



E.C.G.R.A.
ERIE COUNTY GAMING REVENUE AUTHORITY

**EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR'S
REPORT
FOR
APRIL
2025**



ECGRA Communications Services Report

March 2025 Comms.

BiWeekly Meeting with ECGRA Executive Director

Ongoing Social Media Management

Ongoing Consulting

IMPLEMENTED

March social media posts
2 new graphics posted in Feb.
Article reposting
BiWeekly planning meeting with the Executive Director
Photos – Ihack Press Conference
Photos – Edinboro Market
Talking Points – Ihack Press Conference

IN PROGRESS

Brand guide updates (edits made) - #ECGRAworks content from grant recipients
Little Explorers Childcare Op-Ed (in review)
Content Capture from Recipients
Scheduling – Lead Assets Event w/ Zoo



IN PLANNING

Event planning /scheduling (Lead Assets Press Conference, Special Events Press Conference, Upcoming Grants)

Graphics – Future grant opportunities



Annual Report 2024







Early Childhood Learning Erie County Investing in Families


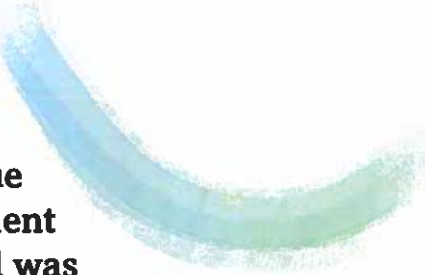

Educator Retention Awards (ERA)
Work Session
April 1, 2025

1



The Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority (ECGRA) is a subrecipient of Erie County's grant award and was awarded \$2.5 million in funding by Erie County Council in 2024 to stabilize and improve the early childhood learning and daycare industry throughout Erie County.

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ECGRA has developed a three-pronged approach to address stabilizing and developing the childcare industry in Erie County.

- 1.) **Stabilizing the Workforce**
- 2.) **Incentivizing Facility Expansions**
- 3.) **New Facility Construction**

3



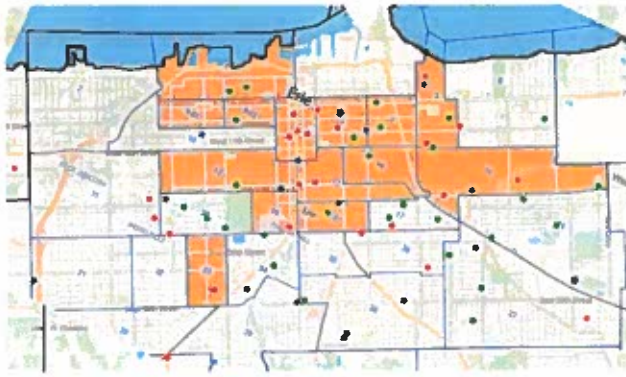
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Priority Areas

This program requires that grant-funded activities take place within Erie County with priority given to geographic areas and populations that have faced long-term economic challenges, disinvestment, and poverty.

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Erie County Census Tracts with Median Family Income less than 60%



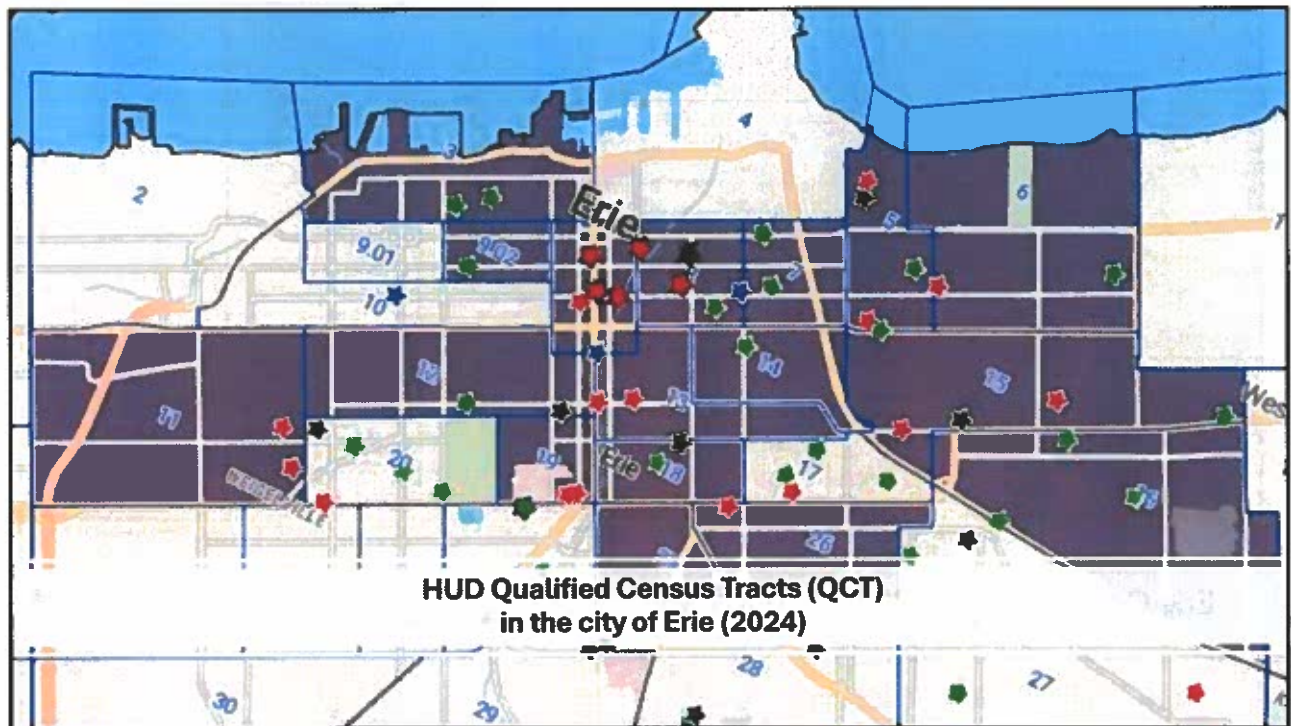
4-star daycare centers represented by red stars.

