



# THE BALTIC NAVIGATOR



Dear Friends,

As I look back on this year, I am filled with tremendous pride. We hit the ground running in January, coming off the incredible momentum of our 1st Annual Symposium. The success of that event helped to further establish us as one of the true leaders in the peer services space. And we haven't looked back.

In April, I was honored to be interviewed by NYN Media about the life-changing impact of peer-led services. That helped to kick off future media mentions, including an article in *The Brooklyn Paper* spotlighting our 2024 Symposium. As awareness about our agency continues to grow, we are on the road to becoming a household name in the mental health landscape. The more people know about us, the more people we can potentially help.

This year, I, along with my amazing executive team, devoted quality time to attending and presenting at conferences in the peer support field, so we can continue to share and expand our knowledge as thought leaders. The work we do is more important than ever to educate legislators about the ways person-centered support can transform the lives of individuals living with a severe mental health diagnosis. With the right amount of empathy, compassion, and resources, individuals can lead bright, fulfilling lives in the community.

At Baltic Street, we've always been committed to providing community resources to help vulnerable New Yorkers thrive. A shining example of that is our Resource and Wellness Center, which we recently reopened and renamed the Isaac Brown Healing & Arts Center. Losing Isaac was a devastating time for us this past summer. Isaac was not just my predecessor, he was my dear friend. His legacy will live on through the Center, as community members gather together at our workshops to embrace their creative self-expression. In addition to re-opening the doors to our Center, we officially introduced our INSET Program with an exciting ribbon-cutting commemorating what we hope will be a new beginning for many on their path towards recovery and community reintegration. We remain grateful to Governor Kathy Hochul for selecting Baltic Street as the only New York City agency to be awarded the grant to fund INSET services.

## December 2024

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# A Message from Our CEO

As we transform lives in Brooklyn, we're continuing to make a difference in the Bronx. We hosted a wonderful ribbon-cutting ceremony at a terrific new space which now houses our Bronx Peer Advocacy and Bronx HomeWorks Programs. We proudly welcomed Bronx Borough President Vanessa Gibson who shares our vision of enhancing community resources for Bronx residents who are in recovery. With a shared commitment to improving mental health and wellness, the possibilities are endless when you have the support of prominent leaders like Ms. Gibson.

Reflecting on our 2024 journey would not be complete without my acknowledging our 2nd Annual Symposium. More than 200 peers joined us for an unforgettable day of community building and knowledge sharing. The hugs and handshakes I witnessed warmed my heart, as it truly demonstrated the power of community to combat loneliness. I'm filled with gratitude to everyone who organized, attended, presented, and sponsored the event. We couldn't have done it without you.

Looking ahead to 2025, we anticipate an exciting road ahead in our efforts to reach more people in our programs. We will continue to raise awareness about peer support while helping others to advocate for themselves. We also plan to be front and center at major community events, as we continue to strive for greater support and inclusion for the LGBTQIA+ community. I look forward to growing our Pride Committee and our JEDIA Committee so we can provide more opportunities for people to amplify their voices. And I look forward to working with all of you to erase stigma, remove barriers, and ensure that no one is ever underserved. Together, let's continue to provide a safe space for anyone who needs one.

To my outstanding staff, Board members, and community partners, thank you for all that you do. I cannot wait to see the great things we're going to achieve in 2025.

Best wishes for a safe, happy, and healthy holiday season.

Sincerely,

Taina Martinez-Laing

CEO

Baltic Street Wellness Solutions



# 2ND ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM RECAP

## Addressing Loneliness and Forging Connections at our 2nd Annual Symposium

On November 6, more than 200 peer specialists, community partners, staff, and Board members attended our 2nd Annual Symposium at BRIC in Brooklyn. The event's theme, "Unlocking the Power of Community: Addressing Loneliness," struck a particular chord as New Yorkers awoke to the 2024 election results.

Baltic Street Wellness Solutions CEO Taina Martinez-Laing encouraged attendees to embrace the safe space of the Symposium while acknowledging the election and praised attendees who came to be unified. "Our work is more important than ever," Taina said.

While setting the stage for a day of learning and community connections, Taina discussed the impact of social health. "Social health is essential to our holistic well-being," she pointed out. "Enhancing one's social health is a key part of the work that peer specialists do. Together, let's create a society where social health is valued."

The Symposium's Master of Ceremonies, Dr. Jonathan P. Edwards, a Program Consultant with the New York City Department of Mental Health and Hygiene and a key figure in the development of the peer workforce, offered eye-opening statistics on the health ramifications associated with social isolation. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, disconnection fundamentally impacts a person's mental, physical, and societal health. Loneliness and isolation also increase the risk of premature death by more than 60%.

