



STAYING STRONG in the Face of COVID-19

So much has happened since the new year. Who knew washing our hands constantly was going to be the next big trend? Yet Unity House has been resilient and remains open. We were declared an essential business in March by New York State because we support adults with disabilities in our communities 24/7/365.

Unity House's devoted employees have been amazing throughout it all. Our team leaders have tackled the daunting task of guiding their programs through all the regulations while also trying to maintain a sense of normalcy. Direct Support Professionals have been selflessly putting their lives on the line every day by working one-on-one with our individuals. And our support staff have been doing their part minimizing in-person contact by working from home on a rotating basis. Our employees are incredible, and the Payroll Protection Program (PPP) from the CARES Act has allowed us to keep everyone on the payroll during the pandemic.

Our staff are in fact essential frontline workers, yet they are often overlooked as we laud the good works done by nurses, doctors, firefighters, EMTs, and others during this time. Our service recipients are among the most vulnerable, susceptible to many illnesses and requiring special attention. Our employees are on the front lines every day, possibly risking their own health to help these individuals. Unity House is proud to stand together with all the other responders out there in this fight against COVID-19.

We are also thankful for the support that we have received from our communities. In March, we put out a call on social media for personal protection equipment (PPE) and the response has been so gratifying. To date, we have received over 600 homemade face masks, medical gowns, thermometers, and more! Our awesome nursing team has been distributing the PPE to the rest of the agency, making sure everyone gets what they need in order to carry on.

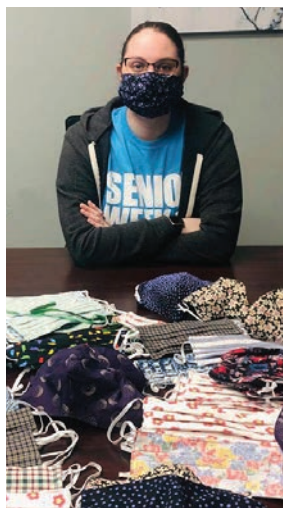
Unity House remains strong in the face of COVID-19. We will continue to provide the best, safest services and supports for our program participants.

FUN TIMES DURING QUARANTINE

Even though it has been difficult for our clients to be in quarantine, they are hanging in there. Unity House has sponsored a number of different activities to help them stay busy and have some fun: a remote karaoke video competition, a sidewalk chalk art contest, participated in Auburn's teddy bear scavenger hunt, and provided activity bags with puzzles and games. Being in isolation is not easy for anyone, so we are glad we can help break up the monotony a bit.



YOU GOT US COVERED



Unity House is so grateful to all who provided the agency with PPE during COVID-19. We've received more than 600 homemade face masks, enabling us to provide this protection to our employees and program participants. We can use even more to keep everyone "covered" as we resume day services later this summer.

Spirit



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Executive Director's PERSPECTIVE

Three months have passed since the novel coronavirus affected all of our lives. Yet this message is not about COVID-19. It's about connecting from the heart. It's about bringing people together for a common purpose. It's about leading through crisis.

Stepping back and taking a look at all that's going on in our world, it is easy to see why these are being called "unprecedented times." Isolation, violent protests, unemployment, politics, illness, the economic collapse. It's all beginning to feel a bit much, but as leaders, we are asked to hold it together for our employees, our clients, our community, ourselves.

So how do I do that? As the executive director of a large agency that employs over 400 people and supports more than 1,000, how do I keep the faith, boost morale, and lead the way? And how do I do that when I too am feeling the same stress, anxiety, and doubt as everyone else? Luckily, I've found two ways: set the example by exhibiting a positive, professional face to the world, and communicate from the heart every week to our devoted staff.

Over these past months, I've come to enjoy my weekly email messages sent across the agency to every employee. I begin formulating them in my mind early in the week, and by Friday morning, I'm ready to sit down and thoughtfully type. I pull from my experiences of the past week, sharing personal stories and anecdotes that I hope resonate with our workers. I attempt to lift them up, let them know I'm right there with them, and inject some good humor into their day. The purpose is to share what's going on in the agency so everyone feels in touch, and send them into the weekend with peace and hope.