3-star daycare centers represented by blue stars.

2-star daycare centers represented by green stars.

1-star daycare centers represented by black stars.

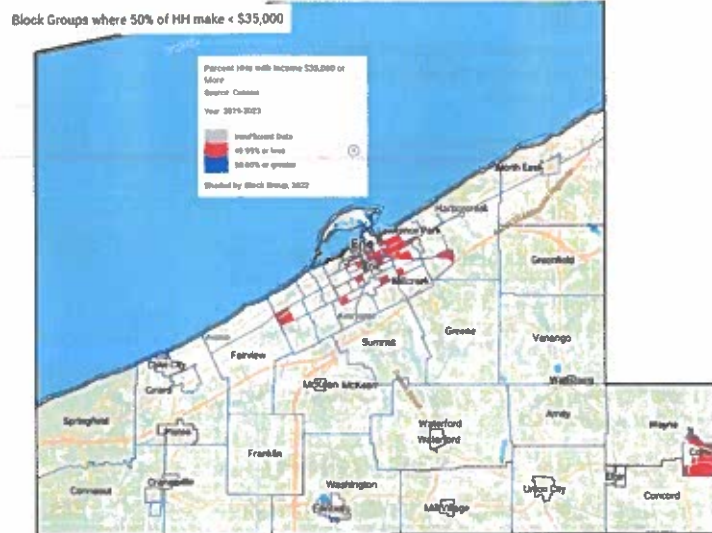
5



6



Erie County Census Block Groups where 50% of Households make less than \$35,000.



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ECGRA Early Care and Education (ECE) Educator Retention Award (ERA)



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Purpose

This award is designed to support Early Care and Education (ECE) programs who are serving families in Erie County.

Priority for these awards will be targeted to Department of Human Services (DHS) Early Care and Education (ECE) programs serving vulnerable or at-risk populations.

If there are available funds, they may be awarded to programs who have Pre-K Counts (PKC), Head Start and Head Start State Supplemental (HS & HSSP), Early Head Start (EHS), and/or Private Academic Pre-School (PDE) certification.

Provider must be STAR 2, 3, or 4, or equivalent at time of application.

Pre-K counts is considered STAR 4 equivalent.

Private Academic Pre-School (PDE) certification. (STAR 2 unless Accredited)



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Important Notes:

All award funds are contingent upon the availability of ECGRA funds.

**This application may be denied if it is not complete,
or
the instructions have not been followed.**

For any questions regarding the completion and submission of the ERA request, please contact the JAM Team Foundation at grants@jamteam.org



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Eligibility Criteria

- † Applicant must align proposed projects and programs with priorities and recommendations identified by Positioning Erie To Prosper and Compete (2024), Child Care Crisis in Erie testimony (2024), as well as any other relevant existing community plans.
- † Other American Rescue Plan (ARPA) funding may not serve as match.
- † Applicant must adhere to contemporary practices/policies with regards to diversity, equity, and inclusion and reflect the spirit and intent of Erie County's Diversity Commitment Statement (Appendix B.)
- † All applicants must be in good standing with the IRS and state and local taxing bodies.
- † All applicants must be in good standing with ECGRA's reporting requirements to date.

Ineligible Grant Recipients

- † Suspended or inactive daycares
- † 501 c 3 not in good standing with IRS




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General Provider Eligibility:

- ❖ The provider must be designated at and meet all Keystone STARS Performance Standards associated with a STAR 2 (or higher) designation or equivalent.
- ❖ The provider must hold a regular Department of Human Services (DHS) Certificate of Compliance. If a provider has a Provisional Certificate of Compliance, award funds may be available upon return to a full DHS Certificate of Compliance. PKC, HS, HSSP, EHS, or PDE certification may apply and will be awarded based on available funding.
- ❖ The provider must have an agreement with Child Care Works (CCW) through the Early Learning Resource Center (ELRC). Furthermore, the provider must be willing to enroll a child who qualifies for subsidy, if space is available.
- ❖ Providers who have liens/liabilities to the commonwealth and/or federal government, including tax liabilities, filed against them (not UCC-1 filings) will be suspended from Keystone STARS and will not be able to receive grants and awards until those liens/liabilities are fully satisfied and the program provides the ELRC a clearance certificate issued by the Department of Revenue. Clearance certificates can be obtained at the provider's local tax office.



