



## Center for Teen Empowerment

The Center for Teen Empowerment (Teen Empowerment or TE) is an asset-based youth development program, founded in 1992, that reaches low-income youth and neighborhoods in Boston and Somerville, MA, and in Rochester, NY. Our mission is to employ, train, and empower youth to, in collaboration with adults, create peace, equity, and justice.

Teen Empowerment inspires young people to think deeply about the most difficult social problems in their communities, and gives them the tools they need to bring their voices and lived experience into the public policy debate work with others to catalyze significant positive change. Each year, more than 140 TE youth leaders conduct over 200 events and initiatives that involve more than 6,000 youth and adults in efforts to build peace, tolerance, and community.

TE's work is recognized nationally and has received numerous honors, including MassVote Award for youth civic engagement (2014, 2016, 2017), The Boston Foundation's Collaborate Boston Award (2016), MetLife Foundation's Community-Police Partnership Award (2012), Harvard University Ash Center Bright Idea (2010 and 2012), RIT Center for Public Safety Initiatives Award (2009), Bank of America Neighborhood Builder Award (2006), and U.S. Mayor's Conference Best Practice in Youth Development (2007).

The Teen Empowerment Model™, upon which the Center for Teen Empowerment's programming is based, drives the daily work of TE staff and Youth Organizers. It is a comprehensive methodology made up of a clearly articulated set of beliefs, actualized through a system of group building, skill development, decision making, and behavior management/change methods.

TE's consulting & training staff train others to use the Model and have written a book, *Moving Beyond Icebreakers*®, describing our creative approach to group facilitation. Numerous national organizations, such as Year Up, the Food Project, and City Year, have incorporated elements of the TE Model into their work.

## Request

The Center for Teen Empowerment request \$10,000 to support our Massachusetts programs:

- **Youth Organizing:** TE employs 70 Massachusetts youth (ages 14 to 21) annually who work every afternoon, together with adult staff, to plan and implement initiatives that address pressing community issues, including violence, youth-police relationships, gentrification, substance abuse, and mental-wellness. Using TE's interactive model, the project builds the employment, life, and leadership skills of the youth to work with adult staff and to organize youth-police dialogue sessions, community forums on racism, youth civic engagement and "know your rights" trainings, and community building initiatives such as teen open-mic nights and inter-generational block parties. Low-income youth earn minimum wage (\$12.75 currently) per hour to gain an understanding of the social problems they confront and implement initiatives that involve 4,000 youth and adults each year.
- **Somerville Youth Leadership Programs:** TE engages 70 youth (ages 12-18) in stipended peer leadership positions. Youth work 1-2 afternoons per week to plan and implement events and initiatives that involve their peers in municipal efforts and enrichment activities. Programs include: Mental

Wellness Ambassadors; Teen Library Leaders; Youth-Police Department walking dialogues and community safety survey project; Youth Media Matters teen journalism project; and youth outdoor leadership programming.

- **TE Studios:** Twelve Boston youth artists meet twice per week to create, perform, and record/produce socially conscious music, poetry, and interpretative dance that conveys culturally competent positive messages to their peers. Youth earn \$12.75 per hour and gain arts, technology, and employment skills. Each year, youth produce an original album. Last year's album, released in May, has been streamed and downloaded more than 800 times. Listen at [teenempowerment.bandcamp.com/](https://teenempowerment.bandcamp.com/)
- **Opportunity Youth United Boston Community Action Team (BCAT):** TE coordinates a group of Boston area young people ages 17-24, and organizations that serve them, working together to increase civic engagement and connection among opportunity youth (those otherwise disconnected from work and school). The BCAT core group employs 10 young people who earn \$15 per hour to register voters, work to increase voter turnout, and plan and implement youth civic engagement workshops and community events such as election night parties and policy forums.

Using TE's interactive model, the TE builds the employment, life and leadership skills of the youth to work with adult staff and to organize dialogue sessions, youth-led community meetings, and large and small scale efforts to involve community youth and adults in school and community improvement efforts. Working as paid Teen Empowerment youth organizers, low-income, urban youth gain an understanding of the social problems they confront, and develop the skills to implement these strategies.

The work that TE youth organizers are doing is more than an exercise in youth leadership that helps them alone. They are successfully working to shift adolescent culture in their communities away from gangs, violence, drugs, and irresponsible sexual behavior and towards positive community involvement. Teen Empowerment provides urban neighborhoods and schools with the missing ingredient that helps communities to reach a tipping point where rates of murder, drug overdose, pregnancy, suicide, and so many other negative behaviors decline and positive educational and vocational outcomes increase. That ingredient is youth leadership.

