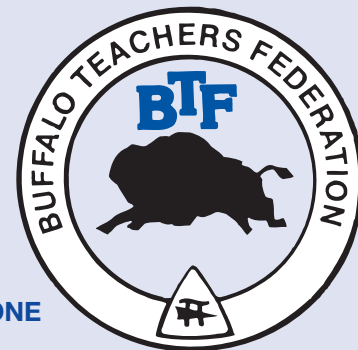


PROVOCATOR

December 2025

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE BUFFALO TEACHERS FEDERATION VOLUME 56/NUMBER 2

DEDICATION
SOLIDARITY
PROFESSIONALISM
PRIDE
SECOND TO NONE



Teachers Speak Directly to Board of Education

The serious problems with Special Education have continued in the District and, for the second month in a row, a group of teachers addressed the Board at its November meeting.

Nine teachers spoke before the Board and outlined the myriad problems created when students are improperly placed, as has been the case in Buffalo Schools. All nine spoke eloquently and the Superintendent and Board are listening. Fixes need to be made and soon.

As a result of this, the District has signed a contract with Autism Learning Partners (ALP) to provide assistance and training to our teachers dealing with challenging students.

The teachers who brought their concerns to the Board were: Belinda Clifford (156), David Aquilina (72), Cailin Aiken (81), Greg Sawicki (302), Sarah Rydzynski (32), Teresa Maurici (32), Colleen Hutton (72), Aniela Baj-Thant (32), and Emily Markel (30).

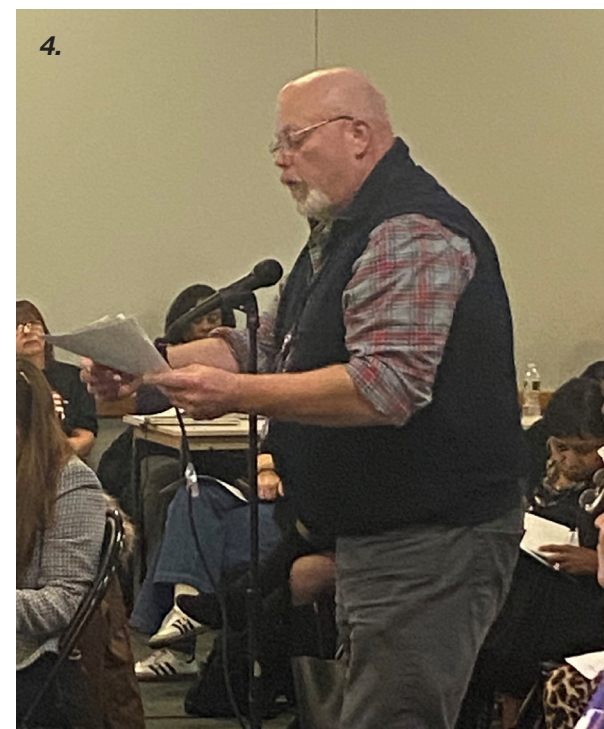
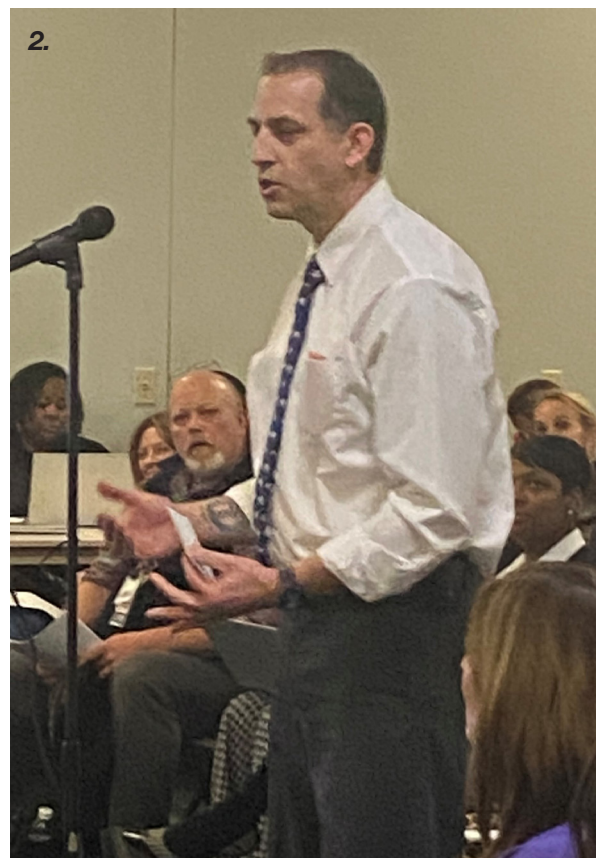
In addition to these teachers, three other teachers (and a school clerk) addressed the Board about the ongoing administrative problems at School 30. The leadership at School 30 has not only been unresponsive to teachers' needs but has neglected serious building concerns involving safety and has taken to retaliation against teachers who raise concerns.