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Specific Provider Eligibility

The provider must meet the following site-specific requirements:

- Be able to provide the following upon request:
 - Copies of employee salary scale, bonus policy and personnel handbook
 - Proof of payment of payroll taxes
 - Verification of staff eligibility through Career Pathway Placement in the PD Registry.

ERA funds must be processed through payroll and are subject to applicable taxes (processing through IRS 1099 is prohibited). Adhere to IRS guidelines for employers and be responsible for any employer's portion of taxes as awards are distributed.

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Award Timeline:

Providers shall complete and submit their application by 5:00 p.m. Friday, April 25, 2025.

All completed grant documents shall be emailed to: grants@jamteam.org

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Electronic submission:

- 1) Page A Request Form and Page B Attestation Form
- 2) Attachment #1 ERA Excel Budget Workbook

emailed to:

grants@jamteam.org




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Eligible Staff Persons



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Position Titles:

- OO = Owner/Operator as Primary Caregiver;
- PSP = Primary Staff Person as the Operator
- D/AD = Director and one Assistant Director
- GS = Group Supervisor
- AGS = Assistant Group Supervisor
- A = Aide

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Eligible Staff Persons

To be eligible, staff must be listed and verified on the providers staff report in the PD Registry.

Please refer to the Career Pathway on the PA Key website for clarifications.

Administrative, custodial, transportation, and food service staff, are not eligible for the ERA unless they have a minimum of a Child Development Associate (CDA) and work at least 15 hours per week directly with children. If this is the case, they should be classified as an Aide or AGS.

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ECE Educator Eligibility Requirements

- Staff must be employed at the same legal entity for at least 12 consecutive months prior to the date of ERA request.
- Teaching staff awards may be used only for staff who work directly with children during operating hours (at least 15 hours) a week, who hold a CDA or 9 credits in Early childhood Education.
- Award amounts are based on the number of hours worked. Staff members working less than 15 hours per week are not eligible for awards. This may be an average of 15 hours over a 12-month period.



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Academic Eligibility Requirements

Please refer to the Career Pathway on the PA Key website for clarifications regarding degree types, related degrees, credit hours, etc.

- Owner/Operator Awards
 - At least a Level B on the Career Pathway
 - Can receive the director ERA at Career Pathway A+ with an approved educational plan to achieve Career Pathway Level B
- Teaching Staff Awards
 - At least a Level A on the Career Pathway
- Teaching staff who are below Level A are not eligible.
- Administrative, custodial, transportation, food service staff, and volunteers are *not* eligible for the ERA.

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ECE Educator Retention Award (ERA) Award Amounts

STAR Level Attained	# Hours Worked Per Week	Director/AD Owner/Operator Level B or above	All Qualified Staff (Career Pathway Levels)		
			Level C or above	Level B or B+	Level A or A+
STAR 2	15 - 20	\$ 2,750	\$ 1,750	\$ 1,000	\$ 500
	21 - 40	\$ 4,500	\$ 3,500	\$ 2,000	\$ 1,000
STAR 3	15 - 20	\$ 3,000	\$ 2,000	\$ 1,500	\$ 750
	21 - 40	\$ 5,000	\$ 4,000	\$ 3,000	\$ 1,500
STAR 4	15 - 20	\$ 3,500	\$ 2,500	\$ 2,000	\$ 1,000
	21 - 40	\$ 6,000	\$ 5,000	\$ 4,000	\$ 2,000

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Guidelines and Compliance for the ERA Award

Non-compliance with any requirement of the Grant Agreement could result in the provider being required to return grant funds to ECGRA and not be eligible for future ECGRA funding.

- All award funds are a one-time payment for those working directly with children and are not to be used to supplement the incomes of teachers.
- Funds attributed to this grant must be expended within six months of the Board approval date as specified in the signed Grant Agreement. Grants not expended must be returned.
- The provider must retain original documentation for all award expenditures for seven years and ensure the documented amounts match total expenditures as reported on the respective Attachment #1 ERA Excel Budget Workbook. Non-compliance will result in grantee being ineligible for future grants.
- Important: Any unexpended funds must be returned to ECGRA.



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Reporting Requirements

A closeout report will be required at the completion of the program. Details will be furnished at a grantee award meeting.

ECGRA must submit quarterly reports to Erie County. Grantees will need to furnish the following information:

1. Number of households served
2. Number of children served
3. Race, ethnicity, gender, and income level of families supported.



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Award Reconciliation/Closure

Attachment #1 ERA Excel Budget Workbook with all tabs completed.

(The budget revision tab is to be completed only if budget revision becomes necessary).

For grant closing and budget approval/expense reconciliation, the following ***must*** be completed and submitted to grants@jamteam.org no later than **November 30, 2025**.



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Right to Know Law

- Federal funding and local share gaming revenue (State funding) is being used as a source for the program funding. As such, Erie County, the U.S. Department of the Treasury, or their authorized representatives shall have right of access to records of the grantee to conduct audits or other investigations. Grantee records including the grant application, may be subject to disclosure under Pennsylvania's Right to Know Law.
- Providers must keep documentation of ERA pay-outs to staff for their records, for review by the Jam Team Foundation or ECGRA and for state/federal agents who may need to review documents for auditing/monitoring purposes. **All grant related documents must be maintained for 7 years.**
 - Allowable documentation: Payroll/employee compensation documents indicate payee, date, amount paid and description of payment and/or is supported by a check or other proof of employee payment.
 - Payroll documents should remain onsite and should not be submitted with Attachment #1.



