

# Spirit

## NEWSLETTER

HONESTY · INTEGRITY · RESPECT

EMPOWERING LIVES. SECURING FUTURES.

FALL 2021

## Advocating for a Living Wage

Unity House of Cayuga County serves and supports more than 1,000 individuals with disabilities every day in seven central New York counties. These are tough times, and the current staffing shortage has become a significant challenge for many businesses and non-profits; there are "Help Wanted" signs everywhere you look. Unity House is down 130 positions and we cannot fill them.

The foundation of our democratic government is that all U.S. citizens can participate, so Unity House is making its voice heard. CEO Liz Smith and COO Darlene Podolak have been reaching out over the summer to our elected officials to advocate for a living wage for our employees and to urge people to get back to work. To date, they have met in person with several representatives, including Congressman John Katko, State Senators Pamela Helming, John Mannion, and Thomas O'Mara, and Assemblypersons John Lemondes, Brian Manktelow, and Anna Kelles. The focus of their meetings has been wages and how government policies and reimbursement rates affect our workforce.



COO Darlene Podolak, Congressman John Katko, and CEO Liz Smith



Darlene and Liz with State Senator John Mannion, Chair of the Disabilities Committee

The agency also recently conducted a letter-writing campaign so our staff and program participants could connect directly with their representatives. The letters urged regional politicians to increase our reimbursement rates so Unity House can pay its direct support professionals a living wage, and enforce the pre-Covid expectation that individuals collecting unemployment benefits must actively seek work between checks. It was gratifying that many officials took the time to respond back in writing to our people.

"Legislators need to hear these messages and understand that our staff don't make a high enough wage to inspire them to do this hard work," continued Liz. "This is vitally important, and we're grateful to our employees who took the time to send in their letters. Hopefully our message will spur action at the top levels of state and local government."



Liz and State Senator Pam Helming



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## *Chief Executive Officer's* P E R S P E C T I V E

What could be more important than demonstrating appreciation for one's employees? Unity House, as a provider of services to some of our most vulnerable citizens, recognizes and understands the importance that staff play in the overall health and vitality of the organization.

I've always thought that direct support professionals (DSPs) are our unsung heroes. Now during Covid, that seems to be especially true. They were not recognized publicly as other frontline workers were. And yet what they do is so critically important. Their daily hands-on work with adults with disabilities is essential to the individuals themselves, to their families, and to our community as a whole. DSPs provide a sense of comfort for family and friends, reassuring them that their loved one is well cared for. They provide a safe, stable place for our service recipients, and that minimizes the burden on other ancillary services in our region.

Proactively acknowledging their efforts is something Unity House and I take seriously. I recently learned that DSPs don't even have a legitimate classification code under the federal Department of Labor that identifies their uniqueness and the complexities of their work. How can we as one agency increase their professional status if the federal government doesn't recognize them for their worth?



serve: mental health, substance use disorder, and developmental/intellectual disabilities. It is important to me and the board of directors that we recognize them all.

Over the years, we've learned that our DSPs especially love clothing items with the agency's logo, like hoodies, blankets, t-shirts, etc. This year, they all received a black jacket in addition to delivered take-out lunches each week in September. We also hung banners at our key locations in two counties.

Now we're into October and we'll continue thanking our most dedicated employees with longevity awards, another important acknowledgement that's been going on at Unity House as long as I've worked here. We recognize staff who have stayed with us for 3, 5, 10, 15, 20+ years. Long-standing employee, Tim Laird, is celebrating 35 years in 2021! Each honoree gets to select a reward from a special catalog, and their supervisor is asked to say a few words about their contributions at a small ceremony.

Unity House and I are so fortunate to have this core group of dedicated staff who have stuck with us through thick and thin. Taking the time to say "thank you" from your heart does matter.



