

# Spirit

NEWSLETTER

WINTER 2025

EMPOWERING LIVES, SECURING FUTURES

## Person-centered Leadership



*CEO Liz Smith  
announces her  
retirement*

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 Unity House



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**Unity House's mission:** to empower and enrich the lives of people in recovery, coping with a mental illness, and/or diagnosed with a developmental disability. This is accomplished by offering services and supports in an inclusive, person-centered environment.

**Our vision:** all individuals are respected and lead lives of personal fulfillment and acceptance within our community.

**Our core values:**  
Respect, Honesty, Integrity

## CEO's Perspective True to the Mission

It is with a lot of emotion and so many memories that I announce my retirement from Unity House, effective the last day of this year.

I have loved my time at Unity House. I am grateful to have worked with so many talented and creative people dedicated to our mission. I'm talking about our amazing frontline staff, our support staff and our volunteer board members. I'm also talking about you. **Thank you for all you've done to support Unity House, and me, as we worked to empower people with disabilities.**

Before coming to Unity House, I worked in a day treatment program that was run by a different organization. The "activities" for people with disabilities were not engaging, not person-centered and not community-based. I came to Unity House in March 1995 hoping I would find a better way. I was not disappointed.

My first job here was in the New Life IRA in Auburn. I wrote the service plans for the residents there and in the scattered site apartment program. I loved that job. I loved the challenge of writing person-centered plans, given all the regulations involved. I vividly remember checking in with my co-worker, Darlene Podolak, to get her thoughts on goals I was writing. Darlene was a sounding board for me then, and that continues today in her role as our chief operating officer.

My early experiences as a front-line staff member shaped who I would become as a leader. They've helped me stay true to our mission as I took on new roles.

I'm pleased to say that I'm leaving Unity House in excellent hands. The board considered launching a nationwide search for my replacement, but we all knew that the best, most qualified person to take my place is already here. **Upon my retirement, Darlene will become Unity House's new CEO.** I know that this organization will remain mission-driven under her leadership.

I have a good life. And for the last three decades, Unity House has been one of the main reasons why. Thank you for being a part of it.



Liz Smith  
Chief Executive Officer



*Liz Smith*

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our monthly  
e-newsletter*

**On The Cover:**

Unity House CEO Liz Smith greets Auburn Day Hab participant Rob Clark



# Unity House CEO to retire at year's end

Liz Smith, Unity House's top executive for more than 15 years, will retire December 31, capping a career dedicated to empowering people with disabilities.

"My career here has been my passion," Liz said after announcing her plans to Unity House staff. "What I'm doing is what I love to do."

Liz began her career in 1988 as a job coach in Unity House's employment program. After taking time to have children and work five years for another nonprofit, she returned to Unity House in 1995 as a case manager.

Since then, she has had a profound effect on the organization's person-centered culture, said Chief Operating Officer Darlene Podolak, who worked closely with Liz in 1995. As case manager, Liz was responsible for writing service plans for people Unity House supports. She was known for taking the time to get to know each resident, Darlene said.

"She was very creative," Darlene said. "Every service plan was like a puzzle. She wanted to make it relevant for the person and yet fully reimbursable through Medicaid, which is not easy. She genuinely loved the people we support and wanted the best for each of them."

Liz became Unity House's first trainer in SCIP – strategies for crisis intervention and prevention – and she trained every relevant staff member long before the state mandated the training. Within three years, Liz became Unity House's first director of quality assurance. In that role, she was responsible for ensuring that each Unity House program met or exceeded state regulations and standards of care.

In 1999, Liz was named the organization's deputy executive director. She launched several initiatives to improve the quality of support the organization offers. Some required a simultaneous change in both culture and procedure. In leading the rollout of the new electronic recordkeeping system, she worked with departments one at a time, making sure each staff member felt comfortable using it effectively.

Former board member Jeannette Baird served on the search committee for the new chief executive in 2009 when Joyce Williams retired. Many qualified people applied and some were interviewed, she said, but Liz stood out.



Liz Smith (right) and Independent Housing Case Manager Cindy Gibson in 2000.

"She was calm," Jeannette said. "You felt that she was listening, that she was the kind of person who listens to others, and that she was not one to give up... I admire her."

Ken Knight, who now serves as president of the board, voted to appoint Liz in 2009.

"She knew the place inside and out, how everything was done," Ken said. "She had her own ideas on how we could improve things. She was looking to what the community needs are and how we could fulfill them. That continues to this very day."