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2025 Grant Schedule



- 📅 **April 1, 2025:**
 - 📍 ECGRA releases the **Early Childhood Learning - Erie County Investing in Families Grant Application for Stabilizing the Workforce**
- 📅 Application and Guidelines posted to ecgra.org
- 📅 **April 1, 2025 –**
 - 📍 Grant workshop held at NWIR / ELRC / JAM Team Foundation
 - 📍 3823 West 12th Street, Erie, PA 16505
- 📅 **April 25, 2025 –** Applications must be submitted by midnight
- 📅 **May 15, 2025 –** ECGRA's board of directors will make the final review and approve funding recommendations
- 📅 **May 30, 2025 –** last day to submit signed agreement letter
- 📅 **October 31, 2025 –** last day to submit a closeout report online
- 📅 **November 30, 2025 –**
 - 📍 grant closing and budget approval/expense reconciliation, must be completed and submitted to grants@jamteam.org

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Thank You!

'The chance to seed a biomedical industry'

Gannon University's new biomedical lab plans to create 100 jobs



Walter Iwanenko, now the president of Gannon University, is shown in this 2021 file photo 21 on the first floor of Gannon's Institute for Health and Cyber Knowledge, or I-HACK building. ERIE TIMES-NEWS FILE

Jim Martin

Erie Times-News USA TODAY NETWORK

First Ascent Biomedical, a 2022 graduate of the Erie Accelerator program sponsored by the Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership, is betting that artificial intelligence might hold the key to more effective and personalized cancer treatment.

The Miami-based company isn't alone in making that bet.

Gannon University and Saint Vincent Hospital announced plans Wednesday to develop two new laboratories inside Gannon's Institute for Health and Cyber Knowledge or I-HACK building. The plan has the financial support of the Lutheran Foundation for Long-Term Living, the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority and the state of Pennsylvania.

First Ascent's plans call for the immediate creation of 38 jobs paying between \$60,000 and \$150,000, with plans for the number of jobs to top 100 within five years.

That's not to mention the construction jobs that will flow from the \$6.5 million project that will include space for a 3,000-square-foot First Ascent lab, 2,000 square feet for offices and a second 3,000-square-foot lab that Saint Vincent Hospital would use to expand its medical laboratory science program.

About 100 people were at Gannon for the announcement.

More important than the jobs

Ultimately, the importance of all those jobs might take a backseat to the human impact of the work that will be done inside the building.

It's there that First Ascent expects to work with 20,000 cancer patients a year, using artificial intelligence to process DNA/RNA sequencing, mutation analysis and data on drug sensitivity to produce personalized treatment information.

In an interview earlier this year with the Erie Times-News, First Ascent CEO Jim Foote explained the approach.



Foote

It's not about finding a new cure, but crunching massive amounts of data to find the best drug for a patient and his or her tumor.

"Everybody is looking for the silver bullet," Foote said. "I think we have enough bullets. We are just not using them in the right way. We are taking all the bullets available and finding out which one works for you."

Advertisement

Foote said Wednesday that data already is being processed at its lab in Florida, but that the one in Erie will have five times the capacity.

Ultimately, he said, First Ascent hopes to locate facilities around the country.

Where's the money coming from?

The Lutheran Foundation is contributing \$2 million toward the project, while the ECGRA is chipping in \$500,000 toward the project's projected price tag of \$6.5 million.

The state Department of Community and Economic Development has pledged \$1.7 million toward the project.

"Generally, we support smaller nonprofit organizations with more limited means, but the LFLTL board saw this as an opportunity to make a wide-spread community impact," said Mark J. Gusek, CEO of the Lutheran Foundation.



This fourth-floor space inside the Gannon University I-Hack building will be transformed into a medical-technology lab. GREG WOHLFORD/ERIE TIMES-NEWS

"The community involvement — the job creation, the new student programs, extending care to our community — really impressed the LFLTL board," he continued.

Perry Wood, executive director of the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority, said that the \$500,000 is the largest investment in ECGRA history.

The remainder of the money is expected to come through financing and ongoing fundraising efforts.

'This has the potential to put Erie on the map'

Work is expected to start late this fall and to be complete in the fall of 2026.

"We are deeply appreciative to the Lutheran Foundation and to ECGRA for their support," said Gannon President Walter Iwanenko. "Their significant gifts allow us to begin the design phase of this important initiative that will not only contribute to the economic development in downtown Erie but could potentially be a life-saving project."

Advertisement

Iwanenko said that he believes the impact could be far-reaching.

"This has the potential to put Erie on the map in terms of biomedical technology and translational research," he said. "We have the chance to seed a biomedical industry here in Erie with this project."

Dr. Chris Clark, president of Saint Vincent Hospital, said he's excited about the potential for cancer research taking place in Erie.

Clark also called the expanded education program an investment in the community's future.

"By training the next generation of highly skilled medical technologists, we're ensuring a robust healthcare workforce, including for underserved areas," he said.