"People's desire for connection simmers with hope," Dr. Edwards said. "The goal of this Symposium is to foster the spirit of access and give people a sense of belonging."



# 2ND ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM RECAP



## Today is a Gift

Kevin Hines, best-selling author, award-winning filmmaker, and mental health advocate, delivered a moving keynote with powerful lessons in suicide prevention. After holding a moment of silence for individuals who have taken their own life, Hines provided a harrowing account of the time he jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge in an attempt to end his life. He was miraculously saved by a sea lion, who kept him afloat, and was rescued by the Coast Guard, who were alerted by an eyewitness.

Hines provided insight into his mental health journey, which began after he was born into poverty in San Francisco. He would later witness the death of his brother, and was later placed into foster care. Over the years, Hines kept his symptoms of bipolar disorder quiet and urged Symposium attendees to never silence their pain. "Always tell someone so you are not alone," he said. For anyone having thoughts that could be physically dangerous to themselves or others, Hines stressed that thoughts "don't have to be your actions."

His takeaway to Symposium attendees: "Today is a gift." Hines also noted that suicide is one of the most preventable causes of death. "Compassion and time to reconsider can help to prevent it," he said.

## An In-Depth Look Into Loneliness

In an engaging panel discussion, Taina, Baltic Street Founder and Board Member Dr. Joanne Forbes, Alliance for Rights and Recovery COO Len Statham, and Advocates Justice Walcott and Andrea Leavitt discussed the root causes of isolation and loneliness. The panel was moderated by Baltic Street's Co-Deputy Director of Programs, Modupe Mujota.

Among the notable takeaways from the session was the importance of leadership to shape an organizational culture without silos and isolation. "Leadership needs to address any cultures that can be toxic and ensure that there is inclusion in the workplace," Taina advised. "We need to think about how everyone can cultivate and grow together as peers."



# 2ND ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM RECAP

## Person-Centered Content and a Special Recognition

An array of workshops provided the opportunity for participants to discuss their loneliness experience. Many noted the power of music to ease loneliness, while other participants discussed the benefits of volunteering and engaging on social media to connect with others. Several peers expressed gratitude to Baltic Street for giving them the tools they need to heal.

City Voices Director Dan Frey was presented with the 2024 Dr. Ruth Westheimer Loneliness Ambassador Award for his work helping to establish The Friendship Squad. The group aims to unite individuals going through life challenges while promoting peer-to-peer friendships. (Congratulations, Dan!)



## Creating Unity and Hope

After a day of inspiring stories and valuable insights, it was apparent that the Symposium met its goal of building community and building hope. To quote the Chair of our Board of Directors Wendell Knight, "Baltic Street strives to create spaces where people feel connected, seen, heard, and empowered." That was definitely the case during our memorable Symposium – many thanks to our amazing event committee, staff, and sponsors for making the day a success!



# BALTIC STREET CELEBRATES MONUMENTAL RIBBON-CUTTING IN THE BRONX



On November 18, our amazing Bronx Peer Advocacy and HomeWorks Programs held a grand re-opening celebration at their beautiful new space on East 149th Street.

Baltic Street Wellness Solutions was delighted to welcome Bronx Borough President Vanessa Gibson, who stopped by to show her support in our shared mission of improving the health and wellness of Bronx residents. “The work that we do is all-important since the Bronx has always led in high rates of diabetes, heart disease, kidney failure, and more. There’s always a lot of opportunity to (enhance) services in the Bronx,” Gibson pointed out. She highlighted an overdose prevention clinic that will soon serve as a central location with streamlined services (including peer mentoring) to better serve Bronx residents who are embarking on a recovery journey. Gibson discussed the possibility of arranging a follow-up meeting with Baltic Street to collaborate with her office and embark on a potential community partnership. In the meantime, Baltic Street CEO Taina Martinez-Laing encouraged the Borough President to “send peers our way,” while proudly noting our agency’s 35 years of exemplary service while addressing the social needs of community residents.

During the exciting ribbon-cutting ceremony, Taina was also joined by Baltic Street’s Deputy Director of Programs Mark Clarke, Program Director of our Adult Home Initiative Christopher Rogers, Director of Advocacy Yasmin Perez, Bronx Peer Advocacy Program Manager Qiana Daniels, and Bronx HomeWorks Program Director Kevin Jones. Taina expressed gratitude to the hard-working Bronx Peer and HomeWorks teams for organizing the successful event. “This is monumental,” Taina said. “I can’t say enough about how wonderful this space is. I cut this ribbon for all of us.”