Superintendent Pascal Mubenga promised the faculty at School 30 that he would meet with them without administration present so that he could hear all of their concerns in detail. The problems at School 30 have been going on for at least two years.

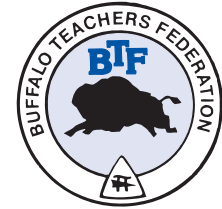
Also addressing the Board that evening was delegate Michelle O'Connell from Riverside High School. She, along with Principal Maria Conrad and some students from Riverside, told the Board about the many good things happening at the school.

Taking our concerns to the Board of Ed can be an effective strategy. It took three presentations last spring before anything was done about the elimination of Spanish RTI services at School 33. But that was fixed and, with continued advocacy, so will other problems.

Hats off to the teachers who took the time to speak at the Board meeting!



1. Showing solidarity, the teachers at School 30 feel encouraged after airing their concerns about the school's leadership.
2. Addressing the Board of Ed, President Rich Nigro praises and encourages the teachers who are about to speak at the November meeting.
3. Prepared with data, Cailin Aiken speaks about the many SpEd problems in the District.
4. Wearing the hat of a teacher, Executive Committee member and SpEd Committee co-chair Greg Sawicki talks about students being misplaced in programs across the District.



BTF at a Glance

BTF President

Rich Nigro

BTF Vice President

Melinda MacPherson-Sullivan

BTF Treasurer

Joseph Montante

BTF Secretary

Nicole Herkey

BTF Executive Committee Members

Pre-K-6

Rachel Binda-Lis, Kim Parzymieso,
Trisha Rosokoff, Tara Rosa,
Janine Schuster, Chris Stephens

7-12

Tom Anthony, Dennis Brancato, Sam
Fritz, Mike Jeffers, Eve Shippens, M.
Sue Raichilson, Jonathan Zasowski

K-12

Amy Flynn, Mary Kiblin, Ellen Malone,
Andrea Manna, Daphne McNab, Becky
Moola, Gregory Sawicki

At Large

Tricia Andrzejewski, Danielle Harris,
Brian Meyer

BTF Headquarters Staff

Rich Nigro, *President*
Melinda MacPherson-Sullivan, *Presidential Assistant*
Joseph Montante, *Presidential Assistant*
Nicole Herkey, *Member Relations Officer*
Jenna Burke, *NYSUT Counsel*
Nick Whitman, *NYSUT Labor Relations Specialist*

Visit Our Updated Website
www.btfny.org

PROVOCATOR

BTF Provocator Staff

Joseph Montante, *managing editor, photo editor*
Chris Salamone, *editor*

The **Provocator** is the official publication of the Buffalo Teachers Federation. It will be published five times during the 2025-2026 school year as a service to BTF members and interested parties in the community. Subscription price is included in BTF dues.

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The **BTF** is an affiliate of **NYSUT**, **AFT** and **NEA**.

December 2025
Volume 56, No. 2
Circulation 4400

Evolution

It's been said that the only constant in life is change. I think this is something most of us can agree with. Looking back on 2025, we've experienced many changes. Not the least of which are the structural changes happening at BTF headquarters.

Sparked by organizational restructuring within NYSUT (our state union affiliate), the three Labor Relations Specialists (LRSs) assigned to BTF accepted transfers to other positions within NYSUT. The sudden departure of Robert Mueller, Devon Gawley, and Jennifer Rhee (all well-respected LRSs) was unexpected. But this series of events provided us with opportunity, enabling BTF to renegotiate the terms of service with NYSUT.

One of the results of this change... BTF is getting an upgrade to its member representation services by using a model many other locals use; one that the Federation used prior to our affiliation with NYSUT. We will be hiring another teacher to serve as BTF's second Member Relations Representative (MRR). Like Nicole Herkey, our first Member Relations Officer (MRO), this teacher will take advantage of all the trainings available to NYSUT LRSs. And as a teacher, (s)he will have the kind of empathy derived from a shared experience and firsthand understanding of the challenges educators face.