**Liz Smith**  
Chief Executive Officer

To ensure that our employees feel valued, Unity House several years ago purposely chose to evolve Direct Support Professionals Week in mid-September into an entire month of celebration. As an organization, we made the conscious decision to recognize all of our hands-on staff who support the three disability groups we



# Lessons **LEARNED**

by Gary Fellows, Director of Facilities



In March of 2021, due to the on-going staffing crisis, I started to help cover shifts at the West Lake Road IRA in Dryden. I have worked for Unity House for over 20 years, but this was a whole new experience. For years I have worked to make sure the programs were able to run smoothly by fixing and updating sites, but now I was working directly with the folks we support one-on-one.

A couple of weeks ago, I was working a shift on a Friday evening. It was decided that everyone would order out for dinner as no one felt like cooking. At first, I'm thinking that this would be a fairly easy process, but with six individuals all wanting different food from different locations, it took much longer than I expected. After the other DSPs and I gave the manager our orders, there was the added complication of paying for dinner. Each individual has their own account with personal cash. Whenever they spend their own money, we have to help keep track of how much they spend by tracking and signing receipts, and making sure the proper change is returned to their account.

Once the manager ordered and picked up all the meals, we sat at the dining room table and talked about how everyone's day went, good or bad, while we ate. I was surprised by how normal this felt. It reminded me of having dinner with my own family. Then, it was suggested we play cards after we cleaned up, so we played UNO for about two and a half hours. I won a total of only one game! The guys took great joy in the fact that I couldn't win a game until the last one, when I told them I'm going to quit while I'm ahead. Playing UNO with the folks felt like playing cards with my buddies at home.

I am looking forward to my next shift at West Lake. I will need to sharpen up my card playing; I can't wait for my rematch! Working at West Lake has shown me that we are all just people at the end of the day.

## Grants & Gifts

Unity House is the grateful recipient of funding from these sources:

### Legacy Foundation - \$3,200

These funds purchased four laptop computers. This new technology allows Ithaca day services participants to attend Zoom Hab, a new virtual learning tool created by Unity House staff during the pandemic to keep program participants connected & moving forward on their life plans.

### Cayuga Community Fund - \$1,750

This support will assist 3-4 PROS mental health professionals in preparing for and then taking the state-mandated CPRP (Certified Psychiatric Rehabilitation Practitioner) examination.

### Annual Dinner Sponsors - \$8,600

Special thanks to all the businesses that supported our annual award dinner this year! Bonadio Group, Cuddy Law Firm, Currier Plastics, Empower FCU, Enterprise Fleet Management, Johnston Paper, Jonathan's Furniture, Lake Country Real Estate (Midge Fricano), Lynch Furniture, MEDENT, MG Architects, Reagan Insurance, Tompkins Trust Co., WSTM Channel 3.



## 2<sup>nd</sup> Annual LEMONADE STAND

It's been three years since Jamie Luffman's brother Phil passed away. To honor his memory, Jamie and her family hosted the second annual lemonade stand on August 18 and raised \$1,132 for Grace House, which helped Phil during his life. Many thanks to the Luffmans for supporting the recovery program and for keeping Phil's memory alive.

# WHAT'S YOUR *Legacy*?

What will you be known for when you leave this world? Those who make thoughtful bequests will live on in the hearts of people they touch.

Unity House has been committed to caring for adults with disabilities for 45 years. To ensure the agency's longevity, we will be launching a legacy giving society in 2022. Watch for exciting news soon! And please consider joining the society by leaving a gift to Unity House in your will so that we can continue to support these vulnerable individuals well into the future.

Learn more at [www.unityhouse.com/plannedgiving.html](http://www.unityhouse.com/plannedgiving.html)



## SITE IMPROVEMENTS



Every year, Director of Facilities Gary Fellows meets with upper management to go over the agency's five-year maintenance plan. Together, they rank projects based on how they will improve each site's safety and quality of life. This has been especially important since the pandemic. With folks unable to leave their homes, making sure their living space is safe and comfortable is crucial.

"Our clients' wellbeing is our top priority," said Gary. "We have to consider many different factors. For example, this summer's projects seemed to mostly focus on how to accommodate our folks' different mobility needs."

