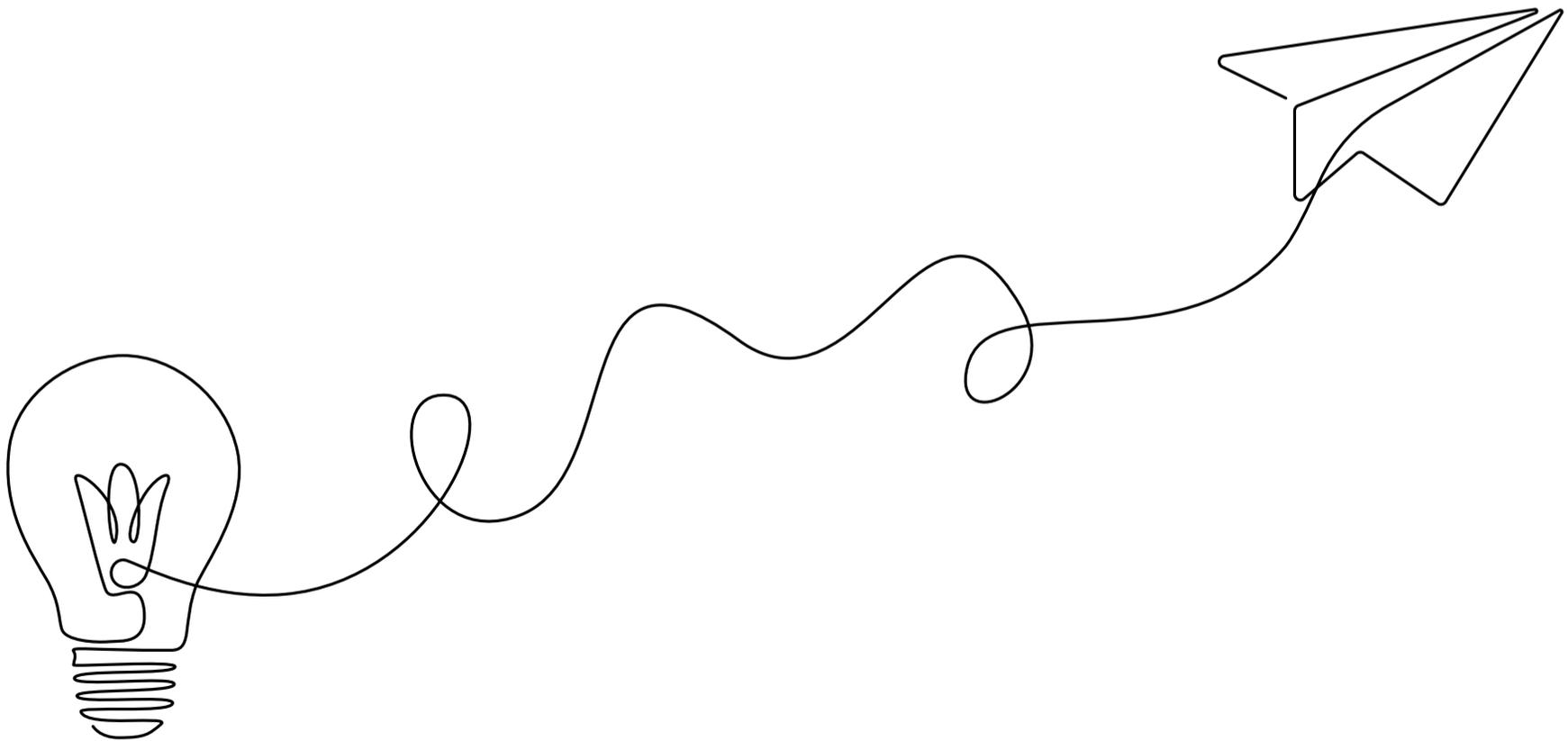




# COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT PROJECT: CASE STUDY

*How Mini-Grants For Resident-Led Projects Are  
Creating Community Impact*



# Empowering Residents to Lead Change

In 2022, the Northwest Michigan Community Health Innovation Region (CHIR) Learning Community sponsored the Community Empowerment Project (CEP), a pilot project designed to empower residents to advance the CHIR’s vision of healthy people in equitable communities. The following case study describes the motivations behind the CEP, what the project was, and how it centered equitable grantmaking practices. It also shares the stories of four grant recipients and offers recommendations, based on lessons learned, to other institutions interested in funding resident-led community-based projects.

