

Unity Games

May the Odds Be Ever in Your Favor



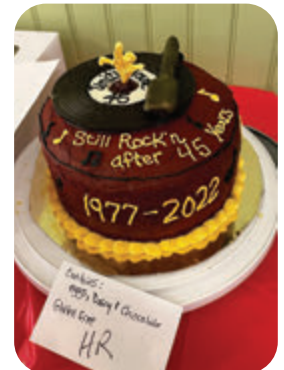
The past two years have been hard for in-person events between the Covid-19 pandemic and the staffing shortages. We decided it was time for some fun! Unity House revived our Corporate Challenge and gave it a complete makeover, including a new name: Unity Games

On September 29, 13 teams from around Unity House gathered at Fillmore Glen State Park for the first reimagined Unity Games. Teams faced off in jousting, corn hole, giant Jenga, a photo scavenger hunt, and Unity Feud. Top teams were awarded medals and trophies for their accomplishments. After a nail biting tie-breaker between the Team Who Must Not Be Named and the Jefferson Jaguars, Who Must Not Be Named clinched the victory.

All programs competed in a birthday cake bake-off in honor of Unity House's 45th anniversary. One cake per department was scored based on taste and decoration. The winner was Human Resources who presented a gluten-free chocolate and vanilla four-layer cake with a 45 record on top.

Participants ended the day with delicious food from Lasca's, music provided by Good Time Charlie's and, of course, birthday cake. It was wonderful to get out of our regular routines and bond with our coworkers. We can't wait to do it again next year!

For more pictures please check out our Facebook: Unity House of Cayuga County Inc. facebook.com/unityhouseofcc





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Editor

Kelly D. Buck
Director of Marketing & Development
315.253.6227 x 313
kdbuck@unityhouse.com

Reporter & Photographer

Alexis Liberatore

To be added to the Spirit e-mail list or to opt-out, please call 315.253.6227 x 358 or e-mail development@unityhouse.com. Learn more about Unity House’s services and how you can support Unity House at www.unityhouse.com.

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P E R S P E C T I V E

I started my career in human services as a direct support professional. Like all DSPs, I worked directly with people with disabilities, helping them learn and grow stronger. I loved it, but the wages were low. Making a living as a DSP was a struggle. Sadly, that hasn’t changed much in the last 30 years.

The Covid pandemic showed just how valuable DSPs are. It’s past time that people stop viewing them as “entry level” employees.

Every day, Unity House DSPs worried: “Am I bringing Covid into my workspace?” “Am I bringing it home to my family?” And yet they still came to work. They followed ever-changing rules intended to protect the people we serve. Our DSPs allowed Unity House to stay open and provide crucially needed services. I shudder to think what would have happened without their dedicated service.

Then, just as we thought we were slowly pulling away from Covid, our country was struck with the greatest workforce disruption in memory. Millions of people quit their jobs to stay safe at home. With so many vacancies, workers gained bargaining power. They used it to push for better work/life balance and higher pay. And why not? Who wants a job where they are not valued or adequately paid?

Direct service professionals are central to our mission here at Unity House. That’s always been true, but our ability to pay them what they’re worth has been limited by the amount the state reimburses us for the services they provide.

Here’s the truth: DSPs don’t make a living wage. The federal government’s Heroes Fund has tried to bridge the gap with generous longevity and retention bonuses, but that money isn’t built into their base wage. It’s a one-time pay-out.

As a leader, I find myself asking two things: How do I advocate more strongly for better wages for my employees, and how can we at Unity House reframe our thinking about these crucial staff?

In this newsletter, you’ll read about my meetings with elected officials, pressing for increased rates so we can better pay our DSPs. You’ll also see stories that celebrate our DSPs and the great work they do every day.

I call on everyone to join me in referring to DSPs as “frontline workers,” because that’s what they are. Much like firefighters, police, EMTs and nurses, direct support professionals deserve to be celebrated by us all. They’ve earned it. And with that respect should come higher pay.

At Unity House, we’re dedicated to our mission, so we’re dedicated to giving our DSPs what they need and deserve. We appreciate your support.