Clark also joked about the source of the ECGRA money that's derived from Erie County's share of revenues from Presque Isle Downs and Casino.

"I have to put a plug in for my sister and my mother who spent a lot of time at the casino," he said.

Clark also took careful note of what's at stake in bringing to Erie technology that has improved outcomes by 83%.

"We are in a position to start enrolling cancer patients to qualify," he said. "We are ready to go."

Jordan Fuller, who led the Fire Accelerator that brought First Ascent to Erie, was among many who have asked the company's leaders why they chose Erie.

The answer, according to Foote, had a lot to do with the embrace of the community, starting with Erie Insurance, and the partnerships First Ascent has been able to form.

Advertisement

Foote was not shy about touting what he thinks this could mean to northwestern Pennsylvania.

"I think it will become an epicenter, a beacon of hope," he said.

Contact Jim Martin at jmartin@timesnews.com.

Friday, 03/28/2025 Page A01

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New \$1.3 million Edinboro Market offers cafe, classroom, kitchen, shop

Jennie Geisler
Erie Times-News
USA TODAY NETWORK

The Edinboro Market, a space for locally produced and unique food items, just ballooned from a 900-square-foot space to a palatial 3,450 square feet, by making a short move.

"We were just retail before," said executive director Marti Martz, barely able to contain her joy. "Now we have 1,500 square feet of retail space, as well as a cafe, a classroom and a commercial kitchen, and we've hired a chef."

They also have a delivery ramp, storage space and an office and staff break area at 211 Mill St.

"We had none of this before," Martz said. "It really is awesome."

She said the \$1.3 million expansion project was paid for by federal money

from the Appalachian Regional Commission, matched by local grants from the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority, the Erie Community Foundation and private philanthropists. The money allows what was just a small retail outfit to act as a community center in the midst of a food desert, as defined by the USDA.

Martz said the original market opened in December of 2017. The new one, at the former location of Edinboro Outdoors, made its first sale just two weeks ago.

The market, which is a certified non-profit, is in the process of developing classes for both local food producers, as well as consumers, such as making sourdough bread, seasonal fermentation, kids in the kitchen and more.

A baker, Curtis Hals, runs the new in-house bakery, Boro Sweet Spot.

"It is our goal to use this as a shared

commercial kitchen," Martz said, adding that they would rent the space by the hour. She said the kitchen still needs a hood, a dishwasher, vacuum sealer, oven and stove.

The market carries more than 80 products produced within 150 miles of the store, Martz said, and their limit is a radius of 250 miles. By contrast, the USDA defines "locally produced" as within a 400-mile radius.

"We're trying to attract people who are connected to growing food," Martz said.

'Local community center feel'

The market is more than a store, said Livia Homerski, 26, who has worked for the organization for five years.

"I just love that local community center feel to it," she said. "You'll never find

toilet paper or bananas here. But there are always friends and family who meet here, or just run into each other and come here and see their neighbors."

Also, it keeps nearby farmers and food producers in business, Martz said, adding that the store is "walkable" for most who live in the area, and they'll be offering scholarships for classes to those who can't pay the entry fee.

Homerski said the Edinboro Market is poised to become much more than a grocery store.

"In the next few years, I'd love to see this become a central community space centered on wellness, where people feel comfortable and welcome to come get whatever they need," she said.

Contact Jennie Geisler at jgeisler@ttmesnews.com. Find her weekly newsletter at <https://profile.goerie.com/newsletters/erielicious/>.



◀ Livia Homerski, 26, has worked for the Edinboro Market since 2021. She is thrilled about the new space at 211 Mill St., Edinboro. "I just love that local community center feel to it," she said. "You'll never find toilet paper or bananas here. But there are always friends and family who meet here, or just run into each other and come here and see their neighbors." PHOTOS BY JENNIE GEISLER/ERIE TIMES-NEWS



▲ Marti Martz, executive director of Edinboro Market, shows off their new soon-to-be commercial kitchen.



► Tim Faulkner of Edinboro has been visiting the Edinboro Market for two years.



Strategic marketing and communications firm Kate & Co. founder and CEO Kate Phillips, tallest woman at left, celebrates with staff announcing the downtown expansion and renovation of the company's offices in Erie on Friday. The wrecking ball used for demolition has four coats of pink paint, a brand color for Kate & Co., according to Brian Dwyer, owner of Dwyer Plumbing & Excavating. GREG WOHLFORD/ERIE TIMES-NEWS

A NEW HOME

Area firm relocates to historic building

Nicholas Sorensen
Erie Times-News
USA TODAY NETWORK

A historic building in downtown Erie is being revitalized to house a modern marketing and communications firm.

Kate & Co., the woman-owned strategic marketing and communications firm, located at 1250 Tower Lane, is relocating to 111 W. 11th St.. The 155-year-old building once was the site of A.K.D. Printing Company but has sat vacant for years.

The building was purchased by Velocity Net Holdings, whose president, Joel Dueterman, saw more potential for his wife's company in the space. Kate Phillips, wife of Dueterman, is CEO of Kate & Co.