## Motivations for resident empowerment

Participants of the Northwest Michigan Community Health Innovation Region (CHIR) Learning Community have long recognized a gap between traditional decision-makers and residents<sup>2</sup> experiencing health inequities across their 10-county region. Motivated by a strong desire to narrow the gap, in 2022, the group sought an opportunity to shift power and resources directly into residents’ hands. A pool of available funds presented an opportunity for experimentation that led to the development of the Community Empowerment Project (CEP), a pilot project designed to amplify resident voice.<sup>3</sup>

## Developing the Community Empowerment Project

After gathering inspiration from other community empowerment efforts,<sup>4</sup> CHIR staff and Learning Community participants began brainstorming how best to use the \$20,000 budget while applying their shared learning around equitable grantmaking,<sup>5</sup> or trust-based funding, and community engagement.<sup>6</sup> They aimed to support the CHIR’s shift from simply consulting residents on its programming to empowering them to create impactful community-level change. “We often ask residents to complete surveys to guide our programs like the MiThrive Community Health Assessment,<sup>7</sup>” describes Emily Llore, a CHIR staff member. “The question for the Learning Community became, how might we empower them to be the change they want to see?” In response, the group designed the CEP to award mini-grants

between \$5 and \$5,000 to residents in the CHIR’s 10-county region for community-based projects led directly by residents.

To further the two priorities of resident empowerment and equitable grantmaking, the Learning Community developed minimal criteria<sup>8</sup> for the CEP mini-grants. “While we considered including the CHIR’s priorities established through MiThrive in the grant criteria, we chose to trust that residents would request funding for ideas that would make a difference in their communities,” says Erin Barrett, another CHIR staff member. The criteria were complemented with a low-barrier application<sup>9</sup> to make it easy for residents to apply. “There was a lot of discussion about equitable options for the application,” reflects Paula Martin, who participated on the CEP review committee. “One idea was to list a phone number for applicants to call and describe their ideas.” The group ultimately created a simple online application form inviting residents to share their ideas and indicate any additional support they might need beyond funding, from project management support to an organizational ally. The application did not require a work plan.

*Health inequities are systemic and unjust differences in opportunities for achieving good health and well-being, such as access to healthcare services or affordable housing and safe transportation options.<sup>10</sup>*

**Footnotes:**

- 1) Available from: <https://northernmichiganohir.org/learning-community>
- 2) Resident is synonymous with community member, client, or patient.
- 3) Resident voice acknowledges all individuals who belong to the community.
- 4) The Learning Community drew inspiration from several successful community empowerment mini-grant initiatives, including the YMCA of San Francisco’s Youth Empowerment Fund.
- 5) See the Equitable Grantmaking Continuum from NonprofitAF and RVC Seattle: <https://nonprofitaf.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Equitable-Grantmaking-Continuum-One-Pager-updated-March-2021.pdf>
- 6) See the Community Engagement Continuum from Harvard Catalyst (2021): [https://catalyst.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/HCAT\\_CEnRsm.png](https://catalyst.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/HCAT_CEnRsm.png)
- 7) Available from: <https://northernmichiganohir.org/northwest-chir/mithrive>
- 8) See the appendix, “Community Empowerment Project Grant Criteria,” for more information.
- 9) See the appendix, “Community Empowerment Project Application,” for more information.
- 10) Braveman, Paula. “What Are Health Disparities and Health Equity? We Need to Be Clear.” Public Health Reports, vol. 129, no. 1\_suppl2, 2014, pp. 5–7., <https://doi.org/10.1177/00333549141291s203>.

*The primary goal of the Community Empowerment Project was to empower residents by shifting resources and power directly into their hands to narrow the gap between traditional decision-makers and people experiencing health inequities across the Northwest Community Health Innovation Region's 10-county region.*

## The role of a review committee

The Learning Community gave the responsibility of reviewing applications and either approving or denying grant applications for funding to a review committee. Five CHIR partners with diverse lived experience, expertise, and perspectives were recruited from the Learning Community and MiThrive Work Group for a voluntary one-year tenure on the review committee. If funding becomes available for a second round of the CEP, the Learning Community plans to engage past grant recipients in a compensated decision-making role. CHIR staff provided the review committee with facilitation support, upholding its culture and agreements while encouraging the challenging conversations required for piloting a new project. The committee met virtually three times and engaged in asynchronous discussion over email.