Liz Smith
Chief Executive Officer

“Direct Service Professionals are central to our mission here at Unity House.”

“I call on everyone to join me in referring to DSPs as “frontline workers.””

Your Support EMPOWERS LIVES

On any given day, Unity House serves more than 1,000 people facing major life challenges. We're dedicated to empowering lives and securing futures. Please consider making a donation to help us meet our mission. Each gift is a sign of how much our community values Unity House and the people we support.



www.unityhouse.com/donate.html



Welcome New Board Member

Lorie Fischer joined Unity House's board of directors in June. She is the program director and early intervention official with Services for Children with Special Needs at the Cayuga County Health Department, where she has worked since 2006. Previously, she held positions at the Gavras Center in Auburn, and in North Carolina, Japan, and San Diego. Lorie holds a B.S. in education from SUNY-Cortland, and served in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserves from 1987 – 1995.



"Lorie has solid experience and knowledge of special needs in Cayuga County," said CEO Liz Smith. "This lends well to the organization because many of the individuals we support need those services regularly. Lorie was recommended by the county health department, and I look forward to working with her."

Lorie is excited to join the board: "I want to remain active in my community. I have many years of experience working with the developmentally disabled population. I look forward to being part of a team that helps many people be successful in the community that I live in, work in and love."



STAFF Spotlight

Unity House believes it's important to recognize staff who go above and beyond. Every quarter, staff across the organization are nominated by their peers. These employees exemplify Unity House's core values.

Employee of the second quarter: Ron Krause, Auburn Unity Employment Specialist (UES)

This is what some of Ron's fellow employees had to say about him:

"Ron always goes above and beyond in everything he does, from supporting his service recipients and his coworkers to computer support. I was glad to be on his team when I worked in Employment Services." -Allen Sprague, MH Independent Housing

"Ron is the ultimate professional. He is the first one selected to take on new programs and projects others aren't qualified for. All service recipients and employees are treated with respect and dignity by Ron. For 21 years, Ron has been sharing his knowledge and expertise with staff, and we are a stronger department thanks to him." -Dan Velte, UES

Grace House Staff of the Quarter: Katie Hammon, Grace House SA/AS Specialist

Grace House Director Dorothy Radcliff had this to say about the inaugural award:

"Katie was selected due to the work ethic that she has displayed over the past couple of months. She also has shown a willingness to try new things in her role. Katie's ability to relate to our participants in a manner that they understand is critical. She is a great multitasker and gets it done. Her optimism and positivity rubs off on other staff and participants!"



Ron Krause



Katie Hammon



Unity House is seeking caring individuals who want to make a difference in people's lives. With competitive pay and excellent benefits, Unity House is more than just a job. It's a great opportunity to develop a career. Unity House has part-time, full-time and relief positions, which means you can work as little or as much as you would like.

At Unity House, you will support people with mental illnesses, developmental disabilities, and/or substance use disorders. With your help and guidance, they will develop their personal skills so that they can build a path to a brighter future.



View our current job listings and complete an online application at: unityhouse.com/joinourteam.html

CHARITY TAP NIGHT *Success*



On July 20, we celebrated Unity House's 45th birthday with a charity tap night in partnership with Perform 4 Purpose. Many thanks to Tinkers for hosting, everyone who came out on a 100-degree night to support Unity House, and especially the kids from P4P for the great music. We hit our fundraising goal and had a blast!



Planned Giving Advisory Council

Unity House has established a Planned Giving Advisory Council to ensure that the charitable organization can empower lives for generations to come.

These volunteer professionals (attorneys, estate planners, accountants, wealth managers, funeral home directors, and others) serve as both subject matter resources and dedicated community ambassadors for Unity House. Council members are available to help people who want to include Unity House in their wills and estate plans.