### *Some programs that got a facelift this year:*

**North Street Road IRA in Auburn.** Our maintenance team installed a new backyard patio. Now not only do the residents have a lovely outdoor space to enjoy, but in case of an emergency, they have a safe place to gather outside of their home.



**Danby Road IRA in Ithaca.** The wheelchair ramp to the main door was replaced. Adequate ramps at our IRAs are essential to ensure that program participants can independently enter and exit their home. Danby also received a new outdoor patio space. Just like North Street, it is important to have an easy-to-access meeting place outside in case of a fire or other emergency situation.

**Sheffield Road IRA in Ithaca.** The stairs leading to the main entrance were replaced and new decking was installed. In addition, a new sidewalk was poured. This will help residents and staff move safely around the outside of the house, especially in the winter.



## Executive LEADERSHIP TEAM

Unity House's board of directors recently formalized its executive leadership team and made some title changes. This strategy has been in discussion for several years and has now been formalized. This important change positions the agency for growth in the future and builds depth across our many departments. It also acknowledges the need to find alternate revenue sources for the agency and will allow us to restructure the development department to meet future goals.

Most of the people remain the same; their titles have simply changed. Our chief officers are:

Elizabeth Smith, Chief Executive Officer (CEO)  
Darlene Podolak, Chief Operating Officer (COO)  
Sara Bilinski, Chief People Officer (CPO)  
Diane Jurczak-Prue, Chief Finance Officer (CFO)  
Amber Amidon, Chief Compliance Officer/QA (CCO)  
TBD, Chief Advancement Officer (CAO)

## GIVING TUESDAY

A GLOBAL  
OPPORTUNITY TO HELP

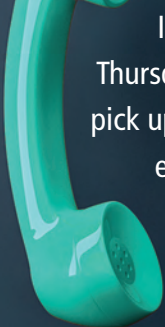
**NOVEMBER 30, 2021**

Celebrate Giving Tuesday with Unity House! Following Thanksgiving, Black Friday, and Cyber Monday, Giving Tuesday on November 30 is our chance to give back. Will you please make a gift to Unity House on Giving Tuesday? Your generosity matters!

[www.unityhouse.com/GivingTuesday.html](http://www.unityhouse.com/GivingTuesday.html)

## Phonathon 2021

**Hello! Unity  
House calling!**



If your phone rings on Thursday, December 9, please pick up! It may be a Unity House employee or board member calling our friends and past donors for our year-end phonathon. We hope to speak with you! Every donation helps the people with disabilities we support, and will help us reach our annual fund goal by December 31!



## Unity House is Hiring!

### Temporary Wage Increase!

Now through December 31 2021,

Residential Direct Support Professionals: **\$18 per hour!**

Day Hab, UES, and PROS employees: **\$16 per hour!**

#### Benefits include:

- ★ Set and Flexible Schedules
- ★ Full- and Part-Time Shifts
- ★ Medical and Dental
- ★ Paid Leave
- ★ Wages on Demand



Apply today: [www.unityhouse.com/joinourteam.html](http://www.unityhouse.com/joinourteam.html)

# PROGRAM *Happenings*



**Cathy's Green Thumb:** This spring Cathy H. from the New Life IRA helped plant a vegetable and flower garden. She spent many early evenings during a hot and dry June watering these baby plants to ensure they grew. Some of the first vegetables that she harvested from her garden were tomatoes and cucumbers. Cathy grew a plethora of vegetables, including green peppers, corn, and squash for her peers to enjoy throughout the summer and into the fall.

**Fish Road Adventures in Atlantic City:** The residents at the Fish Road IRA had a goal to visit Atlantic City by the end of this summer. None had ever been there. They had to budget for months to save up \$200 for this trip. Staff encouraged and worked with them to achieve that, and they all were successful! When the group of six arrived in Atlantic City, they started with a boat ride to go dolphin watching. Next, they had a picnic lunch that they had packed, and then they explored the boardwalk. On their drive back to Ithaca, they stopped and had dinner together.



