

# Spirit

NEWSLETTER  
WINTER 2026

Meet our new CEO



 **Unity House**

217 Genesee Street • Auburn, New York 13021  
[unityhouse.org](http://unityhouse.org)



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Learn more about Unity House’s services and how you can support Unity House at unityhouse.org.

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CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER  
Amy Durkin

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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.

## CEO’S PERSPECTIVE *Leading with You*

After more than 33 years with this remarkable organization, I am honored to lead Unity House as its fifth chief executive. I’m humbled by the responsibility I now have, and **I’m energized by our mission – to empower people with disabilities.**

Because I started my career as a direct support professional (DSP), I know how challenging it can be to provide person-centered support. I also know how rewarding it can be to see that support transform lives for the better.

Our DSPs deliver on our mission every day. **That’s why I’m advocating relentlessly to make sure our DSPs get the support they need.** I’m dedicated to making Unity House the area’s top employer for people who want a rewarding career.

**Can I count on you to help?** Please tell your friends, family members and neighbors about Unity House and invite them to join you in supporting our mission. We need more people to:

- write to state leaders, asking them to provide more support for people with disabilities
- become regular Unity House donors, so that our work can continue when state funding falters
- join our staff or serve on our volunteer board of directors

Thank you for your partnership, your generosity, and your dedication. Together, we will build a future in which all people are respected and lead lives of personal fulfillment and acceptance.

With gratitude,



Darlene Podolak  
Chief Executive Officer



Scan to visit the **“Take Action”** section of our website to start making a difference right now.

**On the cover:** CEO Darlene Podolak (back, right) stands alongside Auburn Day Hab participants Cathy Hamlin, Amy Bean, Heather Rafferty and Eeve Kendrick Bowser.

# NEW Leaders

## NEW CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER brings commitment and passion



Unity House is pleased to introduce its chief operating officer.

**Amy Durkin** began her duties in September in anticipation of former CEO Liz Smith's retirement in December and subsequent promotion of longtime COO Darlene Podolak to the chief executive role.

"Amy has onboarded and already found her place on the leadership team," said Podolak. "I'm excited to see what we can accomplish together as we continue moving Unity House forward."

Amy comes to Unity House from Huntington Family Centers, where she was the director of program services. Originally from the Baltimore area, Amy earned a B.S. in philosophy and another in human services from the University of Scranton, and a master's in counseling psychology from Towson University.

"When I was researching this position, it felt like a good fit from the beginning," said Amy. "I was struck by how this organization got started: the community came together to support the needs of its neighbors. We are at our best when connected to each other."

## WELCOME THREE NEW BOARD MEMBERS

Unity House is delighted to introduce three community leaders who joined the board of directors in January:

**Catherine Diviney** is a partner in the health law department of Hancock Estabrook, LLP in Syracuse.



*"I look forward to working with fellow board members and the Unity House executive team to help ensure continued access to and enhancement of services to our community."*

**Jeffrey Eaton** practices municipal, corporate, and real estate law with Costello Cooney & Fearon of Syracuse.



*"I am committed to furthering the charitable mission of Unity House... [which] does great work for the local community where I grew up."*

**Timothy Pacholyk** is a former insurance agent. He is an acclaimed wellness coach, public speaker and published author, and owns Pro-Renovation Services in Auburn.



*"I want to shine a light on mental illness and recovery services. I can help tear down barriers and extend a helping hand to people in the throes of addiction."*

## UNITY HOUSE STAFF GIVE BACK

In December, Unity House's administrative support staff "adopted" a mother and her seven children, ranging in age from four to 21, through the Head Start program at Community Action Programs Cayuga/Seneca.

Our team looks forward to this opportunity to give back every holiday season. The note of gratitude received from CAP after the holidays captured it all: "Thank you so very much for adopting a family in need. Because of your generosity, they experienced a brighter, warmer, and more joyful holiday."



# Please join us for the ANNUAL AWARD DINNER

Monday, April 27  
Hilton Garden Inn, 74 State Street, Auburn

Tickets are \$85 per person, all are welcome

- 5:30 p.m. Cocktails and conversation, cash bar
- 6:15 p.m. Buffet dinner
- 7:00 p.m. Remarks by guest speakers Bart and Terri Wasilenko, founders of NAMI Cayuga County  
**"Hope Starts with You"**  
Presentation of the Atkins Community Service & Open Arms awards
- 8:30 p.m. Evening concludes

Reserve your seat by April 20  
[unityhouse.org/annual-dinner](http://unityhouse.org/annual-dinner)  
OR call Nicole at 315-253-6227 ext. 358

Sponsorship opportunities are available. For more information, contact [kelly.buck@unityhouse.org](mailto:kelly.buck@unityhouse.org)  
OR 315-253-6227 ext. 313



Bart and Terri Wasilenko,  
NAMI Cayuga County

## 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 21 to raise money for Special Olympics New York.

Since the event's inception in 2014, Unity House staff members have raised thousands of dollars in support of athletes with disabilities.

Gifts of any size are appreciated to help the team reach their goal.

Scan the QR code to make a donation through Unity House's team page.



