all agency sites.



21 WAYS THAT '21 MATTERED

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EMPOWER LEADS THE FIGHT FOR BETTER STATE FUNDING

Throughout 2021, most employers faced a worker shortage. The field of intellectual and developmental disabilities has been dealing with this reality for several years now. A decade of funding cuts from New York State led to low wages and increased responsibilities, especially for direct support professionals.

Empower has taken a lead role in fighting for more resources. On May 24, Empower CEO Jeff Paterson led a rally in Buffalo, organized by the Developmental Disabilities Alliance of Western New York (DDAWNY), to demand that the state “stop the cuts, raise the wage, and fund the future.” He is shown below at the rally, with members of Empower’s Community Housing management team.

On September 14, Jeff testified on behalf of DDAWNY at a hearing of the New York State Senate Disabilities Committee, led by Senator John Mannion of Syracuse. This hearing helped to raise awareness of the need for better state funding.

We are delighted to report that Governor Kathy Hochul and the State Legislature have taken these pleas seriously. New York State has directed more than \$500 million in American Rescue Plan funding, provided by President Biden and the United States Congress, toward recruitment and retention payments for direct care workers. Meanwhile, the 2022-23 state budget includes a significant increase in funding that will allow Empower and other providers to offer higher wages.

Empower is proud to fight for more federal and state resources, so that people with disabilities can have the supports they deserve.



10

EMPOWER FACES A STAFFING CRUNCH HEAD-ON, AND LEADS THE FIELD

We’ve already noted that 2021 presented huge challenges with staffing, especially in Community Housing sites. Despite these challenges facing the entire field, Empower continued to outperform peer agencies in both recruitment and retention.

Thanks to an array of initiatives, under the leadership of our human resources and workforce development staff, Empower’s new hires increased 48% from 2020 to 2021. New hires in the fourth quarter of 2021 were 33% above the quarterly average. And we were able to make these new hires stick: our average quarterly retention rate of Direct Support Professionals was 79% in 2021. Nationally, 70% of Direct Support Professionals stay in their jobs for less than 5 years – but the average tenure of Empower’s DSPs is 7.6 years!

11

DEVON HEDGEMON HELPS TO COMBAT VACCINE HESITANCY

When the COVID-19 vaccine rollout began in early 2021, we found a high level of vaccine hesitancy among Direct Support Professionals. To encourage vaccination, the Developmental Disabilities Alliance of Western New York (DDAWNY) presented an online panel discussion on reasons to be vaccinated.

One of the panelists was Devon Hedgemon, a Direct Support Professional at Empower, who talked about his decision to be vaccinated. Thanks, Devon, for helping to educate others!



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SHAILA KOKIL IS BUFFALO 60 STRONG

Shaila Kokil – known as Miss Shaila at Empower Children's Academy – was named a Buffalo 60 Strong Ambassador in 2021. Buffalo 60 Strong is a campaign that encourages older adults to live a healthy and active lifestyle.



Shaila isn't just a beloved special education teacher at Empower. She is also an active volunteer with the Hindu Cultural Society of Western New York, where she has helped to create a youth summer camp, cultural

activities, and even a CPR training program!

Congratulations, Shaila, on this wonderful recognition.

13

JENNIFER WHITMIRE WINS STATEWIDE AWARD

Jennifer Whitmire, one of the talented Direct Support Professionals at Empower, was honored in September as one of 7 statewide recipients of the Justice Center Code of Conduct Award. The honor is given to individuals who embody the ethical standards outlined in the Code of Conduct for Custodians of People with Special Needs. Specifically, Jennifer was recognized for her strong commitment during the COVID-19 pandemic, and her willingness to be a role model for newly hired staff. This great honor shows that some of our state's best Direct Support Professionals work at Empower!



14

EMPOWER TAKES CENTER STAGE AT A STATEWIDE CONFERENCE - AND JACKIE TAKES A TRIP

On September 14, Empower representatives gave a presentation on workforce recruitment and retention at the Human Resources Professionals Conference for the Disability Provider Community in Saratoga Springs.

