

Uplifting

New System Brings Joy and Greater Safety

Have you ever had to figure out how to get out of bed? How about getting to the bathroom? These are just a couple of the questions some people with disabilities have to consider every day.

The residents of our Danby Road IRA in Ithaca need assistance with everyday tasks. As they've grown older, they've needed more help getting around. To make sure they can stay in the home they love, Unity House installed a ceiling track lift system at the residence this year.

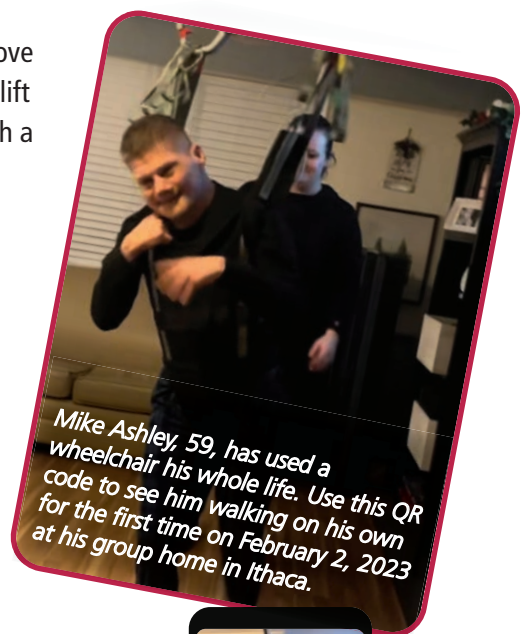
A sling slides along each track so staff can help mobility-impaired residents move about with relative ease. Tracks in the bedrooms and restrooms make it easy to lift residents into and out of wheelchairs. Another track connects a bedroom, through a hallway, to the living room.



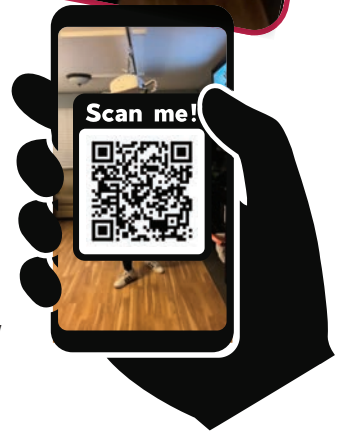
"It's wonderful to see someone who has used a wheelchair their whole life find a new sense of independence," said Program Manager Jodi Fesetch. "Four out of the six residents here use wheelchairs. Every time we set them up in the sling, they get the biggest smiles on their faces. This is the first time in their lives they've been able to walk, and they're enjoying every second."

Unity House installed the \$27,000 ceiling track lift system because it's critical to our mission – empowering people with disabilities.

"We used to do all the lifting by hand," said Assistant Program Director Candi Saxman. "There was always the risk of the staff hurting themselves or accidentally dropping the person they were assisting. This new system will make the job so much safer and easier for our staff and the residents."



Mike Ashley, 59, has used a wheelchair his whole life. Use this QR code to see him walking on his own for the first time on February 2, 2023 at his group home in Ithaca.



Spirit



Spirit is published three times a year by Unity House of Cayuga County, Inc. 217 Genesee Street, Suite 14 Auburn, NY 13021 www.unityhouse.com

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 our mission at www.unityhouse.com.

Administration

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER
Elizabeth Smith
CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER
Darlene Podolak

Board of Directors

PRESIDENT
Andrew Cuddy
VICE PRESIDENT
Kenneth Knight
SECRETARY
Patricia Festa
TREASURER
Bradley Chapman

Lorie Fischer
Jessica Janssen
Joseph Manning
Christopher Ryan
Richard Slagle
Christopher Sloan
Christina Van Ditto

CEO's PERSPECTIVE

Direct Support Professionals deserve higher pay

At Unity House, we have a vision: that all people are respected and lead fulfilling lives in our community. If you share that vision, we could really use your help right now.

While many people were able to work from home during the height of the COVID pandemic, our employees risked their own health to deliver critically needed services in person. They developed creative ways to provide support in spite of staffing shortages and new regulations. They picked up extra shifts. Even our office staff took training so they could help in our group homes.

To retain our amazing direct support professionals (DSPs), we increased our permanent wages last year. But even the new rates – up to \$19.50 an hour to start – aren't drawing enough people to this challenging work. More than a quarter of our positions remain vacant.