Phillips

"Eventually it will house our marketing agency," Phillips said. "The building has a really cool printing press inside. It's an antique printing press that we are going to restore and that will be the

"This new space will not only serve as the heart of our operations but also strengthen our commitment to fostering creativity, collaboration, and community engagement right here in Erie."

Kate Phillips
CEO of Kate & Co marketing and communications firm

entrance when you come in."

The \$4.5 million renovation began Friday with a wrecking ball ceremony. The company anticipates being moved into the freshly renovated building by 2026. Kate & Co. partnered with Avon Design Group, LLC. and Spaulding Banks Project Management to bring the vision to fruition.

"(Friday) marks an exciting milestone and new chapter at Kate & Co.," Phillips said in a news release. "This new space will not only serve as the heart of our operations but also strengthen our commitment to fostering creativity, collaboration, and community engagement right here in Erie."

A reflection of history and modernization

Since the company began in 2016, Kate & Co. was first located in the Renaissance Center before moving to Tower Lane in 2019.

With the new space on West 11th Street, Phillips said it will reflect the company she has built with the mix of experience and modernization.

"We're leaning into the original structure as much as we can but then modernizing it in a way that I think Erie is being modernized," Phillips said.

See LOCATION, Page 6A

Location

Continued from Page 1A

It has deep roots, but with entrepreneurship and ingenuity everything's coming into this next generation. I think that this space will reflect the naissance that's taking place across Erie."

Along with the age of the building, Phillips says the building has a strong foundation which also represents her company.

"It survived the flood of 1915, which wiped out pretty much 80 percent of downtown Erie," Phillips said. "We see it as a symbol of strength and resilience which we see our company is a lot like that too. We're excited to bring it back to life."

The building, which was constructed in 1870, will have several features reserved, including the iron fire escape, vintage printing press and exposed brick interior walls, according to

A NEWS RELEASE.

Demolition ceremony to commence construction

To commence the construction of their new headquarters, Kate & Co. held a demolition ceremony Friday while a wrecking ball demolished the front of the building.

Guest speakers included Erie Mayor Joe Schember and Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority Executive Director Perry Wood.

"We're proud that one of Erie's own is taking on the transformation of this historic property," Schember said in a news release. "This project will preserve a piece of Erie's history and contribute to the revitalization of downtown Erie — projects like this require more than a capital stack, they require a love of Erie, and an eye on the future."

Perry Wood, the executive director of the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority, said that ECGRA was the first



Construction on the future headquarters for Kate & Co., at 111 W. 11th St., is set to be complete in 2026. PROVIDED BY SAMUEL PETERSON

client for Kate upon her return to Erie.

"I can't say enough good things about the work that goes on behind the scenes, Kate, I'm super proud of you and

congratulations," he said from the podium.

Contact Nicholas Sorensen at nsc@nsc.com or sorensen@gannett.com.

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We don't have to choose between veterans or refugees



Your Turn
Katie Kretz
Guest columnist

After years of working on behalf of refugees in Erie, I recently felt a renewed sense of energy and hope. Our collective resettlement team had just completed a comprehensive white paper highlighting the critical needs and opportunities around refugee resettlement in our region. When we presented it to the Erie Community Foundation, their response — along with the support from other community partners such as Infinite Erie, the Erie County Gaming Revenue Authority, the Erie Regional Chamber and Growth Partnership and more — was swift, meaningful and affirming. It reminded me of why we do this work: because it matters, and because it's building something beautiful and lasting for Erie.

But that energy was quickly tested. Following recent articles and interviews highlighting the need for expanded refugee support in Erie, I found myself reading through the public comments on social media. Many were filled with anger, misinformation and division. What hurt the most were the claims that helping refugees somehow means we are turning our backs on our veterans. That couldn't be further from the truth — and as someone who deeply loves this country and those who've served it, I want to address that head-on.

Refugees are deeply vetted

Let's begin with the facts. Refugees are not undocumented immigrants. They do not cross the border illegally. Every refugee who is resettled in the U.S. has gone through a rigorous, multi-agency vetting process that can take years to complete. Background checks, biometric screening, medical evaluations, interviews and security clearances are conducted by the Department of Homeland Security, the FBI, the State Department, and international partners like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Only after this extensive process are they legally admitted to the U.S. under refugee status — a lawful immigration classification recognized under federal law.

Refugees are granted full legal work authorization upon arrival and are required to apply for permanent residency (a green card) within one year. Like any other lawful residents, they work, pay taxes and contribute economically and civically to the communities they live in. Refugee resettlement is not just legal — it is structured, intentional and deeply American.

Once here, agencies like mine, Multicultural Community Resource Center



Abdul Bashir Massod, an Afghan interpreter of Pashto, Dari, Arabic and English works with attorney Michael Barron translating segments of documents on March 25, 2022, in a reception room at the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) Erie Field Office, formerly the International Institute of Erie. BENJAMIN CHAMBERS/ERIE TIMES-NEWS; FILE PHOTO

(MCRC), step in to support them with housing, employment assistance, language access, school enrollment for children and community orientation. We are one of three federally authorized refugee resettlement agencies in Erie, and our work is guided by strict federal and state regulations. Our respective agencies — MCRC, U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) Erie Field Office, and Catholic Charities Counseling and Adoption Services — are not transporting undocumented immigrants. We are not operating independently. We are responding to a call made by our own government to assist families fleeing war, persecution and violence.

