

# GEO Member Story



**The Peter and Elizabeth C. TOWER Foundation**

*The Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation, a family foundation working to improve the lives of young people in Western New York and Eastern Massachusetts, is reaping the benefits of creating deep relationships with community members.*

Since 1990, The Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation has supported community programming that supports children, adolescents and young adults affected by substance abuse, learning disabilities, mental illness or intellectual disabilities to achieve their full potential. Keeping closely connected to the issues at hand is a value originally instilled by the foundation's founders. Today, the Towers' legacy is carried forth by an organization equally committed to strengthening relations with its community and grantees.

In 2011, the Tower Foundation embarked on a journey towards building out its strategic plan under the leadership of Executive Director Tracy Sawicki. Prior to joining the Tower Foundation, Sawicki built empathy through working in the nonprofit sector directly with people with disabilities.

"The first time I heard an individual with a disability say *don't decide anything about me, without me*, I was in college. I never forgot this. It really resonated with me. Ensuring you have the authentic voice of constituents is critical," Sawicki explained.

Approaching the strategic planning process through this lens encouraged the Tower Foundation to keep the communities in which it was trying to serve at the center of its work. The staff and board used results based accountability, an approach which uses the desired end conditions as grounding for an organization's work, to guide their planning process. This process helped the Tower Foundation develop results statements which painted a clear picture of what they were trying to achieve in each of their funding areas.

"Alignment was very important to the Trustees. We did not want to be working at cross purposes with the communities we support so we selected a framework that pushed us to make sure what the Foundation thought was important and a good direction, resonated with others," Sawicki said.

To pressure test these results statements, the Tower Foundation hit the road, conducting over 30 in-person focus groups. Focus groups were often hosted by community-based organizations and attended by a wide variety of stakeholders connected to the issues at hand.

"If there was a stakeholder who we thought should share their voice, we invited them to participate in responding to our results statements. We also asked other stakeholders if there was anyone we missed," Sawicki said. When working on issues that cross systems, it is important to include everyone at the table. Participants included government agencies and officials, other funders, service providers, parents of those with disabilities and, most importantly, young adults with disabilities. "If you are advocating for youth, you need to include the youth voice and youth perspective," Sawicki said.

The Tower Foundation received rich feedback from each focus group. Though they found the picture of what success looks like was in tune with community needs, the language of each results statement

needed adjusting in order to work for some stakeholders. Updating the language gave the Tower Foundation common language to relate its work across multiple platforms and now helps potential grantees easily determine whether or not they are a good fit for funding.

Engaging the community early on in the strategic planning process also helped form relationships, build trust and break down the power dynamic which often exists between grantmaker and grantee. Each focus group was facilitated by an outside party and kicked off by a program officer from the Tower Foundation.

"It helped staff get closer to the issues. It is very humbling to hear from individuals and families about what they face daily. When you listen you learn so much. We certainly did. It reinforced the importance of the foundation's work and our role in making it possible for young people with intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, substance abuse and mental health disorders, live full and satisfying lives in our communities," Sawicki said.

Today, the Tower Foundation is seeing the ripple effects of soliciting feedback from community stakeholders. Grantees are engaging staff at the foundation as partners, seeking and sharing community news and flagging potential collaborations. "People approach us because they had that experience of being heard," Sawicki said.

Listening to the community also widened the circle of community leaders and organizations the Tower Foundation engages with and learns from. This has encouraged the foundation to be less risk averse, which is increasingly important as payment reform and regulatory environments change in the areas it funds. In turn, staff have also noticed that incoming grants applications are increasingly innovative and collaborative.

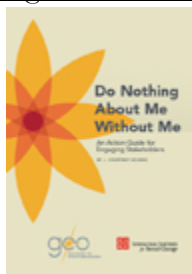
As the Tower Foundation works to influence systems-level change to support healthy communities, Sawicki confirms it will continue to harness the potential behind nurturing and deepening relationships with its grantees and community. "We can't do our work without you. We can't get to the results we want without you. While we bring an important resource to the table, it is just one of the ingredients needed to do this very important work."

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To find out more about The Peter and Elizabeth C. Tower Foundation, visit [www.thetowerfoundation.org](http://www.thetowerfoundation.org).

## **GEO resources that relate to the topics covered in this member spotlight**

### *Do Nothing About Me Without Me*



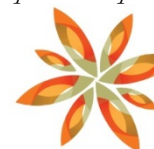
### *Great Power, Great Responsibility: Grantmakers' Role as Conveners*

#### **Great Power, Great Responsibility**

A GEO Briefing on  
Grantmakers' Role as Conveners

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### *Widespread Empathy*



**WIDESPREAD  
EMPATHY**  
5 Steps to Achieving Greater Impact in Philanthropy

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