## Promotion

With the project design and review committee in place, the Learning Community used strategies to promote the CEP to residents who hadn't been previously engaged with the CHIR. The group identified community health workers and other trusted messengers who held pre-existing relationships with residents to spread the word. Facebook community pages became one promotion channel where the CEP was advertised as an opportunity for "money, resources, and support for community-based projects led by residents." Suggested projects included everything from neighborhood improvements to social justice to storytelling. Applications were released with a one-month deadline and were reviewed on a rolling basis to support ongoing learning, course correction, and equitable fund disbursement. The Learning Community received 11 applications from residents in six counties for community-based projects that aligned "unbelievably well" with the CHIR's

priorities established through MiThrive, even though the priorities were not included in the grant criteria. To Barrett, this suggests how attuned residents are to the needs of their communities.

## Fund disbursement

To uphold their equity commitment, the group set a goal of completing the application review and fund disbursement process within 30 days of the application deadline. CHIR staff supported a quick decision-making process, but moving money swiftly into residents' hands was easier said than done. The Health Department of Northwest Michigan served as the project fiduciary, and its disbursement process typically takes upwards of one month. "We worked hard with finance to collect information from grant recipients and facilitate quick turnarounds," says Llore. The process required significant administrative work, especially with some residents facing barriers such as not having an email address or access to reliable internet, let alone online banking. Yet Bryan Southerton, the CHIR's accountant, wanted the "funds in residents' hands immediately" and developed bespoke disbursement plans. For example, one plan involved identifying an organizational ally capable of receiving funds on the resident's behalf. In others, residents received a gift card, were offered reimbursement for supplies, or had a training registration paid on their behalf. "Bryan's dedication to distributing funds quickly for residents contributed to the CEP's overall success," notes Jane Sundmacher, executive director of the CHIR.

## Outcomes

In the spring of 2022, five residents were awarded CEP mini-grants ranging from \$129 to \$5,000 to advance their community-based projects. No reporting was required.

# Reflections

## On taking a trust-based funding approach

Learning Community participants recognize trust-based funding as an approach “to shift resources and power and close the gap between decision-makers and people experiencing the problem, barrier, or inequity,” says Mindy Taylor, who participated on the CEP review committee. It’s based on the belief that “residents are experts on the needs of their communities,” shares Martin, and involves trusting residents to take action to meet those needs. Some specific trust-based practices incorporated within the CEP included simplifying the application, offering residents various forms of support, honoring residents as experts, and trusting that grant recipients would complete the work without a reporting requirement.

Barrett questions whether it was easier for some to embrace the opportunity to test trust-based funding practices because the CHIR isn’t an established grantmaker. Others were cautious nonetheless. “Despite believing in community empowerment, I was nervous about giving money to residents with no strings attached,” reflects Sundmacher. “Everything about this project required a mindset shift for me.” Gerry Morris, who also served on the review committee, agrees: “I thought the concept was great, but I felt that the guardrails weren’t sufficient. It was outside of my comfort zone.” Everyone involved acknowledged the challenge of what trust meant in practice for the CEP: that is, the need to accept that ideas may not work out as planned and to be comfortable with not knowing what happened.<sup>11</sup>

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### Four stories of resident-led community-based projects

Five residents were awarded CEP mini-grants in the spring of 2022 to advance their community-based projects. Four were willing to share the story of their work during interviews conducted in January 2023, and all four received a stipend to compensate for their time. The following project profiles are based on information collected during those interviews. While every effort was made to produce an accurate reflection of the work, given the case study format, it was not possible to capture the full nuance and depth of each story.

- 1 **Bringing SMART Recovery to Manistee County**
- 2 **Intergenerational healing parenting classes for Indigenous residents in Emmet County**
- 3 **Peer-to-Peer support for first responders in Northwest Michigan**
- 4 **Building community resilience by “deepening capacity” in Charlevoix County**

**Footnotes:**

11) NWCHIR staff, Learning Community participants, and review committee members were interviewed without prior knowledge of how the resident-led projects featured in this case study unfolded after fund disbursement.