The many happy responses I receive back warm my heart and indicate the true necessity for this outreach. Others are feeling the same way I am, and if my weekly email in some way encourages our miracle workers to stay safe, continue their hard work, and know they are valued and appreciated, it is a wonderful investment of my time.

In these worrisome days, I've found that open, personal communications can work wonders and ease fears. I wish you too peace and hope and good health as we move into summer. Please stay well.

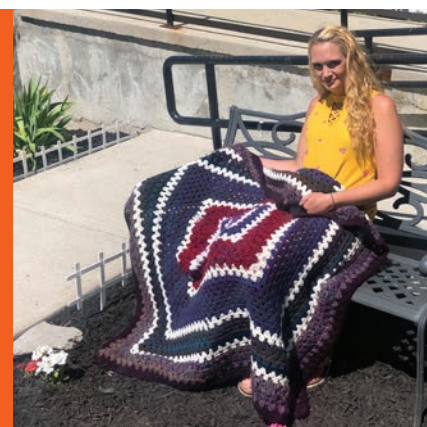


Liz Smith
Executive Director



Crochet Comforts

Theresa has been working on this blanket throughout her recovery. She said: "My mother taught me how to crochet when I was younger. During my recovery and quarantine, I picked the hobby back up to help me cope, and now I use it as a coping skill daily."



CHANGING OF THE GUARD

Even though Unity House could not adequately thank and send off outgoing board members at the annual dinner this year, we are so grateful for their leadership, wish them well, and want to honor them here:



Board President Cindy Wilcox retired from her position in April after serving the agency since 2009.

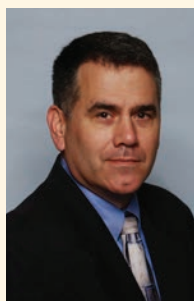
"Cindy was very interested and actively involved in board development and setting our sights higher," said Executive Director Liz Smith. "She was originally brought on for her skills in fundraising, and she was instrumental in helping us get our development program off the ground many years ago. She also developed the board assessment tool for strengths and growth that we will continue to use in the future, and helped ensure that we follow best practices. She was a great leader for our board and I will miss working with Cindy."



Donna Clark also completed her time on the Unity House board in April after four years.

"Donna really understood the regulations that Unity House had to meet every day," said Liz. "She is not only a parent of one of our service recipients, she also was the board director for Freedom Recreational Services, a local agency that helps a similar population. I always appreciated the insight she gave to the board. Donna was a joy to work with and I wish her the best."

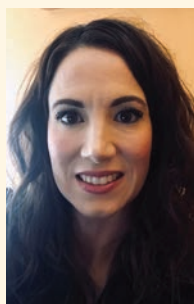
The agency is pleased to name its next board president and welcome a new board member:



Unity House is delighted to have long-time board member **Andrew K. Cuddy** step into the leadership role of board president. Andy joined the Unity House board in 2010, and has been vice president since 2015. He earned his law degree from the University at Buffalo, and is the owner of Cuddy Law Firm, dedicated to vindicating the rights of children with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

"It is a challenging time for Unity House and other agencies across the country dealing with the present crisis," said Andy. "I look forward to working with my fellow board members and the administration and staff of Unity House as we navigate the COVID-19 crisis, keeping people safe and coming out of it in a stronger position. We could not have a better team of dedicated professionals serving this community."

In the years ahead, Andy believes Unity House will be navigating some shifting funding sources and changing needs within its communities. "We will look and plan ahead so that the vital services we provide will continue to be provided in a caring and professional manner, no matter what the new challenges may be," he said. "As board president, I also will be reaching out to young leaders in the community, bringing them onto the board and developing them for future leadership. Our board needs to be continually enhanced by new ideas and youthful zeal."



Christina Warter, owner of Soul and Mind Evolution (SAME) in Auburn, joined the Unity House board in April 2020. She created SAME as a safe space for her young daughter, who has special needs, and other families and caregivers in similar situations. Prior to starting SAME, Christina was a housing coordinator, community educator and support group facilitator at Community Action Programs in Auburn. She majored in dance at Mills College and SUNY Brockport, holds certification in Autism Movement Therapy, and is a Mindfulness Life Coach.

