

From classrooms to cubicles:

How New York Life is scaling
grief support through its
agents and expertise

Case study

At-a-Glance

Company: New York Life Foundation

Industry: Insurance

Challenge: Lack of comprehensive grief support in schools and workplaces

Asset-driven solution: Leveraging New York Life's agent network, data capabilities, and mission alignment to deliver scalable grief education and support resources across schools and companies

Impact: 7,000 schools in 49 states and an estimated 4 million students reached through the Grief-Sensitive Schools Initiative; more than 4,000 New York Life agents trained as program ambassadors; expanded bereavement policy at New York Life; over \$3 million awarded to schools



The challenge: Lack of adequate supports for grieving students and employees

New York Life Foundation's impact in the childhood bereavement space began more than a decade ago, sparked by a partnership with Comfort Zone Camp. What began as a pilot grant quickly evolved into a larger commitment, driven by the realization that this was a space where New York Life could lead. With a corporate mission to offer peace of mind and financial support, bereavement support is deeply aligned with New York Life's purpose.

Motivated by the lack of reliable data and practical support tools, the Foundation launched a research partnership with Judi's House to create the Children's Bereavement Estimation Model (CBEM) to understand where childhood grief was most concentrated. The Foundation also conducted surveys with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) to learn about grief in the classroom. Among its learnings from the initial 2012 survey: over 90% of U.S. educators say childhood grief is a serious problem that deserves more attention from schools, but only 3% had received training on supporting students through their school district. Asked how many students typically need their support due to the loss of a loved one each school year, 87% of educators said at least one, and 25% said six or more.

In 2018, the Foundation launched the Grief-Sensitive Schools Initiative (GSSI), enlisting New York Life's national agent network to deliver grief education and resources directly to schools. As momentum grew, agents began asking: Can we take this to nonprofits and other youth-serving organizations in addition to schools? The model was expanded to youth-serving nonprofits through GSSI+.

In 2024, the Foundation expanded its bereavement support into workplaces. The Grief-Supportive Workplace Initiative was built around New York Life data that revealed a deep unmet need: although up to 20% of a given workforce might be grieving at one time, about 64% of employees report that their workplaces do not offer any bereavement support or training.

New York Life Foundation's approach

New York Life Foundation's grief-support programs are designed to activate New York Life's people, knowledge, and brand. While the Foundation leads the strategy and development of these initiatives, it draws on New York Life's national network of more than 12,000 agents, the company's deep expertise in death and bereavement, and a brand rooted in compassion and stability. Together, the Foundation and the company have created a grassroots, scalable model to support individuals and families navigating grief.

Key components

Agent mobilization: After attending a one-hour virtual or in-person training, agents become grief support ambassadors. They are prepared to deliver 15- to 20-minute presentations to school staff and administrators in their community using templated scripts and materials.

Trained agents can provide a range of resources to the schools they support, including free books centered on characters experiencing grief; training modules and other knowledge resources aimed at increasing awareness and providing actionable guidance; and connection to additional education-related programs and organizations. There's no selling, no data collection, and no product mentions in the presentations. Some presentations are co-led with bereavement professionals. This decentralized approach allows the program to reach communities nationwide quickly and effectively.

Building a deep bench: New York Life Foundation has successfully convened a broad coalition of stakeholders, including educators, mental health professionals, and national education organizations like the AFT, the National Education Association and the American School Counselor Association, to help create and deploy its resources in schools, youth-serving nonprofits, and workplaces.

Key components

Evidence-based deployment and thought leadership: New York Life funded the creation the Children's Bereavement Estimation Model (CBEM), which uses census and other data to isolate mortality information in order to more closely track the states and counties where grief is affecting children most acutely. The Foundation then uses this data to target the support it offers with greater specificity. The Foundation also conducts an annual survey of schools reached through GSSI, as well as a national survey of educators and other relevant groups. Results from these surveys support the Foundation's State of Grief report, which informs broader public discourse on the topic.

Incentivized school participation: If schools pledge to become more grief sensitive, they are granted \$500 to expand their grief resources. Entire districts that sign up are awarded \$500/school to distribute across their ecosystems as they see fit. Some districts, like New York City and Dallas, have received well north of \$100,000.

Expanding to nonprofits and workplaces: The launch of GSSI+ brings grief resources to organizations like Boys and Girls Clubs and YMCAs. And in 2024, the Grief-Supportive Workplace Initiative launched with a pledge model that provides free, audience-specific tools for employees, peers, managers, and HR, including e-learning modules, policy templates, and talking points for difficult conversations. No business relationship is required to participate.

Internal policy changes and modeling best practices: In 2021, New York Life overhauled its own bereavement policy, expanding leave from five days to 15 over a six-month period, and allowing employees to define who qualifies as a loved one. The company also established an emergency fund to help employees with funeral costs. These efforts, combined with benchmarking peer policies, position New York Life as a leading voice on what workplace support can and should look like.

