



NEWS RELEASE  
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## **Neutral Zone Receives National Afterschool Innovator Award from MetLife Foundation at Ann Arbor *Lights On Afterschool* Rally**

MetLife Foundation and the Afterschool Alliance today honored Ann Arbor Teen Center's Neutral Zone with an Afterschool Innovator Award in recognition of the program's success in recruiting and retaining older youth through a unique, youth-driven approach and flexible, student-run drop-in program. Mike Amine, Managing Partner of New England Financial, a MetLife company, presented the Award at the *Lights On Afterschool* event at the Ann Arbor Teen Center, where Neutral Zone also received \$5,000 to sustain its work.

"Despite the many benefits of afterschool programs, far too many youth in middle and high school do not have access to high quality programs during these critical hours," said Dennis White, president of MetLife Foundation. "We are pleased to join the Afterschool Alliance in recognizing and sharing Neutral Zone's exemplary model of addressing the needs and interests of older youth, which helps put them on the path to success."

Neutral Zone is one of only six afterschool programs nationwide to be named an Afterschool Innovator. It was highlighted in an [Issue Brief](#) on recruiting and retaining older youth, part of a series developed by the Afterschool Alliance with funding from MetLife Foundation that examines critical issues facing older youth, schools and communities and the role that afterschool programs play in addressing these issues. The briefs address: opening doors to work and careers, recruiting and retaining older youth; high school dropout prevention; and mentoring.

"We are so excited to receive this Innovator Award. It's really a testament to the amazing array of programs we offer, the incredible teens that participate, and the remarkable teens that play a role in the leadership of our organization," said Neutral Zone Executive Director John Weiss. "By allowing teens to have an authentic voice, we provide them the framework to engage in positive, creative, and leadership opportunities that showcase their talents and competence."

The *Lights On Afterschool* event featured student performances by Neutral Zone's Poetry Project and music programs, as well as two other youth-serving collaboratives. In addition, a number of other local groups set up displays and distributed information on their afterschool programs and activities.

Organized by the Afterschool Alliance, *Lights On Afterschool* is the only nationwide rally for afterschool programs. The event in Ann Arbor is one of more than 7,500 being held across the country at which children, parents, community leaders, educators and others come together to urge leaders to increase support for the afterschool programs that children and families need. The events also give youth a chance to showcase the skills they learn and talents they develop at

their afterschool programs, and send the message that millions more kids need quality afterschool programs.

“Afterschool programs provide children with unique opportunities to get the exposure, experiences and support they need to achieve success,” said Afterschool Alliance Executive Director Jodi Grant. “The Afterschool Innovator Awards honor programs that have developed and are using promising practices to help children and youth excel.”

Neutral Zone is a thriving venue for needed social, cultural, educational, recreational, and creative opportunities for Ann Arbor area teens. The mission statement of the center was written by youth and continues to be the voice and heart which drives the center's creative programs and opportunities: *The Neutral Zone is a diverse, youth-driven teen center dedicated to promoting personal growth through artistic expression, community leadership and the exchange of ideas.* Neutral Zone hosts a drop-in space, free tutoring, and weekend concerts. Additionally, Neutral Zone offers 21 programs in the areas of education, music technology and performance, literary arts, visual arts, and community leadership. Some of the unique opportunities include: recording original music, hosting cutting-edge art parties, featuring slam workshops and performances, and silk screening t-shirts.

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*The Afterschool Alliance is a nonprofit public awareness and advocacy organization working to ensure that all children and youth have access to quality afterschool programs. More information is available at [www.afterschoolalliance.org](http://www.afterschoolalliance.org).*

*MetLife Foundation was established in 1976 by MetLife to carry on its longstanding tradition of corporate contributions and community involvement. In youth development, MetLife Foundation funds initiatives that promote mentoring and provide safe places and constructive activities for young people, particularly during out-of-school time. For more information, visit [www.metlife.org](http://www.metlife.org).*