Liz said she will spend the rest of her time as CEO making sure Unity House has a strong three-year strategic plan and renewing the relationships that have helped her and the organization thrive.

"I want to see Darlene flourish as the next CEO," Liz said. "I love Unity House and want to see it continue to be strong forever."

## Unity House's Next CEO



Unity House's Board of Directors voted unanimously to appoint Darlene Podolak as the organization's next CEO, effective January 1, 2026.

Darlene has served as Unity House's chief operating officer since 2017. She oversees all Unity House programs as well as the facilities department.

Darlene began her career in 1992, and in 1993 opened Unity House's first group home for people with developmental disabilities. She became the program's manager and later director of all PWDD day habilitation programs and PWDD residential programs in Cayuga County. She holds a bachelor's degree in music therapy and a master's degree

in management.

As COO, Darlene has worked directly with the board for many years, said Board President Ken Knight.

"Darlene has impressed me as a very conscientious, knowledgeable person who can lead us into the future," Ken said. "She's going to hit the ground running."

# Welcome New Board Members

Two community leaders have joined Unity House's board of directors. Taylor Symes and Jessica Janssen, both of Auburn, began their board duties in January.

**Taylor Symes** is a licensed benefits consultant for AFLAC, in addition to being a sales rep for Peaceful Living Home Sales. She is a former commercial credit analyst for Generations Bank, and was an economic development technical specialist for Cayuga Economic Development Agency. Taylor holds an A.A.S. degree from Cayuga Community College, and is a Leadership Cayuga graduate, class of 2022.



**Jessica Janssen** is a former Unity House manager and board member. She brings many years of experience in behavioral health care, most recently as the chief executive officer of Cayuga Addiction Recovery Services (CARS), and as a transformation specialist at Cayuga Medical Center. She holds a master's in organizational management, and was the chief program officer at Elmcrest Children's Center for seven years before joining CARS. Jessica previously served on Unity House's board from 2015 – 2023.



## Employees of the Quarter

*We couldn't deliver on our mission without our amazing employees. Employees of the Quarter are nominated by their peers. Each breathes life into Unity House's core values: honesty, integrity, and respect. Congratulations to our most recent honorees:*

### Q-4 Honorees

#### DSP of Q4 2024:

**Lindsey Leighton –  
Residence Counselor,  
Oak Drive IRA, Union  
Springs**

*Here's what Lindsey's nominator had to say:*

*"Lindsey's tone is always genuine and upbeat, no matter who she is talking to. Her positive nature creates an overall sense of kindness and community at Oak Drive. Lindsey always reaches accessible community sites so people are safe while enjoying the outdoors."*



#### Support Staff of Q4 2024:

**Doug Alise – Program  
Manager, Green Street  
IRA, Ithaca**

*Here's what Doug's nominator had to say:*

*"Doug had the incredibly challenging task of temporarily moving 13 individuals to a new home while Green Street undergoes renovations. On top of being able to move everyone in a timely manner, Doug supported them all with their understandable concerns and anxiety related to this move. He and his staff are now helping everyone settle in and develop their new routines."*



# Headed Towards Independence

Sky Chehovich, 23, didn't let blindness and intellectual disabilities keep him from completing high school and becoming an Eagle Scout.

Sky's mother, Jen, was there every step of the way, but she knew she couldn't help Sky become a self-sufficient adult on her own. She enrolled him in an agency-based habilitation program, but it wasn't a good fit; Sky wasn't socializing well or developing the skills needed to live independently.

"I felt like I was failing my child," Jen Chehovich said. "You always worry about your kids. When your kid has a disability, you worry more."

Then, they found Unity House's Self Direction Program. It changed the trajectory of Sky's life.

Self Direction puts people with disabilities in control, empowering them to select the services they need using a budget that they control. With guidance from Meghan Eddy, one of Unity House's self direction brokers, Jen and Sky hired Dusty Archanbo as Sky's direct support professional.

Unity House is Dusty's employer - providing his salary, benefits, training and other necessities - but Sky determines how much he gets paid. They work together to determine Dusty's schedule.

"We're there to guide them in the process," Meghan said. "Sky is the real boss here."



Sky (center) and Self Direction Specialist Dusty Archanbo work together on life skills such as paying bills and grocery shopping. They also explore hobbies to better develop Sky's interests, which include soldering and software engineering.

**For a video of Sky's Self Direction story, scan this QR code.**


With help from Dusty, Sky is now working toward an important milestone: to move out of the family home and into his own apartment by the end of 2025.