# A MEMORABLE GRAND OPENING FOR 2 VITAL PROGRAMS IN BROOKLYN



November 20 was an exciting day for two critical Baltic Street Wellness Solutions programs. In twin grand-opening celebrations, we cut the ribbon on the newly renamed and renovated Isaac Brown Healing & Arts Center (formerly the Resource and Wellness Center) and we introduced the community to our new INSET (Intensive & Sustained Engagement Team) Program. Both programs are housed at 882 3rd Avenue, on the 10th floor.

The Isaac Brown Healing & Arts Center honors the legacy of former Baltic Street CEO Isaac Brown, who sadly passed away this summer. "Isaac Brown and Sara Goodman (the Resource and Wellness Center's first director) were the brains behind creating the Center," said Sean Brennan, who (until recently) served as Resource and Wellness Center Program Manager. "They were the first to say we needed a space that was not about the medical model, but about art and peer recovery. Isaac, was a lover of art and a prolific painter and was instrumental in securing funding to open the Center more than 12 years ago." Sean added, "From the beginning, the Center has been focused on ending loneliness by forging connections among members of the community."

**"Isaac would be very proud of our beautiful new space. Isaac's legacy also lives on through his beautiful art which remains on display at the Center for visitors to enjoy."**

**- Sean Brennan**

# A MEMORABLE GRAND OPENING FOR 2 VITAL PROGRAMS IN BROOKLYN



The Isaac Brown Healing & Arts Center offers art, crocheting, creative writing, music and other workshops that encourage creativity and camaraderie while allowing participants to explore their passions, much like Isaac did.

Baltic Street CEO Taina Martinez-Laing pointed out, "Healing starts within the community. The Center is my gift to you all. And we dedicate it to Isaac."

Deputy Director of Programs Mark Clarke said Baltic Street has plans to grow the Center now that it has been reopened and rebranded. "We're looking to roll out more programs, and we want to make sure we continue to conversation around loneliness that began at our Symposium," Mark said.

And the organization has other plans for the space. "We want to create an environment where people can come in and maybe hold community board meetings," Mark explained. "We want to reach out to other organizations and say, 'Come to us. Let us be a hub for you as well.' So it's a new beginning for us."



# CELEBRATING OUR NEW INSET SPACE



The INSET Program continues to provide a lifeline to individuals facing complex mental health challenges. Part of Gov. Kathy Hochul's \$1 billion mental health initiative – and the only program of its kind to receive funding in New York City – INSET provides comprehensive, personalized support to guide individuals toward recovery and resilience, including those with severe mental health diagnoses who are struggling to navigate the mental health system and receive access to treatment.

“One of the reasons we were awarded this grant is that we have almost 30 years of experience rendering person-centered, peer-based services,” Mark said. “With this unique model – intensive supports – peers are uniquely positioned to provide a different sort of care. More and more, decision-makers are realizing that peers can bring another level of support that can provide more holistic support to those who need it. We want to strengthen our participants to advocate for themselves, advocate for their needs and wants, and most of all, advocate in the process of their treatment.”

Commenting on INSET'S Grand Opening, Charles Benson, INSET'S Program Manager, said, “It was an unforgettable celebration of collaboration, creativity, and community. Partnering with the Isaac Brown Healing & Arts Center team, we showcased the incredible talents and leadership of our peers. From the vibrant live band and delicious catered food to the stunning red carpet and elegant decorations, every detail reflected the hard work and dedication of everyone involved. Each team member played a vital role, contributing their unique skills to create an experience that will be cherished by all who attended. It was a day to remember and a testament to the power of teamwork and shared vision.”

# AROUND THE AGENCY

## A Powerful Conference in Chicago



Baltic Street Wellness Solutions CEO Taina Martinez-Laing, Regional Director of the Adult Home Initiative Modque Mujota, INSET Program Manager Charles Benson, and Baltic Street Family Liaison Paula Walshe attended the National Association of Peer Supporters (N.A.P.S.) Annual Conference, “Reclaiming Our Power,” in October. The conference, which was presented in partnership with the Alliance for Rights and Recovery, took place in Chicago.

This in-person event brought together more than 300 peers, advocates, and policymakers, family members, youth, clinicians, and stakeholders from across the nation to amplify our voice. The conference theme focused on celebrating the strength and resilience within each of us and the transformative impact of peer support. Speakers delved into the power of reclaiming our narratives and our future. They explored how peer support empowers us to overcome obstacles, advocate for change, and create a more inclusive and equitable world.