Become a member of Unity House's

## EVERGREEN SOCIETY

Did you know you can make a lasting impact for people with disabilities through a simple monthly gift?

Evergreen Society members provide steady support year-round through regularly scheduled online contributions.

By becoming a monthly donor, you provide consistent support Unity House people can rely on, ensuring they have access to nutritious food, vital medications, reliable transportation, engaging group activities, and meaningful opportunities for community inclusion.

Even a gift of just \$10 a month makes a difference. Your ongoing support allows us to plan ahead and deliver the care and resources our people deserve.

Will you help us make life better for people with disabilities?

Scan to become a monthly donor today.



# Regaining STRENGTH

Lyndsey Marr had lost her right to parent her four children. She had given up trying to escape domestic abuse and trying to stay sober.

"I pretty much was done," Lyndsey said. "I was afraid that (my partner) would kill me, so I wanted to kill myself first."

That's when Raven Hudson knocked on her door.

Raven, a senior counselor in Unity House's Mental Health Housing program, was the only person who seemed to care, Lyndsey said. On time, every month, Raven was there, encouraging her to believe in herself.



"She was struggling with things she had no control over," Raven said. "She was about ready to give up."

Today, Lyndsey has celebrated a year of sobriety. She and her cat, Hazelnut, live in a safe apartment. She has a full-time job helping others overcome addiction, and she has a shot at regaining her parental rights.



Scan to hear the rest of Lyndsey's story, in her own words.



## HEALTHY CHOICES, *Happy Outcomes*

Since working at Unity House in April 2024, Amy Jefferson has lost 60 pounds and quit smoking.

"I feel so great," said Amy, a residence counselor at New Life IRA in Auburn. "As someone who started at 374 pounds and was a smoker, I have come a long way. I'm excited for what's next."

From the start, Amy embraced Unity House's 'Move In Unity' workplace wellness program, taking the annual wellness pledge and participating in a variety of healthful opportunities.

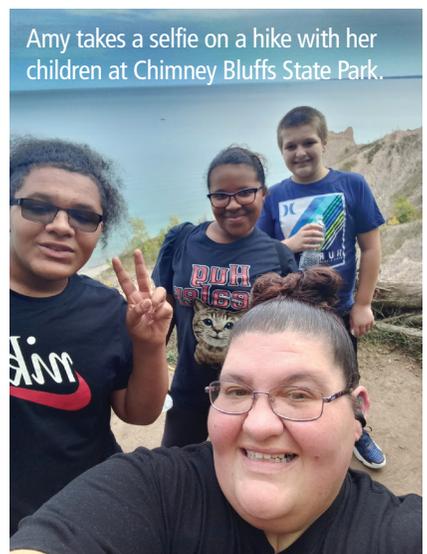
Move In Unity is designed to support employees at every stage of their health journey. By prioritizing choice, flexibility, and community, the program empowers people to build sustainable habits that support long-term well-being.

Through Move in Unity, employees who complete annual biometric testing and participate in wellness challenges are eligible for incentives, including FSA debit cards, gym membership reimbursements, time off, Unity House logo apparel and other benefits.

"We give them tools, choices and supports so they can take care of themselves in ways that actually fit their lives," said Mary Simpson, wellness program coordinator. "We meet people where they are and recognize that progress looks different for everyone."

Amy took part in the program's "H2Go" step and hydration challenge. She focused on building healthy habits and completed the Syracuse Workforce Run. Last summer, Amy started taking her children on hikes, visiting places such as Chimney Bluffs State Park in Wolcott. During the holidays, Amy reached a milestone by completing her first 5K alongside her daughter.

"I find myself trying to better myself not only for me, but for my kids as well," she said. "Sharing my experience with my family makes my accomplishments even more special."



Amy takes a selfie on a hike with her children at Chimney Bluffs State Park.

# PROGRAMS THAT *Empower*



## **SPREADING THE WORD ABOUT RECOVERY**

Congratulations to Ryan, who graduated from Unity House's substance use rehabilitation program in December. Since then, Ryan's been working full-time for Nick's Ride 4 Friends, a peer-led substance use recovery organization.

Through community outreach efforts and sharing his story, Ryan has empowered others on the path to recovery. Ryan is now a Certified Recovery Peer Advocate (CRPA) who frequently tables at recovery-focused events in Auburn.

CRPAs are trained through the NYS Office of Addiction Services and Supports. To earn his CRPA, Ryan completed over 500 hours of training in advocacy, mentoring, recovery wellness support, ethics and medication use. Drawing from his own experiences, he provides non-clinical support and helps people navigate recovery.



## **UES BAKE SALE BENEFITS SLEEP IN HEAVENLY PEACE**

Participants of Unity Employment Services' career-based prevocational class hosted a holiday bake sale at two Auburn administrative office sites. Using sale proceeds, they purchased twin-size comforters and pillows to donate to the Auburn chapter of Sleep in Heavenly Peace. The organization provides beds and mattresses to children in Cayuga County, helping to ensure no child in need sleeps on the floor.