"Unity House, for me, they're one of the good (organizations) that actually listens to us," Sky said. "I'm actually in charge... I'm headed towards being totally independent."

## Freezin' for a Reason



The Unity House Plungers will once again participate in the Ithaca Polar Plunge. They'll jump into icy Cayuga Lake at Taughannock Falls State Park on Saturday, March 22 to raise money for Special Olympics New York. Last year, 19 Unity House staff members raised more than \$2,900, the third highest amount brought in by Community Division teams.




 **Unity House** PRESENTS:

## FOR THE NEXT GENERATION

**PROVIDE FOR YOUR FAMILY**    **PROTECT YOUR ASSETS**    **SUPPORT YOUR CHARITIES**

 **Wednesday, May 21**     **Cayuga County Chamber of Commerce**  
**2 State St., Auburn**

 **Noon - 1:30 p.m.**

Every adult needs a will. If you're thinking about drafting or revising yours, this talk is for you. Join Unity House's Planned Giving Advisory Council at a Chamber Lunch & Learn for an interactive panel presentation on how to make the most of your assets. Light lunch will be provided.

This free, casual event will give you an overview of the options and resources available, with time to get your questions answered.

# Everyone Has A Voice

A new group at Auburn Day Hab is empowering people to stand up for themselves. The self-advocacy group formed a year ago, and is comprised of about 15 program participants. Facilitated bimonthly by Service Instructor Lea VanFleet, the group grew out of a need for a mutual support system.

"A few of the individuals consistently came to me with concerns, problems or wants that they had," Lea explained. "They felt frustrated about not being able to do certain things, or because they felt like they were not being heard."

After taking an advocacy class at Day Hab, several folks decided to form a new self-advocacy group. They meet every two weeks to plan activities, talk about what advocacy means to them, share success stories, and explore ways they can advocate and volunteer together in the community.

The group also gets together occasionally for a fun activity like bowling, cooking class, or a movie. They have elected officers for the club, with the intention that every person at Day Hab has a voice through them.

"I've noticed their communication skills have increased," said Lea. "Just the fact that they wanted a group photo to be taken is big. They came up with that idea, believing that if more people were able to see that this group exists, maybe others would join and be inspired as well."

When asked why being a self-advocate is important, responses from members included: "to be independent," "help me make friends," and "stand up for myself." One participant proudly



shared that she has successfully advocated for a new cell phone, and another pushed for new, different services.

"The most prominent change I see is that their mindset is different," Lea said. "Instead of thinking about how 'I' can accomplish something, it's now more how 'we' as a group can accomplish it. We now have individuals who are taking what they learn from the group and advocating for changes in their own lives."

## Green Street Renovation Update

Residents and staff of Unity House's Green Street IRA in Ithaca have been relocated temporarily to allow workers to complete a \$641,870 project to upgrade their home. Since



November, the 12 residents have been living at a state-owned house on Abbott Road that had originally been built as an IRA.

While Green Street residents had been separated by stairs, the single-floor Abbott Road home makes socializing easier, said Assistant Program Manager Gladys Wells.

"I like that they interact so much more here," Gladys said. "It'll be great to continue that level of interaction at Green."

The renovation project is expected to take several months. When residents return to Green Street, their home will be safer and more accessible, allowing them greater autonomy. The project includes a new entrance ramp, accessible bathrooms, expanded and upgraded living space and more accessible kitchens. A \$499,870 state grant will cover most of the project's costs.

# Not Giving Up: Tina's Story



After an abusive childhood, Tina Clark (left) suffered from depression and thoughts of suicide most of her adult life. Support from Unity House kept her alive.

"Since I was 22, Unity House has been there for me," said Tina, 52. "I never thought I'd be here today. I'm very grateful."

Unity House's mental health housing and outpatient treatment programs have given her the confidence to live with greater independence, she said.

"I'm realizing now that I can do this," Tina said. "I'm not giving up."

Read Tina's full story by scanning the QR code:



## PROGRAMS THAT EMPOWER

### Robert excels in UES food service program

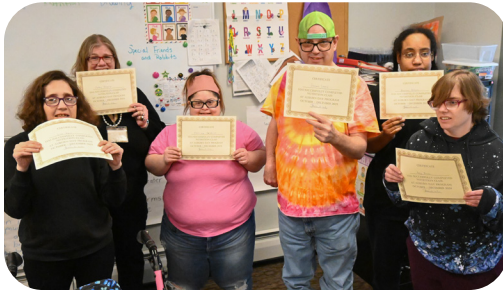
Unity Employment Services participant Robert recently completed the Career-Specific Vocational Training food service program, and will be moving into an internship with a local business soon. Robert has been learning culinary skills such as knife handling, meat prep, kitchen sanitation, griddle and line cook work. He even prepared lunch for Unity House staff members at our Wright Avenue offices in Auburn.