One comment I came across on social media said, "Practically no one even knows your organization exists." My response to that is simple: That's exactly why I'm here — why I'm on social media, and why I'm writing this op-ed. Because people deserve to know the truth, and because I believe we don't have to choose between who we serve. We need to serve everyone — our veterans, our refugees and our neighbors in need.

How services for refugees and veterans align

I want to take a moment to speak from personal experience. My grandfather was a U.S. Air Force pilot. My grandmother was an Army nurse. My brother-in-law is a veteran who has served this country with pride. The people I love most have worn the uniform, and I carry their service and sacrifice with me every day. I have the deepest respect for our veterans, and I believe they deserve every resource and support available to them.

Here in Erie, we are seeing meaningful work being done on that front. Local organizations have been working tirelessly to combat veteran homelessness,

expand mental health services and create more accessible pathways to housing and care. From the Erie Veterans Affairs Medical Center to grassroots support groups, this city is not turning its back on those who have served. We are stepping up.

And here's something else many people don't realize: Some of the refugees we resettle served alongside American troops in Iraq, Afghanistan and other war zones. They worked as interpreters, guides and logistical support — placing their lives at risk because they believed in the same mission our veterans did. In many cases, they were promised protection for their service, and now we must fulfill that promise.

Federal funding freeze hits hard

But we are doing this work in increasingly difficult conditions. While the federal refugee resettlement program has been effectively terminated, the responsibility to support those already here remains. In Erie alone, we have over 5,000 legally resettled refugees who are still eligible for services — families who were brought here by our government and those who are newly resettled still need support as they continue working toward self-sufficiency.

Unfortunately, the funding that supports these services is now in jeopardy. Programs that provide case management, job readiness, youth education and mental health support are at risk, just when they are needed most. These aren't handouts — they are tools that help people succeed, contribute and become fully integrated members of our community.

Come and see the work we do

That's why I want to personally invite the Erie community to come see the work we're doing. Spend time with our

staff. Meet the families. See the joy of children thriving in local schools. Witness the resilience of youth who are learning English, adjusting to a new culture and dreaming big for their futures. See the dignity of parents starting over — working jobs, opening businesses, buying homes. This is not a story of burden — it's a story of hope.

Refugees are not outsiders in Erie — they are part of the very fabric of this community. They shop at our grocery stores, worship in our communities, clean our streets, teach in our classrooms and serve in our hospitals. Their children sit beside ours in classrooms. They celebrate holidays with us. They grieve losses and celebrate milestones. They are not guests — they are our neighbors.

A nation of immigrants

And while we're on the topic of community and identity, I want to remind us of something we too often forget: We are a nation of immigrants. Look back three or four generations in your own family — where did they come from? My husband's family migrated from Poland. Mine came from Germany. What about yours? The very foundation of this country was built by people seeking safety, opportunity and a better life. That same dream lives on in the refugees we welcome today.

This is not about politics. It's not about choosing one group over another. This is about humanity — and honoring the commitments we've made as a nation.

Supporting refugees doesn't dishonor our veterans. It reflects the values they fought to protect.

So let me be clear: This is not about division. This is about community. We don't have to choose between veterans and refugees. We don't have to decide who is more deserving of safety, support or opportunity.

We can care for both. We must care for both.

As a community, we should consider approaching this moment with grace and humility — recognizing that none of us arrived here without help, and that everyone deserves a chance to find safety, purpose and belonging.

Erie is strongest when we come together — not when we let fear or misinformation pull us apart. We can support our veterans, welcome refugees, and build a thriving community where everyone has a place and a purpose.

That's the Erie I believe in. This is the America I believe in. And that's the work I'll keep showing up to do.

Katie Kretz is the executive director of the Multicultural Community Resource Center in Erie. The Erie Community Foundation's newly established Rapid Response Fund will initially accept contributions to help nonprofits address urgent challenges for Erie's refugee community: <https://bit.ly/ecrfapid>.

The Erie County Executive Brenton Davis campaign has taken its first major swipe against Democratic challenger Perry Wood.

In a news release Monday, the Davis campaign called for Wood to resign as executive director of the county's Gaming Revenue Authority after discovering that a nonprofit funded by ECGRA called on its clients to participate in a photo shoot with Wood.

The [Innovation Entente Lab](#), housed at Mercyhurst University, sent a group email on March 20 to organizations served by the lab, asking them to join the photo shoot to "show your support for the continued success of the Beehive Network."

The email doesn't encourage clients to support Wood's campaign. However, the email, which was sent via a Mercyhurst email server, directs recipients to the Wood campaign website for more information.

The lab is part of the [Northwest Pennsylvania Innovation Beehive Network](#), which was founded in 2014 to enhance business expansion and development in the Erie area. ECGRA has been one of its funders.

Davis campaign manager Melanie Brewer said the photo shoot email represents a "clear example of using taxpayer-funded programs to build a partisan political base," according to the news release.

Wood rejects accusation, calls it a distraction by Davis

Wood has dismissed the accusation, insisting "there was no conflict of interest."

"This is clearly an attempt by Davis to prevent me from using my record to run for office, while distracting from his own record of chaos and abuse of power," Wood told the Erie Times-News. "I want to be crystal clear – I am running on my record and how it's benefitted Erie County."