Impact highlights

GSSI has reached 7,000 schools in 49 states

Over 4,000 New York Life agents and employees trained

88,000+ educators and school staff trained

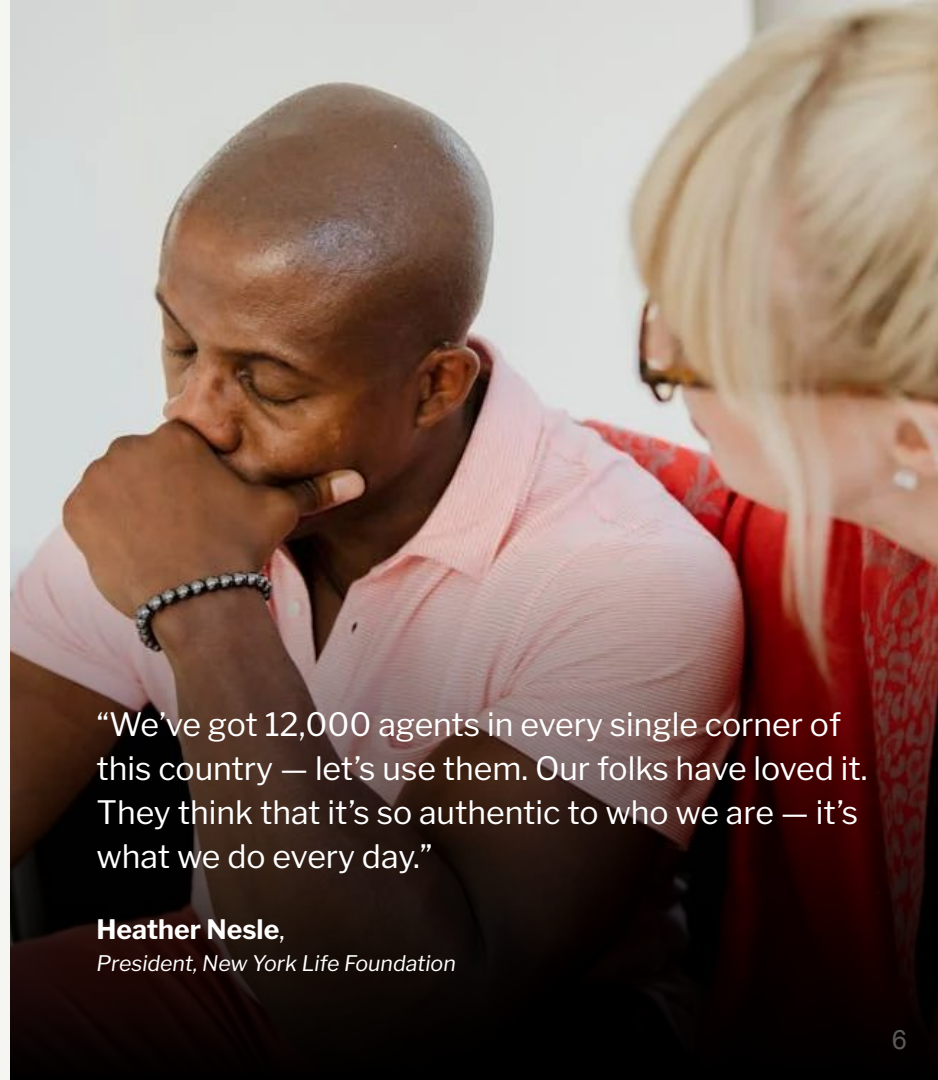
District-wide implementation in cities like New York and Broward County, FL

New York Life now the largest known funder of childhood bereavement causes in the U.S., with nearly \$100M cumulative support

New York Life was a founding partner of the Coalition to Support Grieving Students, which created grievingstudents.org, a comprehensive online resource for schools and administrators

Grief resources now available to any company, not just New York Life clients

New York Life Foundation created [Kai's Journey](#) and accompanying discussion guides, aimed at helping adults speak with children about grief



“We’ve got 12,000 agents in every single corner of this country — let’s use them. Our folks have loved it. They think that it’s so authentic to who we are — it’s what we do every day.”

Heather Nesle,
President, New York Life Foundation

Why the programs are good for New York Life

This initiative works because it is deeply consistent with New York Life's values, identity, and core business.

“

Our grief-support work is authentic to who New York Life is as a company... it ties our staff and agents to the mission, and that's powerful.”

Heather Nesle,
President, New York Life Foundation



Participating agents report higher retention and satisfaction. The program gives them tools to connect with communities on a deeply human topic, and supports the relationship-building required for their long-term business success.



Schools, communities, and workplaces benefit from free, high-quality resources that fill a longstanding gap.



New York Life has taken a leadership position in a nascent field and **is helping shape how society talks about and responds to grief.**

Lessons and implications for other businesses

Align with your company's core values and mission. Alignment makes it easier to gain traction internally and externally.