## 1 Bringing SMART Recovery to Manistee County

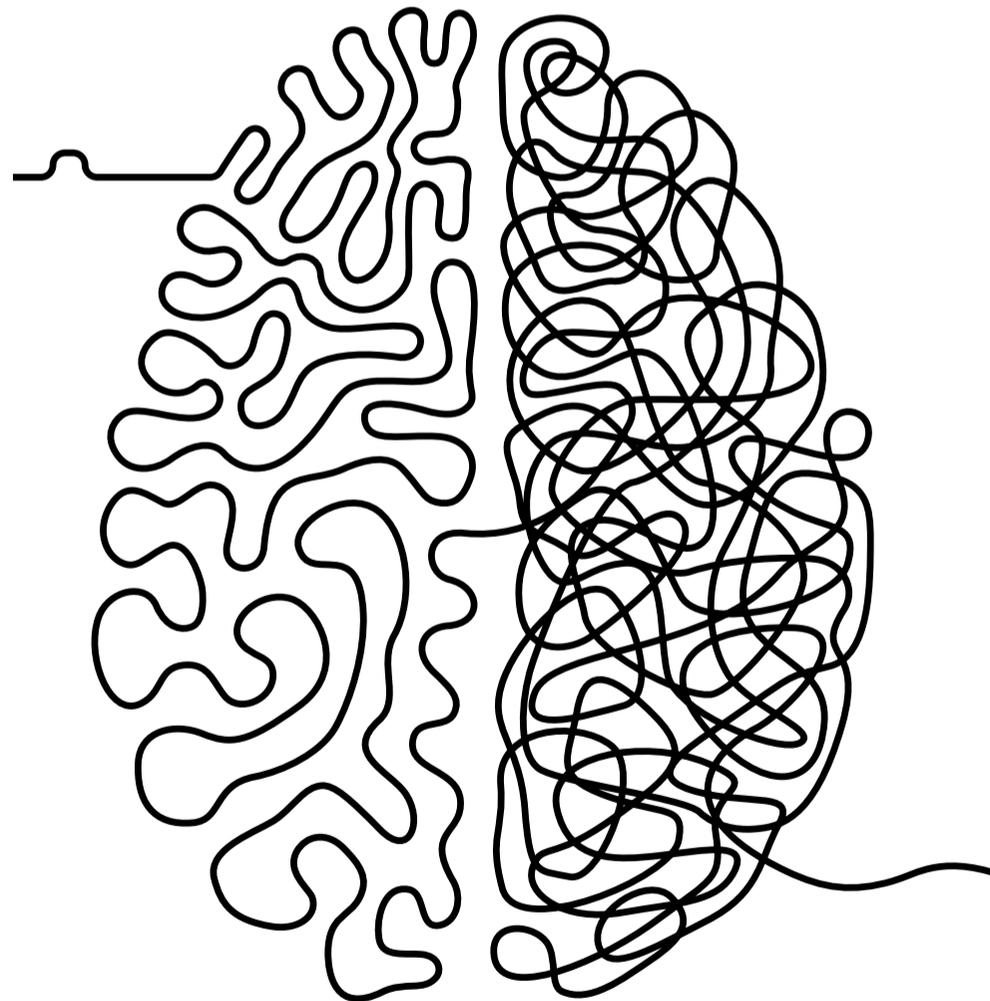
Anthony Lukasiewicz, a long-time resident of Manistee County, Michigan, first learned about the CEP through the Friendship Society in Manistee County. Based on the belief that “the more you help others, the more you help yourself,” Lukasiewicz was inspired to apply for CEP funding to pursue a facilitation certificate in

SMART Recovery, a training he had previously benefited from, to support individuals grappling with addiction.

SMART Recovery is a mental health and educational program that centers on changing addictive behaviors, thoughts, and feelings to support people in developing positive lifestyles. Lukasiewicz says that “SMART helps people learn to self-manage and address the underlying causes of addiction through exercises like journaling.” He also emphasizes that SMART Recovery can be applied to any addiction, from drug addiction to compulsive buying. It isn’t meant to replace other forms of support (like Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon) but instead to complement them.