If funded, this grant will be used for youth salaries and stipends and toward community events and initiatives planned and implemented by youth leaders.

## Population

Teen Empowerment serves low-income, urban youth ages 14-21 living in Somerville and the Roxbury and Dorchester neighborhoods of Boston. These youth are primarily of African-American, Cape Verdean, Latino, Asian, Nepalese, and Caribbean descent, with a substantial low-income Caucasian population (mostly Irish, Italian and Portuguese) in Somerville.

TE youth organizers, and other residents, face a broad range of economic and social challenges. Our youth organizing groups include young people coping with undocumented immigration status, former gang involvement and/or incarceration, homelessness, pregnancy or parenting, and school dropout status.

## Goals and Objectives

**Theory of Change:** Hundreds of Boston area youth are disconnected from work and school, live in families and communities that are chaotic and under-resources, feel hopeless and powerless, and are thus more likely to engage in negative behaviors. The Teen Empowerment Model is based on the idea that

without the opportunity to develop positive relationships with caring adults and peers or to have access to legitimate sources of power, high-risk youth become increasingly likely to use negative behaviors to maintain their survival and acquire status and power among their peers. Thus, the lack of an asset-based approach, in combination with difficult community conditions (poverty, violence, substandard education, health disparities, etc.), precipitates a communication breakdown between adults and adolescents. This breakdown serves both to reinforce destructive behavior patterns among youth and to increase support among adults for punitive means of suppressing these patterns. The punitive response has the unfortunate and unintended consequence of communicating negative expectations that many then act aggressively to fulfill.

TE believes that, in order to intervene in destructive behaviors, it is essential to employ high-risk youth to work with adults solve youth issues. This opportunity gives teens a way to acquire positive power and can help them build the skills they need to have a positive influence on their peers and help transform negative adolescent behavior patterns toward positive community involvement, while successfully changing the trajectory of their own lives. The inclusion of high-risk youth in direct communication with adult leaders, residents and police facilitates the creation of positive relationships by breaking down stereotypes and the tendency for demonization by both youth and adults, as well as by creating forums for open and honest communication that leads to more effective public policy.

### **Goals:**

- Have a profound, long-lasting impact on youth engaged in leadership positions, including building their leadership and employment skills and social-emotional health.
- Shift social norms among youth in the targeted areas from negative behavioral norms—such as drug use, gangs, and other destructive behaviors—to norms that value supportive relationships with peers and adults and engagement in the process of establishing a positive community environment.
- Address the root causes of violence and other issues in the targeted communities by increasing community involvement in youth development, building tolerance and community among diverse constituencies, and building the leadership, job readiness, and life skills of neighborhood youth.

### **Objectives:**

- Formulate a diverse, well-trained, high functioning Youth Organizer (YO) group of 10-15 youth per site in each cycle (Summer and School Year)
- Employ 70 Somerville youth as peer leaders in various programs such as Mental Wellness Ambassadors, Youth-Police Dialogue Leaders, and Outdoors Leadership Program.
- Improve the social-emotional wellness, communication and interpersonal skills of youth leaders.
- Increase youths' confidence and sense of competency in a range of skills and settings.
- Reduce violence and gang activity in these neighborhoods as measured by police statistics.
- Increase youth and community involvement in civic events, increase investment in local government as an avenue for progress, and introduce youth to positive, productive, and peaceful modes of change.
- Engage at least 500 youth and adults in TE site initiatives.
- Improve youth outcomes in the targeted communities.

## **What Makes Teen Empowerment Distinct**

TE's evidenced based approach is an asset-based youth development model that helps teens use their unique talents, skills, and creativity to positively influence their peers and the public policy debate. Teen Empowerment youth organizers gain employment, communication, and various soft skills and increase their resiliency and civic engagement. The work youth organizers do at TE is more than an exercise in

youth leadership that benefits the youth involved. We expect each group's youth-led change strategy to bring about real, meaningful community change.

TE has developed a unique, interactive group facilitation model that ensures that all voices are heard in a way that builds consensus. Our approach values the ideas and opinions of all group members equally and ensures that decisions are made and carried out by youth organizers together with adult staff. Events and initiatives are youth-centered and youth-led, with adults in supportive roles. Youth organizers are responsible for outreach to involve their peers in TE's work and our intentionally diverse group (see hiring above) insures that together they will be able to reach a broad range of community residents. As a part of their job, youth also regularly represent TE in meetings and at forums and events.