The staffing shortage forced us to temporarily close two group homes in Tompkins County last year. If nothing changes this year, we may have to close additional homes. It hurts me to even suggest that, because I know what it means: people with disabilities will lose the homes they love.

Thanks to you and the rest of our supporters, charitable donations to our nonprofit have doubled since 2019. Clearly, our community values people with disabilities and the people who support them. But what about New York State, which provides most of our funding?

After many years of flat funding for organizations like ours, the state finally passed a 5.4% cost of living adjustment in April 2022 that took many months to arrive.

This year, advocates statewide are pushing for an 8.5% increase – equal to the growth of the cost of living – in state funding for direct support organizations. If approved, it would allow us to raise wages further and fill our vacant positions. I've spoken with most local members of the state Assembly and state Senate. All have said they support more funding for DSPs. None said it would be easy.

We could use your help. Please reach out to your elected state leaders now, while the state budget is under consideration. Tell them about your values—that people with disabilities deserve to live with dignity, and that DSPs deserve adequate pay. Urge them to approve the 8.5% increase for organizations like Unity House.

Your voice can make a difference. Working together, we can build a community where all people are respected and are able to live their lives to the fullest.

Unity House belongs to two statewide associations that are organizing letter-writing campaigns to advocate for increased pay for direct support professionals. Use the following QR codes to easily join the campaigns organized by:

The New York Alliance
for Inclusion and Innovation



The Association for Community
Living Agencies in Mental Health



Liz Smith
Chief Executive Officer

Grants & Gifts

Unity House is the grateful recipient of funding from:

City of Auburn - \$36,721

Helping Unity House recover from increased costs and lost revenue associated with the COVID pandemic. Made available through the federal American Rescue Plan Act, the money will also allow Unity House to purchase UV air sanitizers for its day habilitation program in Auburn.

Columbian Foundation - \$5,000

Covering the costs to repair and paint the facade of 31 Market Street, a historic downtown Auburn building that's home to Unity House's day habilitation program.

French & Metcalf Foundations - \$20,000

Helping to renovate a bathroom at a group home in Auburn to accommodate residents in wheelchairs. Handicapped-accessible facilities are a growing need across the organization to enable aging service recipients to remain in their homes.

Legacy Foundation - \$10,500

Installing emergency call bells for 35 bathrooms at various sites across Tompkins County. The call bells will boost safety while providing greater privacy for our residents.

Hiring Caring People

At Unity House, our employees are at the heart of our mission.

They empower people to learn, grow and thrive.

That's why we offer great pay – up to \$19.50/hour to start for direct support professionals – plus:

- **Full-time benefits** – health insurance and more for working 30+ hours per week
- **Flexible hours**
- **Time off** – paid holidays, vacation, sick and personal days and more
- **Peace of mind** – generous employer matching contributions to your 401k
- **Wellness** – free comprehensive wellness and employee assistance programs
- **Pay options** – early payday and direct deposit available
- **Room to grow** – tuition reimbursement, free training and promotion opportunities



Know someone who wants to make a difference every day? Please encourage them to apply at Unity House. View our current job listings and complete an online application at: unityhouse.com/joinourteam.html



Once AND DONE

Your monthly donation provides peace of mind – to you and to Unity House.

You get a shorter to-do list. Unity House gets the consistent funding needed to empower people with disabilities every day.

Setting up a recurring gift couldn't be easier. Just visit www.unityhouse.com/donate.html and select the options that fit your needs. Once and done. Then relax, knowing you're supporting our mission year-round.

Local Legacy

Do you have fond memories of your time at West Middle or West High School?

For just \$100, your name or short message can be engraved on a plaque and permanently affixed to one of the school's historical lockers. It's a great way to support Unity House and be forever connected to your alma mater. For details, email development@unityhouse.com or call 315-253-6227 ext. 313.



Please join us for the

Unity House

ANNUAL BOARD & AWARD DINNER

Monday, April 24, 2023

Springside Inn, 6141 West Lake Road, Auburn

\$75 per person; all are welcome

5:30 pm Cocktails & Conversation
Cash Bar

6:15 pm Buffet Dinner

7:00 pm Keynote Remarks:
Cayuga County Sheriff
Brian Schenck

Presentation of the
Atkins Community Service &
Open Arms Awards



BRIAN SCHENCK
Cayuga County Sheriff

RSVP by April 17

315.253.6227 ext. 358 or email annualdinner@unityhouse.com

Sponsorship opportunities are available



Two Unity House employees have been selected for Cayuga County's premier leadership development program. Chief Advancement Officer Chris Iven and Human Resources Generalist Mary Simpson are part of Leadership Cayuga's class of 2023.