## **INCLUSIVE DRUMMING BRINGS JOY**

Shawn (right) and two fellow Auburn Day Hab participants have been taking drum lessons for the past year with local musician and drum instructor Randy Mucedola.

"Their growth has been a joy to witness," said Assistant Day Services Director James Beaumont, who helped facilitate the classes. "Randy is mindful that everyone has different motor skill abilities and some people may have limitations there. He still finds ways to be inclusive. Shawn, for example, has cerebral palsy that significantly impairs one of his hands. That way of adapting activities for folks is something we're really lucky to have."

Shawn showcased his drumming skills in public for the first time in December at Unity House's Holiday Showcase at the Finger Lakes Mall.



## **A BRIGHTER FUTURE LIES AHEAD**

When fighting to overcome addiction, every clean day is a victory. For Nita, those victories are measured not only in recovery milestones, but in moments of motherhood.

With consistent support from Grace House staff, and encouragement from peers walking the same path, Nita continues her recovery while focusing on being a loving, present mother to her two-year-old daughter.

Nita said she's now focused on putting her daughter — and herself — on the path to success.

"My biggest priority is getting her into a local daycare," Nita said. "I'd also like to work on my CASAC certification so I can secure a job and start giving back."

# Play is for **EVERYONE**

It's Thursday morning, and in the Hedgehog and Koala pre-K rooms, the children already know today is going to be special.

"When Unity House arrives, the hallways light up with joy," said Sherri Koski, executive director of Ithaca Community Childcare Center (IC3).

For the past two years, participants from Unity House's Ithaca Day Hab have partnered with IC3 to build meaningful connections between young children and adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

During a visit in January, six Day Hab participants joined with IC3's pre-K students in painting, drawing and winter outdoor play.

"The heart of the experience is always connection — through art, play, reading, and shared time together," Sherri said. "These interactions spark curiosity, joy, and important conversations about differences and acceptance."

The collaboration supports learning and inclusion on both sides. Before visits began, teachers introduced dolls representing different abilities and started conversations to help children learn about physical and cognitive differences.

"I think it's beneficial for individuals with developmental disabilities to interact with young children, and for children to have the experience of interacting with our folks," said Ryan Wilcox, program manager at Ithaca Day Hab. "We started slow. We brought a small group over, and it went wonderfully. The kids were really engaged."



Ithaca Day Hab program participant Jessica Parsons (center) joins pre-K students painting dots as Unity House community integration specialist Iris Lynch (left) looks on.

Staff members at both organizations quickly recognized the value of the partnership.

"For us, being around young children often helps our people feel more at ease," Ryan said. "Having shared activities creates a natural opportunity to engage in something fun for everyone."

Sherri said the partnership reflects both organizations' commitment to inclusion.

"We're creating an environment where we can have conversations to learn about one another rather than passing judgment," Sherri said. "Understanding the person as a whole is important work."

## EMPLOYEES OF THE QUARTER

Our amazing employees help us deliver on our mission. 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:



**DIRECT SUPPORT PROFESSIONAL**  
**PAULETTE JOHNSON**  
Chemical Dependency Residence Counselor at Grace House

*"Paulette goes above and beyond for the team and program. While attending the program's staff meeting in late November, Paulette was pleased to share recent stories of success with residents and her efforts to research group topics that aligned with residents' interests."*

-AMY DURKIN, CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER



**SUPPORT STAFF**  
**SHANNON HOSELTON**  
Assistant Program Manager at Auburn Day Services

*"We have a new resident living at one of our IRAs. She was talking about missing out on the Halloween party at her former day program. I asked Shannon if we could bring her to the Day Hab party, which was the next day, and she quickly said 'yes.' Shannon's caring attitude helped her to acclimate to her new home."*

-ALYSSA MILITELLO, BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTION SPECIALIST

## Three Auburn IRAs to join Unity House

Unity House is growing to support the residents of three group homes for people with disabilities in Auburn.

The homes, known as IRAs (independent residential alternative), have been operated for years by Kelberman, a nonprofit based in Utica. In October, representatives of the state Office for People with Developmental Disabilities asked Unity House to assume responsibility for the homes. Unity House's board of directors endorsed the change after a thorough review of their operations, said CEO Darlene Podolak.

"These IRAs need better training, better processes and more consistent, experienced leadership," Darlene said. "We have 33 years of experience operating IRAs in this community. We're taking on this new responsibility because we have the capacity to do it well, and because it's our mission."



"I trust Unity House.  
I feel like I can talk to  
anybody here."  
-Donna Clark

Darlene and a dozen other Unity House staff leaders hosted an informal gathering in January for family members of the homes' 11 residents. Attendees asked questions about the transition for more than two hours.

"I'm very optimistic," said Julie Carlton, who attended with her husband, Dan. Their son Kevin lives in one of the homes. "I like that [Unity House] is local and that their program is consistent across all of their homes."

Donna Clark said that the change of auspices is long overdue. Her son Robbie lives in one of the homes. Robbie and Donna know Unity House because he has been attending Unity House's Day Hab program for 27 years and Donna served on the board of directors from 2016 to 2021.

"Robbie's been saying things like, 'I can't wait,'" Donna said.