In addition, TE has worked to create a leadership ladder to help youth organizers grow into adult staff roles in the organization. Currently, 10 of our 17 program staff members began working with TE as youth, including our Somerville Program Director. Because our youth are paid employees, it would be a conflict of interest to have them on our Board of Directors. We do have TE alumni on the board and current youth organizers often attend board meetings. Youth were involved in our recent executive search process, current organizational rebranding process, and other, similar important decisions.

Many of our current and former youth and staff refer to Teen Empowerment as a family. They stay in touch with the organization and with one another, creating a wide reaching network. As one alumni wrote to us recently, "Teen Empowerment showed me that I didn't need guns or drugs to be powerful. It saved my life and still I use the skills I learned at TE every day."

## Impact and Evaluation

TE uses a number of evaluative instruments and methods to assess the effectiveness of our efforts and make changes to improve the program. Youth organizers and staff members work together to set goals and evaluate each initiative and document their efforts and the results for future use. In addition, youth complete intake and exit evaluation surveys based on evidenced based tools. Collection and analysis is completed with the assistance of UMass Boston faculty. Results from last year's evaluation surveys included:

- 100% of youth surveyed learned skills that helped prepare them for the future
- 100% built positive relationships with youth and adults they would not otherwise have
- 100% were proud of what they accomplished and felt more responsible for their community
- 94% thought they'd improved in more than one skill area.
- 88% reported gaining leadership skills

When comparing pre- and post-test evaluation surveys:

- 71% displayed increased level of empowerment
- 93% displayed increased civic engagement
- 50% displayed increase in social capital

In 2013, TE worked with Dr. Russell Schutt at UMASS Boston to conduct an independent, multi-faceted evaluation of TE's work in Somerville. This study found significant positive results for individual youth, showing that, compared to peers, youth who work at TE enter the program with lower self-esteem and employability than the control group and leave with higher employability and greatly improved self-esteem and are more civically engaged, and these impacts are sustained over time. In addition, the study contained statistically significant evidence that TE's efforts were responsible for a 50% decrease in the level of juvenile crime in Somerville's highest crime neighborhood.

## Why Staff Are Passionate About Teen Empowerment

Teen Empowerment makes every effort to choose staff people who are from the communities we serve and are passionate about the issues that we are working to address. As mentioned above, 10 of the 17 adult program staff members at TE began as youth in our programs. Here is what some of them said about their passion for their work:

- “Staff members are passionate about their work because it's personal. Many staff come from the communities in which they work, and/or identify with the specific issues related to youth in their community.”
- “Teen Empowerment is a special place to me. It embodies the idea of youth voice, and acknowledges that youth are the resource needed to create positive change in the community. We are able to get creative as staff, and pass on that creativity to our youth organizers who understand what the relevant issues in their community.”
- “I am passionate about working for TE because I feel like we are at the frontline of things, and I get to see magic happen that simply isn't happening other places. “
- “We are passionate about the work we do because we saw how it creatively teaches young people to become positive influential role models to everyone in their community. We strive to ensure that our organization empowers teens regardless of their background and/or mental health and we value the impact because staff can relate to the youth that walk through our door seeking direction and guidance.”

## Budget and Sources of Funds

The total budget for Teen Empowerment's Massachusetts youth development programs is \$891,265. Of this, 27% goes directly to youth salaries. The following sources of funds for these programs for this year have been committed and received:

• Department of Public Health Youth at Risk Grant	\$180,000
• City of Somerville	\$350,000
• City of Boston Youth Development Grant	\$ 25,000
• Shannon Community Safety Initiative	\$ 61,000
• Community Development Block Grant	\$ 50,000
• John Hancock	\$ 54,000
• Crane Foundation	\$ 20,000
• Rowland Foundation	\$ 30,000
• United Way	\$ 15,000
• Andreas Foundation*	\$ 35,000
• Yawkey Foundation	\$ 25,000
• Carolina Fund*	\$ 63,000

\*Part of a larger grant to Teen Empowerment

In addition, we have several foundation grants pending with The Boston Foundation, the Hyams Foundation, the Trefler Foundation, the Clowes Foundation, and other funders. Finally, funds from our consulting revenues and book sales as well as donations from individuals significantly help to fund this work.