Some other changes this year include:

- Early start to contract negotiations (first meeting – October 15th; second meeting – December 19th).
- Increases to member benefits for the third year in a row, this year to prescription co-pay reimbursement.
- Teachers organizing campaigns to speak at BOE meetings to address challenges in their buildings
- Teacher representations on several committees like the BTF Negotiations Team, District Committee of Stakeholders, BPS/BTF Special Education Committee, BPS/BTF Alternative Education Committee, and the Superintendent's Strategic Planning Committee to name a few.

Another change has us welcoming LRS Nick Whitman back to the Federation. Noteworthy fact: this is the first time in BTF history that a NYSUT LRS has requested to transfer into the Federation.

So, what does all of this tell us? It tells us that change, while sometimes scary, can lead to something better. It tells us to lean into change and steer in the direction you want to head. It tells us that BTF is exactly where it is supposed to be.

From your union family at BTF headquarters, have a restful holiday, and may the New Year bring you all the changes you're hoping for!

Letters to the Editor

BTF Gift to SPCA Helps Injured Cat

As we prepare to gather around the Thanksgiving table, our hearts at the SPCA are grateful for your generosity. This season is a time for thanks, and your kindness is truly one of the greatest gifts we receive!

Raspberry, a 3-month-old kitten, arrived needing urgent veterinary care. She was a little fighter facing a major challenge: a ruptured eye requiring immediate surgery and a dangerously persistent high fever.

Because of your gift, we were able to provide the critical care she needed. This included an emergency enucleation (eye removal) and supportive veterinary treatments to combat fevers that soared scarily high. She required continuous monitoring, antibiotics and fluids to make her healthy.

Today, Raspberry's temperature is stable, and she is healing well! She is receiving her final treatments, including eye ointment for her remaining good eye, and is learning to navigate the world as a brave and resilient one-eyed kitty. Soon, she will be ready for adoption!

Your support made every step of Raspberry's recovery possible. You truly helped us save this sweet girl! This Thanksgiving, thank you for giving second chances and for making the SPCA's mission possible!

Happy Holidays to you and your family!
Phillip Weiss, Associate Director
Corporate & Individual Giving

BTF Donates \$300 to St. Luke's Toy Drive

We would like to take this opportunity to say thank you for your donation to St. Luke's Mission of Mercy in response to our Toy Drive. We are incredibly grateful.

Your generosity helps "God's most lost and abandoned children" enjoy a Christmas filled with love and care. We truly could not do the work we do without your support.

As you share your gifts with us, we are also praising God and his goodness!

Gratefully,
Dennis Gilhooley, Interim Director

Buffalo City Mission Thankful for BTF Help

It's the season of thanksgiving; a time to pause, reflect, and recognize the blessings that surround us. At the Buffalo City Mission, one of our greatest blessings is you. Your gift of \$250 is more than generosity; it is a lifeline of hope for neighbors who are longing for stability and care.

Because of you, men, women, and children who come to the Mission burdened by hardship are welcomed with open arms. They receive not only nourishing meals and safe shelter but also the chance to discover a new path forward through education, mentoring relationships and opportunities to rebuild independence.

Gratitude grows when it is shared, and your compassion is creating ripples of hope throughout Western New York. Each step forward someone takes at the Mission is a reflection of your kindness and the love you've extended to our community.

In this season of gratitude, please know how deeply thankful we are for you. Your support is restoring lives and building a future filled with hope.

With heartfelt appreciation,
Mark Jentsch, Chief Executive Officer

BTF Donates to Explore Buffalo

On behalf of all of us at Explore Buffalo, thank you so very much for the generous donation from the Buffalo Teachers Federation! Your donation will be put into work to support our educational offerings for students, free tours of City Hall every weekday, and present Doors Open Buffalo for thousands of people each year.

Thank you for your continued generous support, helping us realize our mission to promote Buffalo and Western New York architecture, history, and neighborhoods through quality educational programs for learners of all ages.