**Passport to Travel:** Auburn and Ithaca Day Habs created a Passport to Travel event this summer to encourage community integration. All programs were welcome to participate. The passport was a small booklet with locations in and around the Finger Lakes. Participants were encouraged to travel with their staff to different landmarks. Once there, they took a few pictures and presented them to their local Day Hab to get a passport stamp. Prizes were awarded to the folks with the most stamps.

**Unity Employment Services (UES) Team Building:** New UES Director Shannon Coccimiglio hosted her staff this summer for a team building day at Cayuga Lake State Park. The day's activities included different exercises that explored communications, privilege, and interaction with clients and each other.



**Ithaca Volunteers:** Ithaca Day Hab participants Russell T. and Kevin B. love to volunteer in their community! Lately they've been stocking items in the blue food pantries throughout Tompkins County. They are wonderful role models for their peers.





## Welcome NEW DIRECTOR

Nyka Phelps has joined the agency as the new director of the PROSperity outpatient mental health program. She began her new duties in July.

"As we welcome Nyka to PROS and we recover from limited services during the public health crisis, I'm excited to see how she grows and diversifies our classes and services," said COO Darlene Podolak.

Nyka holds a Master of Social Work from Syracuse University, and is a licensed LMSW and LCSW. She most recently was a psychiatric social worker in an inpatient unit at St. Joseph's Hospital in Syracuse. In her new role, Nyka is responsible for direct clinical oversight and monitoring of all operations for the agency's Personalized Recovery Oriented Services (PROS) program.

She supervises six employees while managing budgetary components; program goals, policies and procedures of PROS; and the HCBS/CORE peer empowerment programs.

"I applied because I read some wonderful reviews online about Unity House and amazing collaborations in the community," said Nyka. "Unity House provides a full spectrum of services through OMH, OPWDD, and OASAS, and I loved the idea of having all these services under one roof. My goal is to have more participants attend groups onsite now that the world is starting to reopen, and perhaps offer groups in other locations while maintaining confidentiality."

## RECOGNITION & Gratitude

National Direct Support Professionals (DSP) week is a federally recognized time of appreciation for all DSPs during September. Because we are so incredibly grateful for our DSPs, we've chosen to extend it to the whole month!

Every year the agency presents its DSPs with a special gift to thank them for all their hard work. This year they were given black Sherpa jackets with the agency's logo. In addition, the Lakewatch Inn in Ithaca provided weekly take-out meals throughout September, banners were hung on several Unity House buildings, and wages have been temporarily increased until the end of the year.



Staff at the Auburn Longevity Awards

Longevity ceremonies continued the celebration in October in both Auburn and Ithaca. Fifty-nine employees received an award based on how long they have been with Unity House, ranging from three years to an impressive 35 years of service.



During the ceremonies, managers said a few words about each awardee. There were countless examples of

our staff going above and beyond to help our clients. It was hard to find a dry eye by the end of the award presentations. When addressing the honorees, CEO Liz Smith said: "Thank you does not even begin to cover how deeply grateful I am for all of you. I often find myself in awe of how you manage to do it all. Your passion for the people we serve is so evident in your work. Between limited staff at your sites, prolonged overnight shifts, and new challenges every day, I am inspired by all of you."



Staff at the Ithaca Longevity Awards

## ANNUAL DINNER *Success!*

After missing last year, the annual dinner was especially wonderful in September. About 120 friends attended at the Chantelle Marie venue on Owasco Lake, catered by Balloons Restaurant. Deepest thanks to our guests who attended, our sponsors, our award winners, and all those who support our mission to enhance the lives of people with disabilities. You helped us raise almost \$14,000!



*Guests enjoying dinner at Chantelle Marie*



*Guest speaker Jackie Cioffa and CEO Liz Smith*



*CEO Liz Smith making her welcome remarks*



*Director Kelly Buck and Matt Chadwick drawing the winning raffle ticket*



*Open Arms Award winner Sherri Campagnola and her daughter Rose*



*Atkins Award winner Trudy Buxenbaum and her family*

### Thank you to our Sponsors:

- Bonadio Group
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- Enterprise Fleet Management
- Johnston Paper
- Jonathan's Furniture
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