Baltic Street’s team represented the agency as vigorous advocates and supporters of the conference and the stakeholder organizations behind it. The networking value was priceless, as it helped support Baltic Street’s mission to expand the national presence of both our agency and our wellness solutions movement.

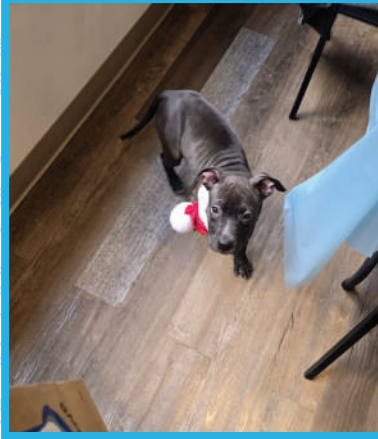
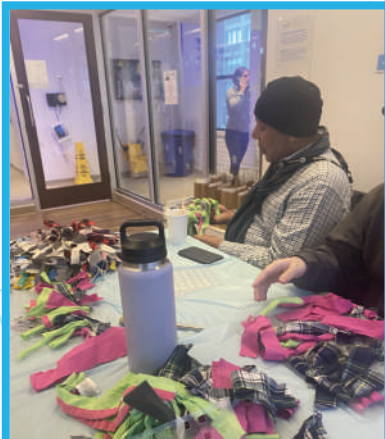
## Taina Martinez-Laing Honored for Her Outstanding Impact and Dedication

In November, Taina was honored with an Ally Award at the *Gay City News* impact Awards at Terrace on the Park in Queens. The publication honored notable leaders who have made a difference in the lives of LGBTQIA+ community members in New York City and beyond. Award recipients represented a range of industries including advocacy, the arts, business, entertainment, literature, and more.

**Congratulations to Taina on the incredible honor!**



## GIVING TUESDAY SPOTLIGHT: PAWS-ING TO GIVE BACK



Giving Tuesday is a global annual event that encourages people to support the vital missions of nonprofit organizations. At Baltic Street, we once again turned Giving Tuesday into “Give-Back Tuesday” by teaming up with our friends at RiseWell Community Services to support a fellow nonprofit organization. This year, we volunteered our time to support Bideawee, a no-kill animal shelter and rescue organization.

On December 3, Baltic Street team members Jana Rogers, Malcolm Douglas, Kevin Jones, and CeCe Graham joined RiseWell staff for a day of volunteering at Bidawee’s Chelsea location in Manhattan, where they helped build feeding mats and beds for the animals. And of course they spent quality time with an array of adorable dogs and cats!

Since 1903, Bideawee has been creating a safe haven for animals in need and connecting them with loving forever homes. Bideawee also offers special adoption programs to help vulnerable populations, including seniors and veterans, experience the joy and therapeutic benefits of pet ownership. Animals play an important role in combating depression and isolation, and the overall boosting of mental health.

The event marked the second year in a row that we partnered with RiseWell on Giving Tuesday. Last year, we teamed up to beautify the exterior of the United Order of Tents, a human services organization in Brooklyn.

“During that meaningful experience, we made a shared commitment to increase our collaborations with like-minded organizations who are dedicated to making our community a better place for our most vulnerable members,” said Christopher Rogers, Chief Marketing and Development Officer of the Joanne Forbes Foundation. “We are deeply passionate about every opportunity to invest our time and resources into the community. Together, our efforts today help build a brighter tomorrow, creating meaningful change and fostering a supportive environment for all.”



## NEW TRAINING UPDATE

Baltic Street team members, don't forget to register for upcoming training sessions!

Baltic Street offers a series of training sessions for new hires and other interested team members (with manager approval). Led by Baltic Street Director of Training Sara Goodman, the sessions take place on Thursdays at 9 Bond Street.



# AGENCY TRAININGS

BALTIC STREET WELLNESS SOLUTIONS



## TRAINING WILL RESUME IN FEBRUARY

Staff trainings will resume in February. Announcements with more details will come from [Resources@balticstreet.org](mailto:Resources@balticstreet.org).

# EXCITING STAFF ANNOUNCEMENTS: ROLE CHANGES



**Yasmin Perez**  
Director of Advocacy



**Monique Hodges**  
Senior Manager of Advocacy



**Modupe Mujota**  
Co-Deputy Director of Programs



**Christopher Rogers**  
Chief Marketing & Development Officer  
Joanne Forbes Foundation, Inc.



**Baltic Street  
Wellness Solutions**

balticstreet.org  
9 Bond St, Brooklyn, NY 11201  
(718) 833-5929  
info@balticstreet.org