With gratitude for your support,
Brad Hahn, Executive Director

BTF Donates to Thanksgiving Dinner, Food & Children's Books Giveaway

We are writing to express our heartfelt thanks for Buffalo Teachers Federation's generous support of the ***Friends For A Better Buffalo 2025 Thanksgiving Dinner Food & Children Books Giveaway***. Because of your contribution, we were able to provide families in the Buffalo Public Schools and throughout the City of Buffalo with complete turkey dinners and festive sides to help them celebrate the holiday.

Working together truly made a difference. This year, we provided more than 250 families with holiday meals, the majority of which were hand-delivered by our dedicated volunteers. From the bottom of our hearts, we would like to thank the organizations and individuals who made this possible: the Friends For a Better Buffalo Volunteer Committee, West Herr Automotive Group, Buffalo Public Schools Commissary, the Office of Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Initiatives (CLRI), Buffalo Peacekeepers, Buffalo Teachers Federation, Five Star Bank, West District School Board Member-Jennifer Mecozzi, Edison Street Community Church, and the many supportive friends who helped make this holiday a success for families in need.

As we delivered packages to homes that applied for the assistance through the Buffalo Public Schools Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Initiatives Department, parents and caregivers expressed profound gratitude for our giving. Your generosity not only helped feed their families throughout the holiday season but also brought loved ones together physically and spiritually. *We pray that your holiday is as blessed and joyful as the lives you touched this week.*

We look forward to future opportunities for our organizations to partner as we continue to support those facing economic and emotional challenges. It was an honor to work with you this year, and we hope we can continue this meaningful partnership for years to come!

With sincere gratitude,
Terrance Heard
Nina Heard
Co-Founders, Friends For A Better Buffalo (a registered 501(c)3 nonprofit organization)

29th Annual BTF Thanksgiving Food Drive Provides Dinner for Needy Buffalo Families

Once again, more than 100 area families enjoyed Thanksgiving dinner this year through the generosity of the Buffalo Teachers Federation and its teachers.

For the 29th consecutive year, cash and food donations were collected to ensure that needy families would enjoy the holiday with a traditional feast.

This year, Lorraine Elementary #72 led the way in donations but bags of food also were received from Schools 33, 45, 76, 93, 206, 208, 305, and the Adult Learning Center.

The McKinley High School JROTC boys and girls helped pack bags of food for distribution to individual families. They were treated to a pizza party at the BTF office after they finished their work.

Thousands of dollars in food and gift certificates were donated by BTF members and were distributed through several charitable and non-profit groups. It is estimated that about 4,000 families have benefited from the BTF Thanksgiving Food Drive throughout the years.

After the food was collected, volunteers met at the BTF office, where they stuffed shopping bags with all the traditional foods for a Thanksgiving feast including corn, green beans, sweet potatoes, cranberry sauce, dinner rolls, stuffing mix, and a \$15 gift card for Tops Supermarkets to purchase a turkey.

Dozens of boxes of food items were packed for area nonprofit organizations for distribution to the needy.

The agencies distributing the food and gift certificates were: Gloria Parks Community Center, Native American Community Services, Jericho Road Community Health Center, Community Action Organization, Friends for a Better Buffalo, and Fulgham Family Foundation.



1. Always eager to lend a hand, President Rich Nigro assists with bag packing.
2. Working alongside the JROTC students, VP Melinda MacPherson Sullivan reaches for a can of green beans to put into a bag.
3. Working diligently, the JROTC students from McKinley High School make light work out of preparing meals for needy families.
4. Standing with volunteers with Friends for a Better Buffalo, President Rich Nigro, Hazel Beharry, Treasurer Joseph Montante, and VP Melinda MacPherson Sullivan continue to support members of the community in need.
5. Posing with Rich Nigro and Melinda MacPherson Sullivan, Col. Mark Ricchiazzi is proud of the work his JROTC students have done.

BTF Posts for New Position

Changes are afoot at the BTF office. Since NEA-NY and NYSUT merged in 2006, BTF has relied on NYSUT Labor Relations Specialists to assist our teachers with contractual questions as well as filing and handling grievances.

However, NYSUT is going through a re-structuring and the terms of BTF's affiliation with NYSUT had to change. BTF leadership met with NYSUT's leadership team and a deal was reached which would allow BTF to hire teachers to serve at union headquarters as Member Relations Representatives. Currently, Secretary Nicole Herkey is serving in such a capacity.

On December 12, an email was sent to all teachers with the job posting and a link to the application. Interested members holding tenure should apply by following the instructions on the posting. We hope to review applications and conduct interviews in January and have the job filled no later than March 1, 2026.