Wood said his campaign had reached out to people who work at Mercyhurst, not the university itself, about organizing a photo shoot to showcase the success of the Beehive Network, which he referred to as "one of the most important economic development initiatives that ECGRA helped pioneer from Day One."

He said his campaign was unaware that an email would be sent out.

Mercyhurst University has referred to the email from the Innovation Entente Lab as an "error."

"Mercyhurst University is committed to non-partisanship. The announcement in question was an error. It did not have administrative review," read a statement provided to the Erie Times-News from Mercyhurst spokesperson Debbie Morton.

Davis has been attacking ECGRA — and Wood — for a while

Wood, who [announced his candidacy](#) for county executive Jan. 28, has been a frequent target for Davis.

In early 2024, Davis criticized [ECGRA](#) for its operating costs and Wood's salary; rebuked it in the [news media](#) as a "slush fund of walking-around money;" and floated the idea of dissolving the board altogether, placing all gaming revenue funding decisions squarely in the hands of county government.

Wood, along with members of the ECGRA board, pushed back against Davis, insisting the county executive was seeking to impugn the credibility and frustrate the business of an independent authority with baseless accusations.

ECGRA Solicitor Tim Wachter has said ECGRA's funding approvals have "met both the spirit and letter" of state gaming laws. Moreover, during ECGRA's latest board meeting in March, Wachter indicated that a state audit of ECGRA has not yet found any signs of financial malpractice. The audit is expected to wrap up in the May-June timeframe, according to Wood. ▶

"Brenton Davis hasn't done his job serving this county, so he is picking a fight with me," Wood said. "I got in this race to bring my decades of experience creating jobs and improving outcomes for Erie County residents to a broken county government. I will continue to connect with voters about my record and why I will be a better county executive. This scares him since he has done nothing but create chaos."

Wood is competing with [Democrat Christina Vogel](#) for the Democratic Party nomination for county executive.

A.J. Rao can be reached at arao@gannett.com. Follow him on X [@ETNRao](#).

Donors Making a Difference



Donor Recognition

As we reflect on an amazing 2024, we are filled with gratitude for the support that allows us to make a difference in our community. We had the joy of delivering appreciation gifts to some of our amazing business advocates

and want to express our heartfelt gratitude to all of our marvelous business champions who continue to support us year after year allowing us to bring creativity, joy, and opportunities to youth in our community, thank you! Your generosity makes our mission possible. We couldn't do it without you.



We **heART** you for all you do!

*Special thanks to Ben Davis for creating these fantastic metal pieces and Gene Davis Sales & Services for donating our custom project.

2024 Grants Received

2024 Catholic Social Ministry Grant
Benedictine Ministry Fund
Catholic Campaign for Human Development
Charles I Blake Family Foundation
Find Your Light Foundation
Gannon University Schuster Arts Re-Grant Initiative
Huplits Grant (Sierra Club)
John Nesbit Rees & Sarah Henne Rees Charitable Foundation
RBC-USA Regional Grant
The Erie Community Foundation-William & Ethel Hovis Fund



EITC Thank You

Dahlkemper Landscape Architects & Contractors
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Scott's Splash Lagoon, Inc.
UPMC Health Plan



We need people like you.



February 17, 2025

YOU can empower a safe, fun, and welcoming downtown for all.

Perry Wood
5340 Fryling Road
#201
Erie, PA 16510

Dear Perry,

The best part of downtown Erie is the people—like YOU!

Your support matters now more than ever as community development organizations like ours **continue to build the downtown community, with the community we serve.** People are at the heart of everything we do because when the heart of our culture and commerce thrives, our entire region prospers.

For those who have never given to the Erie Downtown Partnership, we're making it easy to start: just **\$25 in 2025** can help fuel transformative projects, beloved events like the St. Patrick's Day Parade and Downtown d'Lights, and essential services like clearing snow and removing litter from sidewalks.

Every contribution, no matter the size, plays a vital role in shaping a vibrant, welcoming downtown. Join us in making 2025 a year of momentum and progress—**your \$25 gift is the first step toward something extraordinary.**

Make 2025 the year to support downtown's quality of life and economic vibrancy!
Give today at eriedowntown.com or mail your check to:

Erie Downtown Partnership
140 East 5th Street
Erie, PA 16507

Thank you for considering a gift and for being part of our mission!

Warm regards,


Emily Fetcko, CEO

*We value what ECGKA does for us—
and the wider community!*



From the office of:

The Most Reverend Dwane Brock, Archbishop

1129 Pennsylvania Avenue • Erie, Pennsylvania, 16503 • (814) 874-3091 • (814) 874-3063 fax

February 28, 2025

Please, let me take this time to thank you for your presence, support, prayers, good wishes, and kind words at the ribbon-cutting ceremony for the new ERIEBANK branch on 10th and Parade streets. It means a lot to me and the entire team.

We cherish your partnership and look forward to building the ideals of what we call "community".

Sincerely & Respectfully,

P.S. If you haven't already, please consider opening an account at the new branch to satisfy any and all of your individual and/or business needs.

"Ad maiorem Dei gloriam inque hominum salutem"