### Small steps, big wins: Nutrition class

A group of Auburn Day Hab participants completed a 12-week nutrition class led by Behavioral Intervention Specialist Alyssa Militello. The class, designed to encourage healthier eating habits, focused on practical skills such as reading nutrition labels, making smart choices while grocery shopping and navigating restaurant menus.

The program was inspired not only by the needs of the participants, but also by Alyssa's own personal wellness journey, having recently lost 100 pounds. Participants are "growing more independent and confident in their health, one step at a time," Alyssa says.



### Hope for the holidays

Mental health treatment apartments staff partnered with Community Action Programs Cayuga/Seneca to adopt a family – a mother and two children – who were in need of some extra holiday joy. Staff members at our West Middle School offices also participated in making the season brighter for a family of five in Auburn.



### George obtains his peer specialist certification

Grace House graduate and PROS participant George Anthony recently marked 18 months of sobriety. He now lives independently in Auburn, in an apartment supported by Unity House. After completing 18 online courses and meeting additional requirements, George earned provisional certification as a Certified Peer Specialist (NYCPS-P) through the NYS Academy of Peer Services.

Eager to support others on their mental health and substance use recovery journeys, George is focused on achieving his next goal: finding employment.

"I don't care much about where I land," George said. "I just want to start helping folks as soon as possible. It's time to get to work."



# That's A Wrap

Unity House successfully concluded its 2022-2024 Strategic Plan in December. Below is an overview of some key priorities achieved:

## Priority One: Staffing

Unity House is an employer of choice in the communities we serve

- Explore strategies to effectively communicate the comprehensive total rewards package offered at Unity House
- Streamline effective advertising to attract qualified candidates
- Train the trainer; managers taught how to train other managers

## Priority Two: Information Technology

Ensure business continuance, sustainability and disaster recovery from a technology and information perspective

- Form a tech-savvy committee
- Develop a 5-year technology plan
- Maximize the use of existing platforms

## Priority Three: Endowment

Grow the organization's endowment fund to seven figures

- Establish a Planned Giving Advisory Council
- Create and launch a Legacy Giving Society
- Restructure the Development and Marketing department

## Priority Four: Quality Services

Create a process to ensure relevant and high-quality services

- PROS curriculum redesign and expansion of class schedule
- Maximize Independent Housing stipends
- Evaluate the viability of all services offered by the organization annually
- Reimagine day services
- Maximize ACCES-VR contract and SEMP funding

## Priority Five: Employee Wellness

Unity House offers a premier Wellness Plan for its employees

- Survey staff on the existing Wellness Plan and evaluate for pros and cons
- Continue to collaborate with the consultant to explore new wellness initiatives

## Please join us for the Annual Board & Award Dinner

Monday, April 28, 2025 5:30 - 8:30 p.m.

Holiday Inn

75 North Street, Auburn, NY

Tickets are \$85 per person; all are welcome



Remarks by guest speaker  
Amanda Maestro-Scherer, owner and founder of  
Maestro Music Therapy

*"Where Words Fail, Music Speaks: The Impact  
of Music Therapy at Unity House"*

Presentation of the Atkins Community Service &  
Open Arms Awards

RSVP by April 22 at

[unityhouse.org/annual-dinner](https://unityhouse.org/annual-dinner)

OR call 315.253.6227 ext. 358

Sponsorship opportunities are available;  
please email [kelly.buck@unityhouse.org](mailto:kelly.buck@unityhouse.org)

# Looking Forward

## 2025 – 2027 Strategic Plan

Unity House's new three-year plan is being finalized as we go to print. Anticipated priorities for the coming years are below. Greater details will be shared.

### Priority One: Staffing

Unity House is an employer of choice in the communities it serves

### Priority Two: Programming

Maintain and expand high quality services to meet community needs

### Priority Three: Relationship Building

Raise the profile of Unity House as a partner and charity of choice

### Priority Four: Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging

Implement a DEIB program that is beneficial for employees, people we support, families, and the greater community

*Spirit*