Toy Story and Personal Care Drive Continues

For the sixth consecutive year, the BTF Women's Committee has organized a toy drive for needy children in Buffalo.

With a donation from the BTF as well as contributions from individual teachers, members of the committee shopped for new toys and stuffed animals so that children can have gifts at Christmas. Happening along with the toy drive is a personal care item drive for women and children in need. Basics shouldn't be luxuries.

Committee members were able to purchase items that many of us take for granted such as shampoo, toothpaste, deodorant, and other personal care items.

Items like these mean a lot to those in need and, with the cost of so many items rising, the Women's Committee believes that sponsoring a drive like this is more important than ever.

This year, donations were given to Child and Family Services, Jericho

SBF Rx Reimbursement Set to Rise

For the third year in a row, an increase in benefits has been unanimously approved by the trustees of the BTF Supplemental Benefit Fund.

Effective January 1, 2026, the BTF Supplemental Benefit Fund trust will reimburse teachers and their dependents \$3 per prescription up to a maximum of \$150 per person in a calendar year. Previously, teachers and their dependents were reimbursed \$2 per script up to \$100 per person.

The proposal, put forth by President Rich Nigro, who also is one of the trustees, is welcome news for our members.

"The reimbursement rate had been \$2 for several years. We can afford this increase for our teachers and we feel it is money well spent", said President Nigro.

To take advantage of this benefit, simply complete the SBF Rx Co-Pay Claim form available on our website under Member Benefits and submit

to the BTF along with a computer-generated printout from your pharmacy for you and each of your dependents. The deadline for submitting the information is Friday, March 6 at 5:00 PM.

In addition to President Nigro, the other trustees are Sam Fritz, Jesse McVerby, Sue Raichilson, and Ruyvette Townsend. The director of the SBF is Christine Whitman.

BTF Secretary Says Goodbye

After nearly 45 years of service to the BTF, Hazel Beharry is retiring at the end of December.

Hazel was an administrative assistant for Vice Presidents Edith LeWin, Rebecca Pordum, and Melinda MacPherson Sullivan, as well as many of the Uniserv Directors and Labor Relations Specialists assigned to the BTF through the years.

Hired during the last few months of Tom Pisa's presidency, Hazel has worked through the BTF's good times and bad ones as well. Her polite phone manners and compassion have helped assuage many teachers in crisis through the years.

The job she has done for our teachers, officers, and the professional staff at the BTF will be hard to replace.

We wish Hazel all the best as she pursues other ventures.

Best wishes, Hazel!



ABOVE: Posing with some of the toys being donated are: Charlotte Watson-Wales, Joseph Montante, Nick Whitman, Rich Nigro, Desiree Breckenridge-Barnes, Hazel Beharry, Melinda MacPherson Sullivan, and Nicole Herkey.



NYSTRS among the Best Anywhere

The New York State Teachers' Retirement System (NYSTRS) is one of the finest pension systems in the country. With a Market Value of Assets at 100% for 2025 (see graph 1 below), and a track record of paying benefits to retirees on time and without fail since 1921, teachers can rest assured that their pensions will be there when the time comes to separate service.

The NYSTRS Annual Meeting was held in Saratoga Springs November 2-3 and 16 BTF members representing Buffalo Schools attended. At the meeting, delegates took advantage of informative presentations about how the system works, prior service, and even Social Security.

At the end of the sessions on Sunday, the delegates had the opportunity to meet with the 10-member Board and ask questions. One of our delegates, Executive Committee member Tricia Andrzejewski, asked a question dealing with the diversity of NYSTRS' assets and what the consequences might be if the Artificial Intelligence (AI) bubble were to burst. It got people thinking.

The Annual Meeting concluded on Monday with the delegates electing

Natalie McKay of the Schoharie Central School District to a seat on the NYSTRS Board of Trustees.

The truth is, we are fortunate to live in New York State for a few reasons besides the Buffalo Bills. NYSTRS collects payments from both employers and all Tier 5 and Tier 6 employees. The employer contribution (currently 9.59% of payroll for all tiers) is taken directly from state aid that is allocated to school districts so that payments cannot be missed.

Having guaranteed funding assures that the system can pay out the promised benefits. This is not the case with many retirement systems across the country. A "healthy" retirement system is one which is funded at 80% or better. Many teacher retirement systems in America are well below this including California, Kentucky, and New Jersey, to name just a few.