"The people we are meeting are exceptional," Chris said. "I love learning with them and from them. The relationships we are building will only help Unity House in the future."

Conducted by the Cayuga County Chamber of Commerce, Leadership Cayuga is designed to stimulate public-minded thinking and increases the community's base of informed, capable leaders. Each year, the program selects about 20 emerging local leaders to participate in interactive monthly sessions. The class meets with area experts and community leaders to learn about local government, economic development, nonprofits and education, among other topics. Along the way, they join a network of about 700 people who have completed the program since 1989.

"Whoever came up with this concept was brilliant," Mary said. "The program has allowed me to meet some of the most passionate, service-minded individuals that truly have a desire to see Cayuga County thrive."

As part of the program, its members are creating a plan to further revitalize the Auburn Downtown Business Improvement District.

"To be a part of tackling some of the city's biggest challenges is an honor and a privilege," Mary continued. "I'm grateful to have been selected to participate in the Leadership Cayuga program and I look forward to using this experience to benefit Unity House."



2022 HOLIDAY CARD
Winner

Congratulations to Jamie V. of Auburn Day Hab, the winner of the 14th annual holiday art contest. Jamie (center) is pictured here with CEO Liz Smith (left) and his parents, Jim and Peggy.

GIVING GROWTH

Unity House supporters are amazing. Together, they gave more than \$165,000 to advance Unity House’s mission in 2022. That’s an increase of more than 50% over 2021!

Here are some fundraising highlights at year-end:

Giving Tuesday - This year’s campaign raised \$10,597, all of which will help upgrade our group homes to accommodate the needs of our residents as they age. Generous challenge gifts from two donors inspired a record 46 Giving Tuesday gifts.

Phonathon - On December 12, volunteers called donors who had given in the past, but not yet in 2022. Our friends came through with donations totaling \$11,583, including a \$5,000 match from a generous anonymous friend.

Staff Giving - We have the most altruistic employees at Unity House! In 2022, they donated \$4,172 to support Unity House people and programs.

All gifts to Unity House directly benefit the people we serve, helping them to live happy, fulfilled lives. That’s why we’re so grateful for our generous and growing circle of friends.

Advancing OUR MISSION

Unity House is dedicated to empowering people with disabilities. Delivering on that mission in recent years has become more challenging as state funding has dropped against inflation. In response, Unity House is working to widen its base of support.

“Unity House has a powerful mission,” said Chris Iven, who joined Unity House as its first Chief Advancement Officer in July. “When people know what we do and why we do it, they want to help by donating, volunteering or working here.”

Marketing and Development Director Kelly Buck and Project Coordinator Alexis Liberatore have joined with Chris to form Unity House’s new Mission Advancement team. In addition to all of the functions of the former Marketing and Development Department, the team is working with Unity House employees, board of directors and community members to develop new ways to engage people in support of the mission.

The team organized the Planned Giving Advisory Council, a group of volunteer estate planners who care about Unity House’s mission and want to help its supporters make planned gifts. The team is also organizing a group to support and engage friends and family members of the people Unity House

serves. This summer, the team will launch Unity House’s first peer-to-peer fundraiser.



“We’re asking all of our friends to invite their friends to join the cause,” Chris said. “Unity House was founded by the community, and it will take all of us to keep it strong for generations to come.”

If you want to help, please contact Chris at 315-253-6227, ext. 360 or civen@unityhouse.com.

Happy RETIREMENT

Unity House was both happy and sad to bid farewell to two long-time employees in December.

Executive Assistant Mary Fishlock retired after faithfully serving chief administrative officers and the board of directors for 17 years.



Nurse Alice Stoyell departs after seven years on the job caring for our service recipients.

Both will be greatly missed. Thank you for your dedicated service, and best wishes on your retirement!

Maintain Don't Gain: Unity House's employee wellness program, Move in Unity, offered a voluntary challenge: to maintain or lose weight over the 2022 holiday season. The challenge drew 42 participants who collectively lost more than 100 pounds.