Due to an unforeseen change in his circumstances, Lukasiewicz had not been able to complete a facilitation certificate by January 2023. He describes being humbled by additional support from the CHIR and is eager to complete the certificate at the earliest opportunity. Lukasiewicz plans to offer SMART Recovery to residents at Spirit of the Woods Conservation Club in Brethren and to approach Dixson Township to provide training at the township’s community building, which he describes

as a more accessible location. “We have to take recovery seriously,” says Lukasiewicz. “I look forward to completing the certificate and being able to facilitate meetings, both for addicts and their family and friends.”



# 2

## Intergenerational healing parenting classes for Indigenous residents in Emmet County

Meredith Kennedy is a resident of Emmet County, an Indigenous mom, and a self-described “systems agitator” whose life’s work is to ensure that her children do not endure the same harm as previous generations of Anishinabe. When she learned about the CEP through her involvement in the CHIR, Kennedy jumped at the chance to apply for CEP funding on behalf of the Zagaswe’iwe, or Council to Address the Holy Childhood Indian Boarding School,<sup>12</sup> to advance its community-identified priorities. The Zagaswe’iwe consists of over 180 boarding school survivors and their descendants who carry traumatic memories of assimilation, physical and sexual abuse, and cultural erasure.

The Zagaswe’iwe “wanted culturally appropriate parenting classes to stop the cycle of abuse and trauma,” describes Kennedy. The CEP grant funded two facilitators, Jen and Lexie, from Parenting is Essential, to deliver a curriculum designed by Albert Pooley to support Indigenous mothers and fathers in becoming models of healthy parenting and bringing healing to their families and broader tribal communities. During the previous five years, Lexie and Jen had been offering classes free of charge to support their community. With the CEP grant funding their time, they delivered a 14-week program in the spring of 2022 that attracted 13 participants from Emmet County. The virtual classes were held once a week for 80 minutes, organized by theme, and supported by an accompanying workbook. Participants were encouraged to share openly about their lived experiences of trauma. “We built peer support,” says Kennedy. She goes on, asserting that “One of the challenges for boarding school survivors is that there aren’t enough counselors who are aware of the trauma of Indian boarding schools and know how to respond in culturally appropriate and responsive ways.”

“I believe community problems have community solutions,” Kennedy says. “What I loved most about the CEP is that it uplifted people in my community and offered the healing they wanted. The CEP honored our solutions.” Following the success of the classes last spring, Lexie and Jen now have the confidence to apply for other funding opportunities to continue delivering the curriculum on a paid basis. At the time of the interview, the Hannahville Indian Community had just earmarked funding through their Prevention Specialist Program for them to deliver the curriculum to residents in Michigan’s Upper Peninsula next.



*You can learn more about this work at [www.miigwechinc.org/zagasweiwe](http://www.miigwechinc.org/zagasweiwe).*

**Footnotes:**

12) The Holy Childhood Indian Boarding School in Harbor Springs, Michigan was the last Indian boarding school in operation in the United States. It closed in 1986.

# 3

## Peer-to-Peer support for first responders in Northwest Michigan

Cobey Taylor is a resident of Missaukee County and president of the Northwest Michigan Peer Support Network, which aims to address the stigma around mental illness and reduce the number of suicides within the first responder community. Taylor learned about the CEP through a practicing mental health clinician in the network.