Jackie McGrath (pictured at right), a human resources staff assistant at Empower, traveled to the conference with Brandon Jerla (pictured in the center), Empower's director of staff development and learning. Jackie has received supports from Empower over the past several years, but she recently grew her role and is now an integral part of the hiring team. She prepares paperwork, greets candidates, and assists with interviews.

Empower's high level of engagement with the people we support during staff hiring and onboarding has helped to push Empower's new hire retention rate well above the norm. That's why Empower was asked to present at the conference, where more than 75 professionals heard about Empower's successes.

This was the first time Jackie had traveled away from home without a family member to accompany her. She stayed in her own hotel room and overcame her fear of traveling by herself. We're lucky to have Jackie working with us, and we congratulate her on her personal and professional accomplishments.



21 WAYS THAT '21 MATTERED

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NOW IN COLLEGE, CHARLES DIETEMAN JOINS EMPOWER FOUNDATION BOARD

In one of his last acts as a student at Lewiston-Porter High School, graduating senior Charles Dieteman presented a \$7,000 check to Empower CEO Jeff Paterson – the product of Charles' annual World CP Day fundraiser at Lew-Port. Starting in 6th grade, Charles raised nearly \$15,000 for Empower up to his high school graduation.

Now a first-year student at Niagara University, Charles continues to support Empower in new ways. He is now a member of the Empower Foundation Board of Directors. Thanks for all you do, Charles!



16

BOARD OF DIRECTORS WELCOMES ITS FIRST SELF-ADVOCATE REPRESENTATIVE



In June 2021, Robin Warren was appointed as Empower's first self-advocate representative on the Board of Directors. Robin participates in community prevocational services at Empties for Empower, and lives in the community with her husband. She is a graduate of Leadership Niagara and is an effective self-advocate. At board meetings, she represents the interests of

people who receive supports from Empower.

Thank you, Robin, for bringing the voice of self-advocacy to our board table!

17

POPULAR FUNDRAISING EVENTS MAKE A GRAND RETURN

After COVID-19 doomed our in-person fundraisers in 2020, we were delighted to bring those events back in 2021. June 14 brought the annual Drive FORE Empower Golf Tournament at Niagara Frontier Golf Club in Youngstown, raising more than \$20,000 to support Empower. The annual Snowflake Basket Auction, usually held for two days in March, became a one-day Harvest Basket Auction in October – raising more than \$10,000 in a single day.

Our sincere thanks go to all the sponsors, donors, participants, volunteers and staff who made these events so successful. We look forward to even greater success in 2022!



21 WAYS THAT '21 MATTERED

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EMPOWER FINISHES 2021 IN GOOD FINANCIAL SHAPE

As we mentioned earlier, state funding was cut over and over again over the past decade, leaving providers like Empower short on funds. By early 2020, nearly half of not-for-profit providers across the state had less than 40 days of cash on hand – leaving them extremely vulnerable.

Empower was no different. Over a period of six years, we cut more than 25 positions, closed and transformed various services, started new revenue-generating programs, and asked staff to forego raises far too often. Even with those measures in place, we ran deficits several times due to lack of state funding.

After years of planning and hard work, we turned the tide in 2020 – and in 2021, we had another good year. We're financially stable and ready to face the future.

19

CHILDREN'S GUILD FOUNDATION SPONSORS NEW ONLINE FUNDRAISING SYSTEM

2021 brought an exciting opportunity, thanks to the support of the Children's Guild Foundation. Empower was one of several organizations that joined the Network for Good, an online giving platform. Network for Good makes it easy for donors to give money to Empower, and for Empower to track these gifts and communicate with donors. Thanks to the Children's Guild Foundation for connecting us with this great resource!

20

EMPOWER PUTS FINISHING TOUCHES ON NEW THREE-YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN

With our previous strategic plan expiring at the end of 2021, we knew we needed a new plan to guide us through the next few years. In mid-2021, Empower hired Mary Beth Debus of Program Savvy Consulting to work with us on a new three-year strategic plan. The second half of 2021 was filled with stakeholder interviews, surveys and planning sessions, leading to a robust new plan with three priority areas: workforce development, technology, and expanded programs and services.