Special thanks to our charter members:

- Michael Antonacci, Rialto Wealth Management
- Patrick Carbonaro, Carbonaro, Carbonaro & Brune, PC
- Timothy Carr, Pinnacle Investments, LLC
- Norman Chirco, Chirco Law Firm
- Nancy Massicci, Community Foundation of Tompkins County
- Michael O'Gorman, Farrell's Funeral Home
- Ryan Pine, Genesee Capital Advisors
- David Tehan, Boyle & Anderson, PC
- Michael Zoanetti, Tompkins Financial

MOVE IN **Unity**

Studies show that long periods of being stationary can negatively affect your health. In an ongoing effort to keep Unity House staff engaged with their overall well-being and to improve their work-life balance, the Move in Unity committee has introduced several initiatives. When staff feel empowered, they are able to pay it forward and empower the people they serve.

- Unity House offers employees free biometric testing every year to help track their health. To encourage participation, if 75% of each department completes their biometric testing and the online health risk assessment, that department is awarded a free wellness day off.
- Unity House has partnered with Indeed Wellness to provide free online seminars to all staff. These sessions are taught by experts and cover a variety of topics including stress management to nutrition. All classes are recorded and uploaded to the Wellness Library for convenient 24/7 access by staff.
- All Unity House employees and their families have free access to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Our EAP offers the most comprehensive program anywhere and is available online 24/7.

Raise **THE RATES**



Assemblyman Brian Manktelow & CEO Liz Smith

New York State is headed for a crisis in its ability to care for people with disabilities, and only the state legislature can avert it.

That's the message CEO Liz Smith has been sharing with local members of the state Assembly and Senate.

"Our ability to deliver on our mission depends on our direct support professionals," said Liz. "They're the reason we're able to empower people with disabilities. They deserve a living wage."

The wages Unity House can pay its direct support professionals is a function of state reimbursement rates for the services provided. Those rates lag far behind inflation, and even the modest increase approved in April has yet to be received by nonprofits such as Unity House. Without a significant increase in state support, DSPs may be forced to leave the work they love for higher-paying jobs, Liz said.

Liz is meeting with state senators John Mannion, Pam Helming, Rachel May and Peter Oberacker, as well as Assemblymembers Anna Kelles, John Lemondes Jr., and Brian Manktelow. So far, all have expressed strong support for raising state reimbursement rates.

Spirit

A message FROM **CHRIS IVEN**



It takes people to deliver on Unity House's mission.

We need employees to provide services to people with disabilities, of course. We also need volunteers to serve on our board, partners to enable innovation, and donors to help with the costs.

Unity House is dedicated to empowering people with disabilities so they can secure their future. My role is to help our nonprofit build and deepen the relationships we'll need to keep doing that for generations to come.

That's why I'm eager to meet supporters like you. I want to know why you support Unity House, what you think might help us grow stronger, and who you think might help.

Please reach out to me at 315-253-6227, ext. 360 or civen@unityhouse.com so we can set up a time to talk. I look forward to meeting you!

Chris Iven joined Unity House in July as its first chief advancement officer.



In July, the new suicide prevention hotline 988 launched nationwide. Now, anyone in the US who is contemplating suicide, experiencing a mental health crisis, or battling addiction will be able to call or text 988 for specialized and speedy help. Operators will put the caller in touch with a crisis counselor trained to handle these situations. We all need help sometimes. Reach out to 988!



PROGRAM *Happenings*



Sweet Treats: To beat the summer heat, Auburn Day Hab participants made ice cream by combining cream, sugar, and chocolate in a container, and then putting that into a bag of ice and shaking it until it became ice cream. What a great treat!

Spring Sing:

After a two-year hiatus, our friends from Ithaca Without Walls and Day Hab were able to put on their first Spring Sing at Stewart Park since Covid. Lots of good talent; watch out, *American Idol*!



Out on the Town:

Residents at the Hector Street IRA took advantage of the great weather when they visited local wineries and played mini-golf. Program participants were excited to get out in the community again.



We Scream For Ice Cream:

In July, Melissa Leader at Empower Federal Credit Union and Poppy's ice cream truck teamed up to bring free cones to Unity House staff in Auburn.



Building Healthy Relationships: These Auburn Day Hab participants are the most recent graduates of the Healthy Relationships class!

This curriculum takes 20 weeks to finish. In August they celebrated the completion of their course with certificates and snacks. Congrats, grads!