"Unity House has made a positive impact in their mission to empower people, such as my daughter," said Christina. "Their person-centered actions have cultivated inclusive communities where everyone, including my own family, can thrive and are celebrated."



Lessons LEARNED

by Renee Choiniere, Program Director,
PWDD Residential Cayuga/Onondaga

Years ago, when I had just graduated from college, I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. While I was trying to find direction, I took a job at Wal-Mart in the photo lab.

One day while I was helping a customer, a visibly upset young woman came running up to the counter. She had a pair of shoes in her hands, saying "Excuse me, excuse me! There is a serious issue!" I told her I'd be happy to help her as soon I was finished with the other person. When it was her turn, she put the shoes on the countertop and said "This is very serious. The shoes in this box are size 7.5, but the box they're in says size 9. What should I do?" I said to her, "Thank you so much for bringing that to my attention. That might be confusing for some customers; we definitely need to fix that." I thought for a second, then I picked up a black Sharpie from behind the register. I handed it to her, and said "Why don't you change the 9 on the box to the correct size?" She seemed satisfied with that answer and said "Okay!" as she then walked away towards the shoe department.

When the next customer came up, he told me he had watched the whole interaction. He said he worked for a local agency that provided services for people with intellectual disabilities, and he was impressed at how well I handled the situation. I was pleased at the compliment, but also taken aback because it hadn't even occurred to me that the young woman could have had a disability. A few weeks later, I saw an ad in the newspaper for an agency in the area looking for a residence counselor. I sent in an application, and suddenly my life had direction.

I definitely do not condone graffiti-ing anything in any store. But, because this column is called "Lessons Learned," there is a moral to my story. One of the requirements of my job, a requirement that can take years to learn, is to respond to adverse situations in ways that are thoughtful and creative. It would have been perfectly "status quo" for me have taken the shoebox from the woman and handled the mix-up myself. But because I gave her the tools (in this case, the black Sharpie) to fix the problem herself, she felt empowered, and I felt good about the job I did that day.



NEW DIRECTOR OF MENTAL HEALTH HOUSING PROGRAM

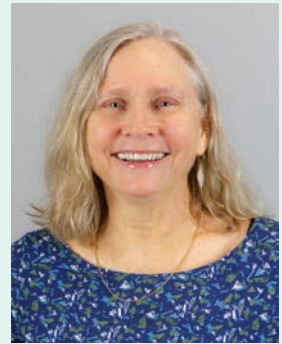
Judi Magee has been promoted from assistant director to program director of Unity House's mental health residential program. Judi has been with the agency since 2017, and began her new duties in May.

"Judi has a lot of experience inside and outside of the agency, and she is wonderful at supporting individuals with chronic mental illnesses," said the Chief Operating Officer Darlene Podolak.

As director, Judi has oversight of about 110 residents in the agency's supportive housing programs located in Wayne, Tompkins, and Cayuga counties. She also manages 47 treatment apartments and supervises about 40 employees. Judi monitors all person-supported service planning, budgets, policies and procedures, and programming.

"I am very happy to be given the opportunity to direct Unity House's mental health residential programs and to work on growth and quality programming," said Judi. "My goals are to ensure that program participants are satisfied with the services they are receiving, and that our staff feel valued and appreciated. It's important for people to hear they are doing a good job."

HAPPY RETIREMENT SUE MORLEY



Sue Morley, Director of Mental Health Residential and Unity Employment Services (UES), retired from Unity House on May 1 after 18 years of service to the agency. Sue was instrumental in re-designing and running our programs for nearly two decades. She took on managing UES in three counties, adding mental health respite to our programs, and expanding the residential programs to two counties.

Good luck and best wishes to Sue!

STAFF SPOTLIGHT



Nursing Program Manager Kelly Minde

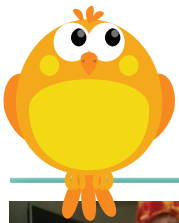
Kelly is an Auburn native who graduated from Cayuga Community College in 1997 with an A.A.S in Nursing. She began her career here at Unity House in 2004, first as a site nurse in Auburn, and then moved up to the program manager position in 2014.