Thanks to all who shared their expertise as part of this planning process – your voices were heard, and your input will make a huge difference over the next three years.

21

FACING TRANSPORTATION CHALLENGES, EMPOWER TAKES THE WHEEL

Empower's day and prevocational services rely on getting people back and forth from their homes to their programs. For the past several years, Empower has used a contracted transportation provider, along with Empower's own vehicles and drivers. Due to a driver shortage, it has become more and more difficult to find outside transportation providers who are able to meet Empower's needs. So, Empower "took the wheel." As of December 2021, Empower now handles all of its own transportation.

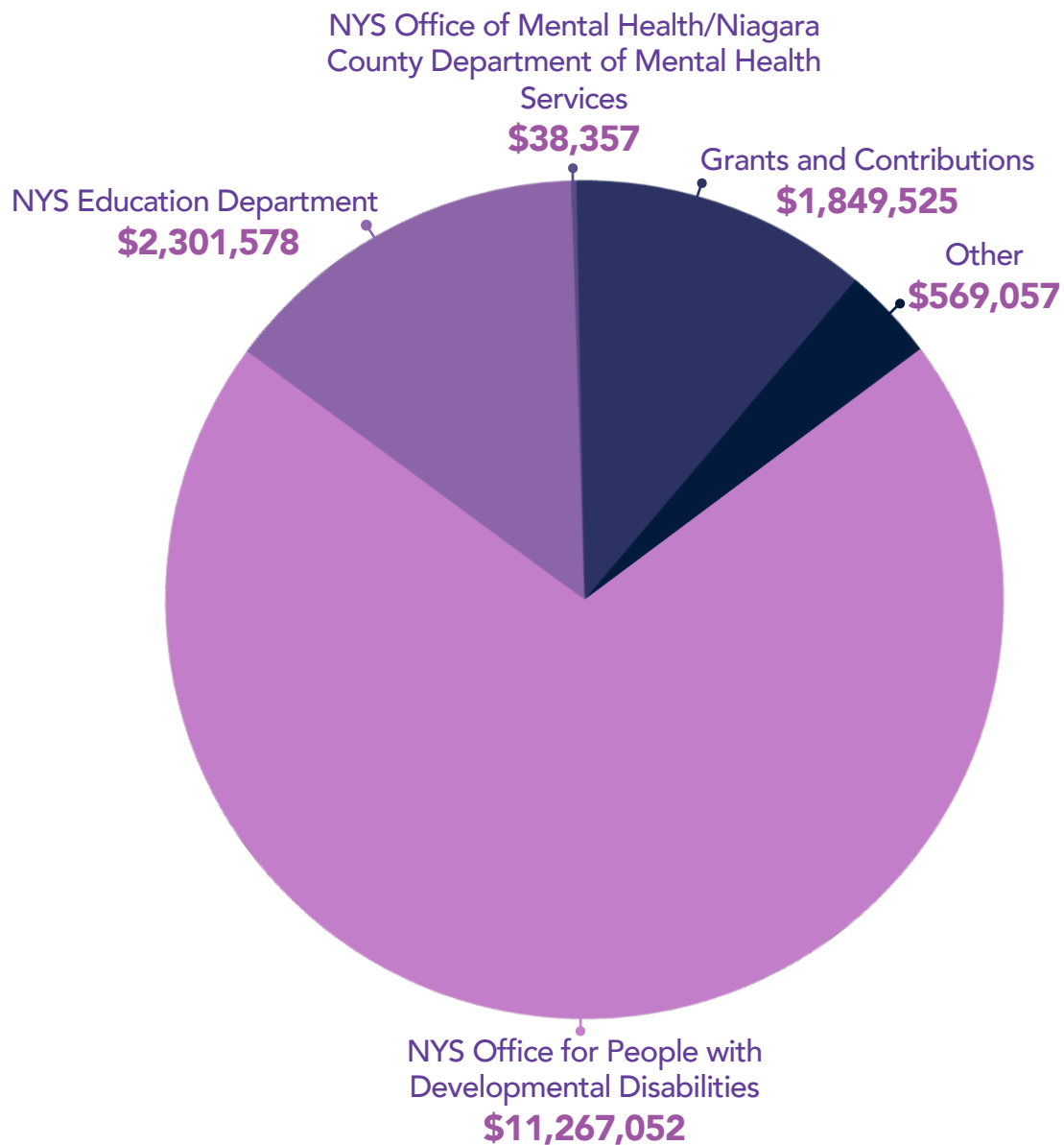
As always, we do whatever it takes to provide the best possible supports.