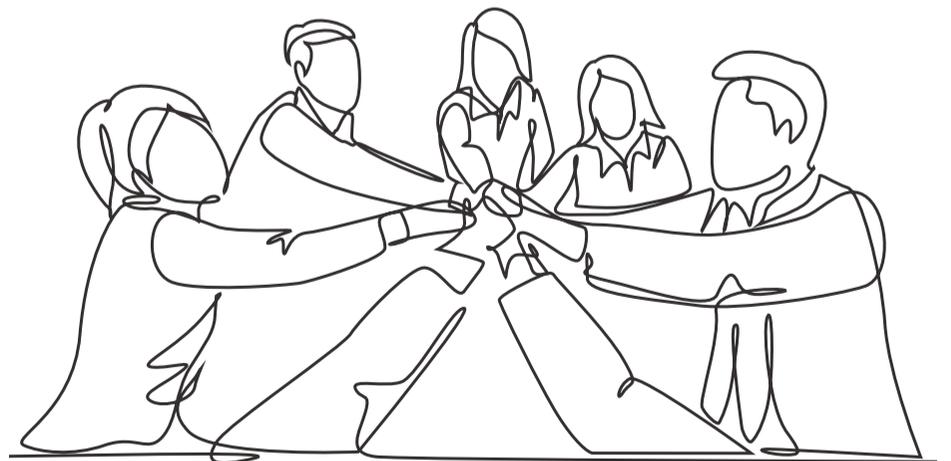
“The opportunity felt like it was meant to be,” says Steichen, another network member and local firefighter. He shares that Taylor saw the CEP funding as an opportunity to “break the mold on mental health training.” Taylor’s idea was for the Network to host a low-cost date night for local first responders and their spouses, including a meal and mental health training. The goal was to increase spouses’ awareness of the trauma their loved ones experience and understanding of how they can help.

“We wanted to offer mental health training at a fun event that people would look forward to,” reflects Steichen. “Everyone embraced the vision, and everything snowballed in the best way.” After receiving the CEP grant, Discovery Cruise Lines offered an accessible rate to the Network so it could host the event on a tour boat in Grand Traverse Bay. Then the Northern Michigan Doctors’ Association offered to cover the catering expense. Thanks to the generous support, the Network could offer tickets for \$25 apiece. The event drew participation from across the first responder community, including fire, law enforcement, dispatch, and emergency medical services. Twenty-nine couples from Northwest Michigan attended the event, and one couple even drove from Detroit—a 250-mile journey. Everyone met on a dock and loaded onto a boat on June 22, 2022, the first day of summer and “reliably decent weather,” laughs Steichen. After their meal, 2 The Rescue, a mental health training

group based in Grand Rapids, Michigan, facilitated an eye-opening course that explored topics like depression and crisis intervention. “When first responders receive information at work and don’t take it home, that’s a barrier to mental health,” says Steichen. “We were glad to provide the education to both first responders and their spouses, too.”

“We’ve had so much positive feedback on the event,” Steichen goes on. “We strengthened our Network and gave people a chance to meet new friends within the first responder community.” Several attendees, including spouses, were motivated to take on leadership roles within the Network. One attendee from law enforcement is now helping to grow Network participation within that community. Beyond the increase in Network participation and leadership, the event’s success lent credibility to the Network and helped kickstart a more concerted fundraising effort. In addition to providing mental health resources to the community, Steichen says the Network hopes to host similar events annually. Ideas are currently percolating; this year, it might be a softball tournament.

*You can learn more about the Northwest Michigan Peer Support Network at [www.nmipeernetwork.com](http://www.nmipeernetwork.com).*



# 4

## Building community resilience by “deepening capacity” in Charlevoix County

Two residents of Charlevoix County, Caitlin Ludlow, a healing arts practitioner, and Ben Cheney, a performer and designer, learned about the CEP through a friend who thought the opportunity might be of interest. Incidentally, Cheney and Ludlow had recently

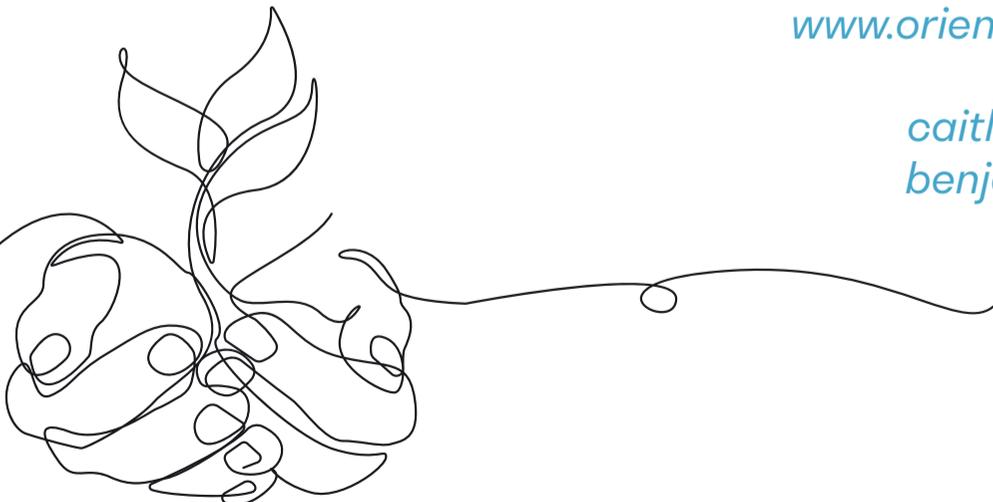
attended the Zagaswe’iwe’s<sup>13</sup> monthly healing circle and were “getting curious” about what contribution they could make as white-bodied allies to the community. The timing was ripe. Ludlow and Cheney applied for CEP funding to co-design and co-facilitate a five-week series of workshops called “Deepening Capacity” for a small group of participants. The series aimed to improve participants’ personal and collective agency as allies in activism.