Kelly now oversees six nurses who provide support for all of our residential programs and Day Habs. Her goal has always been to create an atmosphere of consistency and team work. This consistency empowers staff to know what's expected of them across the board. No matter which site they are assigned to, the systems, requirements and expectations are the same.

"I'm proud to have Kelly on my team," said Program Director Amy Santobianco. "Kelly is a trusted professional with a heart of gold. Her work ethic, natural leadership abilities and can-do attitude are exactly what the programs of Unity House need during these trying times."

COVID-19 has been a unique challenge for Unity House's population. During the coronavirus, the agency's main goal is to prioritize the health and safety of its staff and clients. Kelly has remained positive and focused on supporting the people we serve. She was instrumental in gathering donated medical equipment, PPE, face masks, gowns, etc. and distributing it across our programs.

When asked about being a nurse during a global pandemic, Kelly said: "The Direct Support Professionals and program managers in the residential settings are my heroes! As I work behind the scenes, I'm amazed by the people I'm working alongside during all of this. The focus is truly where it needs to be: keeping everyone – staff and service recipients – safe and well. I'm proud to be a part of this team!"



Birdhouse Fun!



To pass the time during this pandemic, Marty at our Fish Road IRA has been tirelessly working on making wooden birdhouses from scratch. He has collected free pallets from local stores, taken them apart, and used his tools to recreate them into these awesome pieces. Marty has delivered a birdhouse to three other Tompkins County IRAs (with more to go) in hopes that the residents will decorate them in their own special way.



DRYDEN APARTMENTS GET A FACE LIFT



Unity House strives to keep its properties in top condition. Last fall, we replaced the deteriorating wooden fire escapes at our apartment building on Beam Hill Road with new metal staircases. We then gave the whole outside an upgrade by replacing most of the windows and the siding. Our progress was slowed down by COVID-19, but we are just wrapping up the finishing touches now and the residents think it looks great.



EVENT CANCELLATIONS

ANNUAL DINNER

Because the health and safety of our staff, clients and guests are always our top priority, we have cancelled our annual board and award dinner, originally planned for April 27 and rescheduled to July 20. We will honor our two award winners (see below) and outgoing board members at a time when it feels right and safe. Mark Monday, April 26, 2021 for next year's annual dinner!

Special thanks to our sponsors who switched their sponsorships to an outright donation: Jonathan's Furniture, Key Bank, Reagan Insurance, Currier Plastics, Lynch Furniture, MEDENT, and Relp Benefits

ART FLAIRE

The City of Auburn has announced that all summer events, including Art Flaire and Founders Day on August 8, have been cancelled to comply with guidelines for slowing the coronavirus pandemic. This is another disappointing but not surprising turn of events. We will see you at Art Flaire next August!

Kudos and gratitude to our Art Flaire sponsors who also supported our annual fund: Empower FCU, Tompkins Trust Co., WSTM Channel 3

Unity House is delighted to announce its 2020 award winners. While we are deeply disappointed that we cannot recognize them in person at our annual dinner this year, please join us in congratulating them and thanking them for their outstanding service to our community! Both will be honored at a future date.



Timothy Donovan

10TH ANNUAL ATKINS COMMUNITY SERVICE AWARD:

Timothy Donovan of Auburn. Tim has lived in Auburn his entire life and volunteers with a wide range of non-profit organizations. He is a former Unity House service recipient and has made it his life's work to now give back to all the agencies in town who helped him in his recovery. He gives from his heart in helping Unity House, the mental health

and recovery populations, homeless shelters, food pantries, Rotary, and much more.



Lt. Michael Wellauer

9TH ANNUAL OPEN ARMS AWARD:

Lt. Michael Wellauer of the Cayuga County Sheriff's Department. Lt. Wellauer was nominated by Unity House employee Alyssa Militello in recognition of his patience, kindness, and compassion to the individuals with disabilities we serve. Mike has committed time and effort working with them to understand how 9-1-1 works, giving them tools to de-escalate stressful situations and develop more constructive coping skills.