2021 BUDGET AND FUNDING SOURCES

2021 brought ongoing financial challenges thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, Empower ended 2021 with a surplus.

The following is the funding breakdown by funding source.



Total:
\$16,025,569

2021 DONORS AND FUNDERS

\$1-\$99

Lori Argo
Marie Bindeman
Marlies Borzynski
Kevin Bovanizer
Pauline Conrad
C.T. Young Mechanical
Diane Everts
Friends of Angelo Morinello
Florence Frosolone
Michael Johnson
Sherri Kaminski
Sue Ann LaBarber
Nancy Mangus
Martin's Service Station
Anthony Mineo
Lydia Muzzillo
Don Napoleon/VSCO
Linda Padilonia
Razl, LLC
D. Tattersall
Dorothy Tidd
Michael Vitch
Susan Zelasko

\$100-\$249

Benevolent and Protective Order
of Elks
Robert and Sheila DiFrancesco
Enterprise Fleet Management
Alfred Frosolone
Robert Kazeangin, Jr.
Lewiston Porter Middle School
M.J. Colucci & Son Funeral Chapel
Michael Marra
Honor Martin
Sevenson Environmental Services
Solution Development Firm
The Spicy Pickle
Tony's Takeout

\$250-\$749

Blackbaud Giving
Dr. Alice Kozen
Susan Kuznik
Lewiston Porter Central School
Joseph Mineo
Orleans-Niagara BOCES
Jeff and Michele Paterson
Philadelphia Insurance
Red Jacket Lodge
Town of Niagara Lions Club

\$750-\$1,499

Neil Gruppo
Jocoy's Collision
Ron Miller
Diana VanHise

\$1,500-\$2,999

Advance2000
Bond Schoeneck & King
Crown Benefits Group
The Evans Agency
Lumsden McCormick CPA
Niagara County Central Rotary Club
William and Joan Paterson

\$3,000 AND HIGHER

Charles Dieteman and Friends
Francine Hall
Parkview Health Services

** This list does not include those who received a tangible benefit for their payment, including Golf Tournament golfers; the list does include event sponsors.*

2021 LEADERSHIP

SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAM

Jeff Paterson, *Chief Executive Officer*
Diane Baehre, *Chief Quality Officer*
Rita Tweedie, *Chief Financial Officer*
Eric DesSoye, *Director of Analytics and Special Projects*

Mary Hoffman, *Educational Services Supervisor*
Brandon Jerla, *Director of Staff Development and Learning*
Kim Kiely, *Director of Job Training and Day Programs*
William Krayss, *Director of Community Housing*

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

President: Thomas Caserta, Jr., Esq.
Immediate Past President: Susan Kuznik +
First Vice President: Patricia Wrobel +
Second Vice President: Daniel Vitch
Treasurer: Stanley Fera
Corresponding Secretary:
Russell Petrozzi

Recording Secretary: Patrice Wells
Self-Advocate Board Representative:
Robin Warren
Kevin Burgess, LMSW
James D'Angelo
Robert DiFrancesco
Alice Kozen, PhD

Olivia Linke
Noelle McCoy
Donald Napoleon
Richard Sawicki, DPM

+ Term has since expired

EMPOWER FOUNDATION BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Chairperson: Donald Napoleon
Charles Dieteman
Eric McGuire

Robert O'Leary
Jeff Paterson

Empower

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