Mobilize your existing employees, customers, and partners. Tap into their local knowledge, connections, and passion.

Listen for evolution and expansion opportunities. Agent feedback helped the Foundation bridge silos and identify adjacent needs in youth nonprofits and workplaces.

Invest in data. If there are gaps in data related to the problem you're attempting to solve for, invest in data collection to better understand the scope and better inform your impact strategies.

Collaborate with other organizations, nonprofits, and experts in order to leverage complementary strengths and achieve greater impact. Collaboration and partnerships are key to addressing complex social issues.

Walk the walk. Ensure that internal policies reflect the values and impact you are driving externally.

Design with trust in mind. Templated tools and compliance protocols ensured consistent, values-aligned delivery.

Related resources

[Grief-Sensitive Schools Initiative](#)

[Grief-Supportive Workplace Initiative](#)

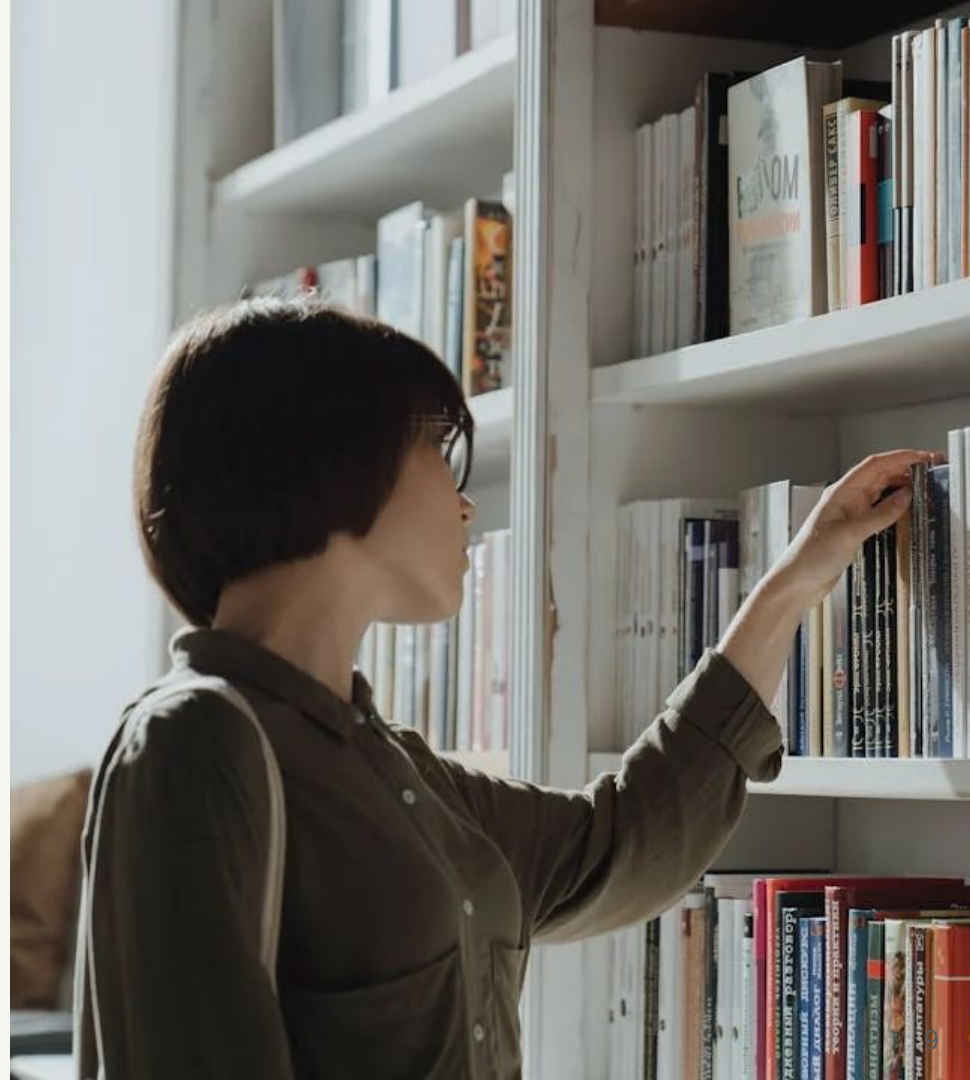
[Grievingstudents.org](#), a central resource developed by the Coalition to Support Grieving Students that offers practical guidance for schools and administrators on how to help grieving students

[Judi's House](#), an early New York Life partner that helped to establish the Children's Bereavement Estimation Model (CBEM), a prevalence indicator of childhood bereavement rates

[Kai's Journey](#) book series

[National Center for School Crisis and Bereavement](#)

[New York Life's 2024 State of Grief Report](#)



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**Please don't hesitate to
reach out if you have
questions or feedback!**

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