Bubble Art: Auburn Day Hab participants recently made unique art with bubbles. They colored the bubble solution and blew bubbles onto paper, creating interesting designs. Vicky Simpson, Auburn Day Hab DSP, said: "Everyone had a blast and it was easy to clean up."



PROS Craft Fair: The folks at our PROS mental health program hosted their second annual craft fair in December. The sale featured items PROS participants made themselves, including gift cards, resin art, fruit preserves and baked goods.



Lending Library: Unity House launched a book lending program for staff in both Auburn and Ithaca. Employees are encouraged to borrow books and write short book reviews. The program was organized by Move in Unity to encourage intellectual wellness.



PROGRAM HAPPENINGS



Giving Back: Every year, employees at Unity House's administrative offices adopt a family through the Community Action Program (CAP). This season, the staff helped a single mother with six kids. Staff bought items from their wish lists to give them the Christmas they deserve.



Winter Sing: Auburn Day Hab and Ithaca Day Hab put on their first holiday concerts in December. Participants sang a variety of tunes, and community members were invited to join in the fun. It was so successful that they plan to make it a holiday tradition.



Spaghetti Day: Who knew that January 4 was National Spaghetti Day? Our friends at Auburn Day Hab did, and they celebrated by making noodles and red sauce. It was a great opportunity for the participants to practice their cooking skills and share with friends.

WHY I SUPPORT UNITY HOUSE

by Elaine Meyers

My brother Carl was a Vietnam veteran who returned from the war troubled. With voices in his head and visions of helicopters attacking, he was not able to hold a job. He began a repetitive cycle of being forced into rehabilitation, moving to halfway programs, being released and stopping his medications, followed by hospitalizations, court orders and temporary rehabilitation. This went on for years.

Our family thought Carl would never find peace. We were wrong.

Carl finally found a wonderful group home for people recovering from mental illness. One beautiful day many years ago, after living there for only a month, my brother announced: "I am tired of the voices in my head. I will take my meds. I will become part of my new community." He kept his word, and my brother, then in his early 50s, began a new life.



Carl helps with the pony rides for a Paxton Street Home community and family day.



Our family continues to support organizations that provide the hope and love needed for folks to become and appreciate their own true selves. That's why, as soon as I visited Unity House, I knew I would contribute to their cause. Carl lived in Pennsylvania, but here in central New York, Unity House is where people like my brother receive the loving and transformative care needed to value themselves and enjoy life again.

Elaine Meyers, retired librarian and author of the book "Iron Pants," lives in King Ferry with her husband, Tom Meyers.



STAFF Spotlights

We couldn't deliver on our mission without our amazing employees. That's why we're proud to celebrate some of them here.

Each Employee of the Quarter is nominated by their peers. Each breathes life into Unity House's core values: **honesty, integrity, and respect.**

Congratulations to our two most recent honorees!

3rd Quarter 2022:

"Sherrie has gone above and beyond to pick up overnight shifts at the West Lake Road IRA in Dryden. She is always willing to assist multiple programs in their time of need, especially during this staffing crisis."

---Jen Oakes, West Lake Road IRA



Sherrie Flowers
DSP at Sheffield IRA

4th Quarter 2022:

"Rachel comes to her shifts with a positive and ready-to-work attitude. She's always willing to help out by taking extra shifts and doing anything that needs to be done. She is fantastic with the people we serve! Rachel always meets them where they are in any situation and supports them as needed."

-- Kristina Emmick, North Street Road IRA



Rachel Longley
DSP at North St Rd IRA

Giving FROM THE HEART

Good Samaritan Bailey Brown loves to help women in need. In December, she collected 16 gently used handbags and filled each with feminine care products. Then she just needed to decide on who to give them to.

“Every holiday season I reflect on a place I would like to give back to,” she said. “This year, Unity House came to mind as I was thinking about the great experience I had doing this same donation in 2016 as a Wells College student when I lived in Aurora.”

Thanks to Bailey, several women in Unity House’s Auburn mental health housing program were the lucky recipients of those handbags just before Christmas.

Bailey continued: “This community has made such a great impact on my life, it is an honor to give back in any way. Unity House has a mission that speaks to my heart and it’s wonderful to be able to contribute to that mission with this project.”



Bailey Brown, center, donates bags filled with feminine hygiene products for women in Unity House’s mental health program.