To Ludlow, “capacity feels like having resiliency in my nervous system.” Cheney adds that deepening capacity is about turning inward with “kindness, compassion, and curiosity.” Together, they created a container<sup>14</sup> for the series that allowed participants “to be safely introspective and communally connected, so that they might feel their capacity and see it reflected,” describes Cheney. Eleven participants enrolled free of charge in the series, which ran in the fall of 2022, and on average, nine people attended each two-hour in-person workshop. Cheney and Ludlow designed the workshops around themes, like connection, and

incorporated expressive arts therapy practices. Each workshop included movement, drawing, journaling, community sharing, and “authentic witnessing,” says Ludlow, “that happens when people watch other people move.”

Cheney and Ludlow believe participants found real value in the series. “We want more of this’ was the sense we got,” Ludlow shares in celebration. On reflection, she also highlights the importance of accessibility: “We wanted to make the series available to anyone willing to do the work, regardless of their financial situation,” she says. “The prospect of getting funding from the CHIR to offer something to the community without worrying about how we’d be paid for our time made the CEP very appealing. So often we do work without being paid, which is unsustainable.” While the series was offered free of charge, participants were encouraged to make a donation to Miigwech Inc., or a nonprofit of their choosing, to show their support as allies to the local First Nations community. Looking ahead, Ludlow and Cheney want to offer the series again in the fall of 2023, yet with more workshops over a longer period of time. They foresee a challenge in centering accessibility while at the same time being compensated for their time. They therefore encourage other institutions to adopt the CEP’s approach: funding residents directly to make contributions to their communities.

*You can learn more about Ludlow and Cheney’s work at [www.orienttothrive.com](http://www.orienttothrive.com) or by reaching out to them directly at [caitlin@orienttothrive.com](mailto:caitlin@orienttothrive.com) and [benjamin.b.cheney@gmail.com](mailto:benjamin.b.cheney@gmail.com).*



**Footnotes:**

13) You can learn more about the Zagaswe’iwe in the section “Intergenerational healing parenting classes for Indigenous residents in Emmet County.”

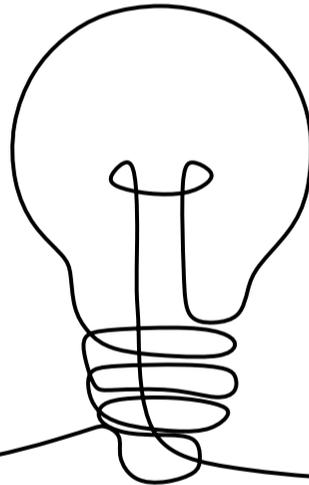
14) Ludlow and Cheney use the word container as a metaphor for the safe, engaging atmosphere they created for participants throughout the series.

# Reflections

## On the importance of the Community Empowerment Project

Funding residents through the CEP to lead community-based projects represented a step forward for the CHIR in its efforts to address the gap between traditional decision-makers and people in their region experiencing health inequities. “Residents are leading,” says Llore, “and we’re providing support. We’re acting more like a thought partner.” Additionally, the CEP led the CHIR to develop new organizational practices to overcome internal barriers to resident engagement or, as Sundmacher puts it, “to move up the Community Engagement Continuum<sup>15</sup>.” Instead of asking residents for information, CHIR staff ask, “What can we offer to support your success?” notes Barrett. One way this manifests in practice, for example, is when CHIR staff prepare new grant proposals, they now think carefully about using the funds to support more authentic connections with residents.