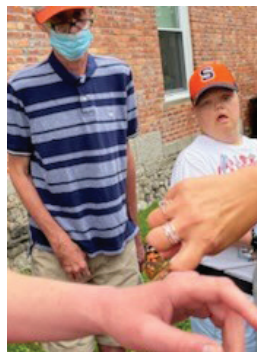


Dinner in Dryden:

Marquis at our Dryden IRA has been working hard on his culinary skills. He was so proud of the fried tofu and stir-fry he made for dinner, he just had to show it off. Bon appetit, Marquis!



Stained Glass: Participants at Ithaca Day Hab Painted on clear glass tea light holders to give it a stained glass effect. What a simple way to spice up plain glass and have fun!



Butterflies Everywhere:

Over the summer, the gardening group at Auburn Day Hab bought a butterfly garden. It came with a cup of live caterpillars and a butterfly habitat. They got to see the caterpillars become chrysalises and then watched as the butterflies emerged from their cocoons. Together, they set them all free. Participants

discussed how butterflies are important pollinators and how they help plants reproduce.

Grants & Gifts

Unity House is the grateful recipient of funding from:

FIVE STAR BANK - \$2,550

In support of our PROS mental health program, this grant purchased curriculum and training materials on such topics as anger management, assertiveness, nutrition, budgeting and money management, music and humor for recovery, and many others specifically designed for people with mental illness. The grant also bought bus passes to get our clients to those classes, and funds to help pay for field trips.

J.M. MCDONALD FOUNDATION - \$3,000

In the aftermath of Covid, Unity House shifted some programming space. The McDonald Foundation provided funding for four new office cubicles for staff: desks, bookcases, chairs, and other equipment.



NARCAN *Training*

On National Overdose Awareness Day (August 31), Grace House saw an opportunity to educate Unity House staff with a hands-on NARCAN training. The session was led by Grace House Director Dorothy Radcliff and two residents, Cheryl and April. Together they talked about their personal experiences administering and receiving NARCAN. All participants got a NARCAN kit to take home. An overdose can happen to anyone, so it's best to be prepared. No more stigma. No more shame.

Welcome **TWO NEW DIRECTORS**

Two regional executives joined Unity House as chief administrative officers this summer:



Chris Iven, chief advancement officer (CAO). Chris is an experienced nonprofit executive with expertise in building productive relationships. He comes to the organization from Elmcrest Children's Center, where he was the director of philanthropy. He also was a regional executive director at the YMCA of Greater Syracuse, and an editor for the Syracuse Post-Standard. Chris holds an M.S. in journalism from Syracuse University and a B.A. in political science from Denison University. In this newly created position, he will advance Unity House's mission by creating deeper relationships with community leaders and growing the nonprofit's endowment.

Joanna Viggiano, chief financial officer (CFO). Joanna is a senior accounting and financial management executive with over 25 years of experience. She was the CFO at Two Plus Four Management Co. in Syracuse before joining Unity House. She has held top financial positions at Liberty Resources and with the Pyramid Management Group. Joanna is a certified public accountant, and earned a B.S. in accounting from Niagara University. At Unity House, she will manage the organization's \$25 million budget while forming a cohesive team and ensuring Unity House's fiscal viability.



"I am excited to work alongside these two new officers," said CEO Liz Smith. "Each brings a new perspective to the good work we've been doing, and will challenge us in the future. They bring fresh energy to our mission, and I believe both will inspire us and propel us forward."

Celebrating our **DSPs**

National Direct Support Professionals (DSP) Week is observed every September. Designated by the U.S. Senate, DSP Week gives Unity House and other organizations the chance to recognize the dedication and hard work of our essential frontline staff. Every year, Unity House presents its DSPs with a special gift to thank them for everything they do. This year, they each received a high-quality drawstring backpack and a Yeti travel mug.

Longevity ceremonies were also held in Auburn and Ithaca. This year we recognized 65 employees across the organization. They received an award based on how long they have been with Unity House. Milestones range from three years to an impressive 35 years of service!