Grants & Gifts

Unity House is the grateful recipient of gifts from:

Cayuga Community Fund - \$700

Made in collaboration with the United Way of Cayuga County, and specifically targeted to COVID-related needs, this grant from the Cayuga Community Fund purchased \$20 pre-paid phone cards for use in our PROSperity and Grace House programs, which serve individuals with mental illness and substance use disorders. This population is particularly affected by the isolation required due to coronavirus. These phone cards empower clients to participate in Zoom check-in calls, telehealth meetings with practitioners, video calls with medical staff, and online classes, such as Anxiety & Depression, Emotional Eating, Anger Management, The Art of Recovery, and yoga and book club.

Our Generous Community and Employees

At the onset of the coronavirus, Unity House, like many other non-profits, was lacking a sufficient supply of personal protective equipment (PPE). We put out a call for help on social media, and you responded in spades! To date, Unity House has received hundreds of homemade masks, in addition to medical gowns, thermometers, and face shields. Thank you for this crucial support!

SEEKING BOARD MEMBERS

Unity House is seeking dedicated individuals who have the time and energy to devote to leading the organization. Those with development/fundraising or legal experience, people of color and representatives from Tompkins County are especially welcome to apply.

Please go to

www.unityhouse.com/joinourteam.html

to learn more, then contact Executive Director Liz Smith (lsmith@unityhouse.com or 315-253-6227 ext 320) to express your interest. An in-person interview will follow to discuss how Unity House's needs best fit with your interests and expertise.

What's Your Legacy?



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

Unity House has been committed to caring for adults with disabilities for over 40 years. By leaving a gift in your will to Unity House, you help ensure that we can keep making life better for these individuals for the next four decades.

Please speak with your attorney or financial advisor, and learn more at
www.unityhouse.com/plannedgiving.html

"That is your legacy on this Earth when you leave this Earth: how many hearts you touched." — Patti Davis

GIVING
TUESDAY

NOW

Unity House participated in Giving Tuesday Now on May 5. It was a new global event created to help nonprofits meet the unprecedented needs caused by COVID-19.

Many thanks to the 23 people who donated to Unity House that day! We raised a total of \$1,170. In these difficult times, such contributions make a world of difference to the agency and the people we serve.



LEGISLATIVE DAY 2020

Hundreds of people gather in Albany every February to lobby for causes close to their hearts. Unity House staff and program participants were there too. We partnered with two different agencies: the New York Alliance For Inclusion & Innovation and the Association for Community Living. Our folks talked to legislators and advocated for a 3% increase on contracts and rates for the next five years. Great job, Team Unity House!



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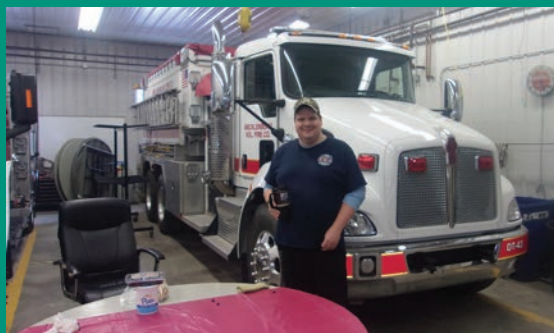
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A PROUD VOLUNTEER

One of Mike G.'s favorite things to do is volunteering in his community. He can be found helping at Ithaca Foodnet/ Meals on Wheels, Finger Lakes ReUse, and the Enfield firehouse. "I love helping people in my community," said Mike. "I feel like I am doing good work with these organizations."

Mike has been with Meals on Wheels for several years now. He's there almost every Monday, where he prepares the bread and works the hot trays. He takes pride in making a difference for the seniors they serve in Tompkins County. Mike also enjoys sorting and stacking the recyclables at Finger Lakes ReUse: "I really like that I can help save the environment one bottle at a time."



Mike's most recent volunteering endeavor has been with the Enfield fire department where he has been for about two years. He enjoys helping with parades and events, and assisting the firefighters with whatever they need around the station. "I know that the work I do around the station helps the firefighters be at their best to help save people when they get the call," Mike said. "I am so proud that I am making a difference in people's lives."