Barrett continues with her reflection, suggesting that it’s likely “safe to say that the CEP led everyone involved to shift their mindsets around what it means to empower residents.” Southerton and Llore offer that the CEP left them feeling proud to belong to a region where people are willing to step up and improve their communities. And, importantly, Sundmacher adds, “I was initially reluctant from an administrative perspective, but this whole experience has been so positive. I would embrace something similar in the future.”



### Footnotes:

15) See the Community Engagement Continuum from Harvard Catalyst: [https://catalyst.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/HCAT\\_CEnRsm.png](https://catalyst.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/HCAT_CEnRsm.png)

# Recommendations

Based on the Community Empowerment Project experience

The CHIR staff, Learning Community participants, review committee members, and grant recipients invite other institutions interested in funding resident-led community-based projects to draw on this case study for inspiration. They also offer the following recommendations based on their experience with the CEP:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
|    | <b>Develop a low-barrier application process</b>  |
|   | <b>Create clarity by defining abstract concepts like “community” and “impact”</b>   |
|  | <b>Think creatively about what you have to offer; small amounts of money make a big difference, as do other forms of support, like supplies, meeting spaces, technology, data, and social capital</b> |
|  | <b>Activate your existing connections with residents by inviting them into advisory and collaborator roles</b>  |
|  | <b>Promote any opportunity as broadly as possible</b>   |
|  | <b>Look for shared learning opportunities</b>   |
|  | <b>Ground your efforts in humility; there’s a lot to learn</b>  |
|  | <b>Recognize that shifting traditional practices is a long game, requiring experimentation, reflection, and patience</b>  |

## Contributors

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**Anthony Lukasiewicz**, Community Empowerment Project grant recipient and resident of Manistee County, Michigan

**Paula Martin**, MS RDN, Community Nutrition Specialist, Groundwork Center for Resilient Communities

**Gerry Morris**, Board President, Project Unity for Life

**Bryan Southerton**, Accountant, Health Department of Northwest Michigan

**Jacob Steichen**, Community Empowerment Project grant recipient and resident of Grand Traverse County, Michigan

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## About the author

Jessica Conrad has been working at the frontiers of positive change for over a decade as a researcher and writer, storyteller, communications strategist, program manager, and curriculum designer. She brings deep grounding in systems practice and extensive experience designing and producing case studies and publications, strategic initiatives, and transformative learning opportunities in her previous roles at the RE-AMP Network, the Blekinge Institute of Technology, Forum for the Future's School of Systems Change, and the Garfield Foundation.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Community Empowerment Project Grant Criteria

Minimal grant criteria were developed for the Community Empowerment Project (CEP) to reflect a commitment to equitable grantmaking.

To have been considered for a 2022 CEP mini-grant, applicants must have:

- Been located in one of the 10 counties served by the Northwest Community Health Innovation Region: Antrim, Benzie, Charlevoix, Emmet, Grand Traverse, Kalkaska, Leelanau, Manistee, Missaukee, or Wexford.
- Had an adult ally if under age 18 (otherwise the opportunity was open to all ages).
- The CEP was not intended for organizations or agencies.

### Appendix B: Community Empowerment Project Application

A low-barrier application was developed for the Community Empowerment Project (CEP) to reflect a commitment to equitable grantmaking. The simple online form opened with a sincere sentence: “Don’t worry - it doesn’t need to be perfect.”

The application included the following questions:

Section 1: Tell us about your project!

- What is your idea?
- Who will benefit from your project/effort?
- How will your project/effort support change?
- We recognize that it takes more than money to make a project successful. What supports would you be interested in receiving to help amplify your idea? Select all that apply:
  - Money
  - Networking support
  - Help with problem solving
  - Advocacy support
  - Access to data
  - Project management support
  - Promotion and outreach support
  - Organizational ally
  - I’m not sure and would like to learn more!
- How much money is needed to support your project / idea?

Section 2: Contact information

- Name
- Email
- Phone number
- What is your preferred method of communication?
  - Email
  - Phone
- What county do you live in?

Section 3: Before you go!

- What questions do you have, and how can we support you?