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## [LOCAL NEWS](#)

# People power: CTI celebrates local champions

## Five community leaders feted at annual gala



Secretary of Housing and Livable Communities Ed Augustus and former former state Sen. Steve Panagiotakos at Community Teamwork's Champions of Community Action Gala held at the Four Oaks Country Club in Dracut on May 23, 2024. (Melanie Gilbert/Lowell Sun)



From left: Susan West Levine, CEO of Lowell Community Health Center, Chief Advancement and External Relations Officer at LCHC Jennifer Meehan and UMass Lowell Chancellor Julie Chen at Community Teamwork's Champions of Community Action Gala held at the Four Oaks Country Club in Dracut on May 23, 2024. (Melanie Gilbert/Lowell Sun)



Fortaleza founder and honoree Vladimir Saldaña speaks during Community Teamwork's Champions of Community Action Gala held at the Four Oaks Country Club in Dracut on May 23, 2024. (Courtesy Kevin Harkins Photography)



Co-director of the Center for Asian American Studies and associate dean of undergraduate studies in the College of Fine Arts, and honoree Sue Kim speaks during Community Teamwork's Champions of Community Action Gala held at the Four Oaks Country Club in Dracut on May 23, 2024. (Courtesy Kevin Harkins Photography)



Chelmsford Town manager and honoree Paul Cohen speaks during Community Teamwork's Champions of Community Action Gala held at the Four Oaks Country Club in Dracut on May 23, 2024. (Courtesy Kevin Harkins Photography)



Middlesex County Register of Deeds and honoree Richard Howe Jr., speaks during Community Teamwork's Champions of Community Action Gala held at the Four Oaks Country Club in Dracut on May 23, 2024. (Courtesy Kevin Harkins Photography)



Lowell City Manager and honoree Tom Golden speaks during Community Teamwork's Champions of Community Action Gala held at the Four Oaks Country Club in Dracut on May 23, 2024. (Courtesy Kevin Harkins Photography)



From left: Secretary of Housing and Livable Communities Ed Augustus; Shelia Ochs, Community Teamwork board chair; Fortaleza founder and honoree Vladimir Saldaña; Chief Program Officer Carl Howell; co-director of the Center for Asian American Studies and associate dean of undergraduate

studies in the College of Fine Arts, and honoree Sue Kim; CEO Karen Frederick; Middlesex County Register of Deeds and honoree Richard Howe Jr, Chelmsford Town Manager and honoree Paul Cohen, Lowell City Manager and honoree Tom Golden and Lt. Gov. Kim Driscoll at CTIs Champions of Community Action Gala held at the Four Oaks Country Club in Dracut on May 23, 2024. (Courtesy Kevin Harkins Photography)



Community Teamwork CEO Karen Frederick opens the Champions of Community Action Gala held at the Four Oaks Country Club in Dracut on May 23, 2024, as Board Chair Shelia Ochs looks on. (Melanie Gilbert/Lowell Sun)



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Goodwill, positive energy and esprit de corps flowed all night during Community Teamwork's Champions of Community Action Gala, which featured special guests Lt.

Gov. Kim Driscoll and State Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities Secretary Ed Augustus.

A capacity crowd of family and community leadership marked Community Action Month by honoring five local leaders who, CEO Karen Frederick said, “Have helped us implement our mission over the years.”

Community development professional and Fortaleza founder Vladimir Saldaña; founding co-director of the Center for Asian American Studies and associate dean for undergraduate studies in the College of Fine Arts at UMass Lowell Sue Kim; Middlesex County Register of Deeds Richard Howe Jr.; Chelmsford Town Manager Paul Cohen; and Lowell City Manager Tom Golden accepted their awards at the Four Oaks Country Club in Dracut on Thursday.

“They are great people, and we’re grateful to be able to honor them,” Frederick said.

CTI is a private, nonprofit corporation established in 1965 under the Economic Opportunity Act to serve low-income people in the community. It was established as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty under his “Great Society” program. There are 1,000 Community Action agencies across the country, with 23 of them in Massachusetts.

During its nearly 60 years of service in the community, CTI has extended a helping hand by expanding its mission to reach 74 cities and towns in the commonwealth. The agency’s core service area includes Greater Lowell – Lowell, Billerica, Chelmsford, Dracut, Dunstable, Tewksbury, Tyngsboro and Westford – as well as communities in Middlesex and Essex counties.

That outreach includes programs such as Head Start and Early Education and Care, leased housing, WIC, financial literacy, behavioral health, youth and senior resources and economic development projects. Its resource center on Merrimack Street is the portal for entry to all of its programming. The agency serves more than 55,000 people.

It’s a grassroots mission that Driscoll said is vital to the state’s efforts to serve at-risk residents.

“Organizations like Community Teamwork really help us make sure we’re serving our most vulnerable neighbors,” Driscoll told a reporter, explaining the state-level attention to the community gathering. “At the state, we may be able to deliver resources and uplift policies and strategies, but they’re actually doing the work on the ground in communities, and that’s why I’m here.”

Community is right in CTI’s name, and it was also baked into the remarks of all the honorees. The celebration served as a fundraiser to help fight against homelessness, an issue that has taken on extra relevance as thousands of migrant families have been welcomed into communities across the commonwealth.



Augustus's EOHLIC is standing up the emergency shelter system that is housing families fleeing unrest and violence in Haiti and Venezuela. Most families speak either French, Spanish, Portuguese, as well as Haitian-Creole. CTI, working with Golden and the City Council, has been an integral part of that effort.

Augustus noted the impact of CTI under Frederick's leadership.

"I don't normally do these fundraising type events," he said, before the gala began. "But this is a special organization and Karen is a special leader. I came out because...she's been such a good partner with us, particularly with the emergency shelter program."

The Inn & Conference Center, a 252-room hotel in Downtown Lowell, is home to [migrant and local homeless families](#), the majority of whom are children. CTI has been at the forefront of that resettlement effort, partnering with the onsite agency, Commonwealth Care Alliance, to provide a suite of services such as food, education, medical care, transportation and housing vouchers and immigration services. "We are so pleased to have [the migrants] in our community," Frederick said.

It was that collaboration that Golden said was the real honoree of the night.

"Tonight is about partnership," he said. "About people coming together to help people."

CTI has also been focused on adult homelessness since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic.

With the support of and \$2 million in funding from the city of Lowell, the agency opened 19 units of newly renovated single-person occupancy apartments on [Summer Street in March](#), and purchased a building that will become a women's shelter with services.

"One of our first residents moved in and looked at our case manager and asked, 'Can I get rid of my tent?'" Frederick said. "Somebody right from a tent in the streets to supportive housing."

Over in Chelmsford, CTI has worked with Cohen to provide temporary housing to unhoused adults. Despite the challenges, Cohen described his town's contribution as "We just do it in a Chelmsford way by assisting those in need."

The theme of community flowed over to the honoree's remarks, all of whom thanked their families for their support over the years.

In her remarks, Driscoll compared CTI to a Swiss Army knife, an indispensable tool with a lot of facets and options.

“We can’t really improve the lives of people if we don’t have community partners like Community Teamwork to help folks,” she said. “New arrivals, new immigrants into our country. Without CTI, we wouldn’t be able to provide the sorts of resources people desperately need and want and why people are coming here – to find a better pathway for their family.”

*Local agencies, like CTI, which is supporting the work of CCA at the ICC, offers some local information on its website at [commteam.org/get-involved/help-respond-to-the-ma-state-of-emergency](http://commteam.org/get-involved/help-respond-to-the-ma-state-of-emergency).*