In addition, Article V, Section 7 of the NYS Constitution has a line that refers to the pensions of public sector employees which states that they "shall not be diminished or impaired". This not only means that your pension cannot be reduced once you are receiving it, but also that the benefits

guaranteed under your tier cannot be unfavorably changed. They can, however, be enhanced!

With the number of Tier 6 members expected to eclipse the number of Tier 4 members in the very near future (see graph 2 below), BTF and NYSUT have been pushing to "Fix Tier 6". While enhancements were passed in both 2022 and 2024, there is much more work to do. There will be a rally in Albany on Sunday, March 8, 2026 from 12:00 – 2:00 PM. A bus will be provided and we are hoping for a great turnout. More information on this rally will be forthcoming.

Will our retirement system to be solvent and able to pay benefits for the next 100 years and beyond? Under the guidance of Executive Director Tom Lee and the Board of Trustees we are fortunate to have, the Magic 8 Ball says "it is decidedly so".



Above: NYSTRS delegate Trish Andrzejewski approaches the microphone to ask a question of the trustees at the Annual Meeting.

30-Year Asset Summary 1995-2025

As of June 30, 2025

\$36.2 Billion
Employer
Contributions

\$5.2 Billion
Member
Contributions

\$227.7 Billion
Investment Income



\$161.9 Billion
Benefit
Payments
and Expenses

1994 Net Assets
\$47.0 Billion

2024 Net Assets
\$154.2 Billion



NYSUT Pension and Retirement Committee

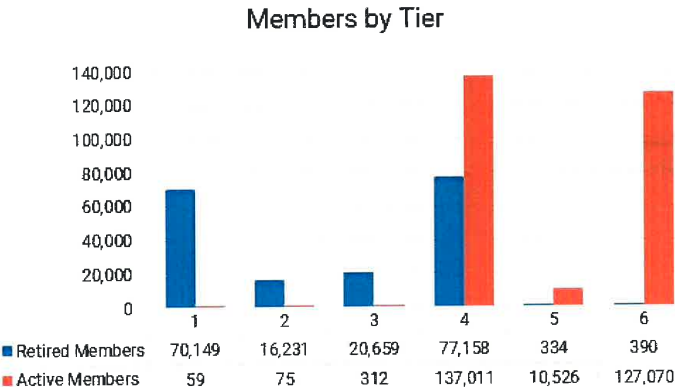
11/1/2025

June 30, 2025 Data Summary

Active Members: 275,053

- In-pay Members:
- Retirees: 177,262
 - Beneficiaries: 7,659
 - Total In-pay: 184,921

Total Members: 459,974



NYSUT Pension and Retirement Committee

11/1/2025

Scholarships Available For Teachers' Children

Scholarships, funded by a BTF settlement and earmarked for the children of Buffalo teachers first, are being administered by The Community Foundation of Greater Buffalo.

Scholarships for the 2026-27 academic year will be awarded in the spring.

Students who are currently high school seniors or are already enrolled in an accredited program, are encouraged to apply.

Awards range from \$1000-\$6000 and the funds are allocated to the children of Buffalo Teachers before other applicants.

The application process opens on January 1 and closes May 1.

To apply, visit www.cfgb.org and click on the 'Scholarships' tab under Community Change. You also may call the CFGB at 852-2857.

Did You Know...?

That non-Board personnel are not authorized to enter a classroom unannounced during teaching periods or at other times when the teacher has responsibility for pupil supervision?

This provision can be found in Article XVI.A of our collective bargaining agreement and does apply to parents!

Welcome New Members

The following 27 teachers have joined the Buffalo Teachers Federation since the last issue of the *Provocator*. Welcome to the union!

- Diane Atallah
- Amanda Beecher
- Grace Borrelli
- Gabrielle Brainard
- Joshua Brill
- Alec Xavier Cowans
- Shantelle Damon
- Ana Paolo Duda
- Lindsey Fattey
- James Harris
- Tara Howard
- Sam Khorramnejad
- Lisa Kankolenski
- Charlene Lanier
- Charles McCormick
- Me Meh
- Kayla Miner
- Adam Myers
- John Nienhaus
- Robin Pedone
- Michelle Rose
- Jennifer Scifo
- Janice Sedita
- Shane Small
- Jeffrey Thomas
- Ronette Wood
- Steven Zafirakis

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