

Spirit

NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2026



217 Genesee Street • Auburn, New York 13021

unityhouse.org



Spirit is published three times a year by
Unity House
217 Genesee Street
Auburn, NY 13021
unityhouse.org

Editor

Kelly D. Buck
Director of Marketing & Development
315.253.6227 ext. 313
kelly.buck@unityhouse.org

Writers & Photographers

Nicole Hube
Chris Iven

To be added to Unity House's e-mail list or
to opt-out, please call 315.253.6227 ext.
358 or e-mail nicole.hube@unityhouse.org.

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

Administration

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

Darlene Podolak

CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER

Amy Durkin

Board of Directors

PRESIDENT

Kenneth Knight

VICE PRESIDENT

Patricia Festa

SECRETARY

Christopher Sloan

TREASURER

Taylor Symes

Michael Antonacci
Catherine Diviney
Jeffrey Eaton
Jessica Janssen
Timothy Pacholyk
April Rendsland
Christopher Ryan
Margaret Shaw
Rhonda Sheffield

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 *Mission Work*

My first six months as CEO have been incredibly
busy. I'm not complaining, though, because Unity
House's mission is so important. And because we
have you.

**Your advocacy, your monetary gifts and
your moral support power Unity House.** With
your help, we've made major improvements
this year so that people with developmental
disabilities can live with more autonomy and
dignity.

- At the state's request, we've acquired and improved operations at three
group homes in Auburn. We're now buying and renovating a nice house to
replace an outdated one that came with the transfer.
- We've completed a major renovation of our Green Street IRA, home to
13 people in Ithaca.
- We're building a new fully accessible house in Auburn. It will become home
to residents of the group home where I started my career with Unity House
33 years ago.
- We've launched a new technology pilot so more residents can gain skills to
live with less staff support.
- We're reopening our IRA on Fish Road in Ithaca. It closed six years ago due
to staffing shortages.

And here's some more exciting news. Unity House has won
a five-year, \$2.8M state grant to open a new program to
support people with mental illness in Cayuga County. We're
now seeking program space and volunteers to help it thrive.

None of this would be possible without our amazing
employees, donors and supporters. **You help us do
more to empower people with disabilities.**

With gratitude,



Darlene Podolak
Chief Executive Officer



Scan here to
subscribe to our
e-mail updates,
including our
monthly
e-newsletter.

On the cover: Ithaca Day Hab participants Robert Gilliam (top left) and Bonnie Gould
(seated) spend time outdoors with Unity House community integration specialists
Todd Webster and Emily Toti during the program's spring talent show, titled Our Time
to Shine, at Stewart Park in June. Read more about the event on **page 4**.

A Long Road to Recovery: **MORGAN'S STORY**

Morgan O'Neil, 29, has battled substance use since her teenage years.

"I started drinking at 15," she said. "I was throwing parties every weekend when my stepdad wasn't home."

At 17, Morgan was prescribed opiates. That quickly led to dependence. Heroin and fentanyl use soon followed. By her mid-20s, even Morgan's sales jobs at liquor stores fed her addiction. She was hosting tastings, building relationships with customers, and even developing a modest social media following. But behind that public persona, her addiction continued.

"I was stuck in a cycle that seemed impossible to break," Morgan said.

After she was arrested for drug possession in 2016, she entered drug court for the first time and promised to get treatment. When she didn't, she was arrested again and spent seven months in jail.

In August of 2024, Morgan was picked up on a warrant. A drug court judge in Syracuse gave her a second chance. This time, Morgan committed fully to 118 days of in-patient treatment. She then transitioned to Grace House, Unity House's residential rehabilitation program in Auburn.

At Grace House, Morgan found the structure and accountability she had been missing.

Through the program's 12-Step approach, individualized recovery planning, and consistent support from staff, she began to rebuild her life. She marked sobriety milestones alongside her peers and developed tools to sustain her recovery.



Morgan (center) stands alongside Grace House program director Dorothy Radcliff (left) and friend Joanne Burger.

"Working with my sponsor and my counselor forced me to take a hard look at myself and do the work I had been avoiding for so long," she said.

With the support system she needed to succeed, Morgan graduated from Syracuse Community Treatment Court in April.

"I learned how to cope instead of escape," she said during her graduation speech. "I learned that asking for help is not a weakness; it's a strength."

Now nearly two years sober, Morgan has completed courses to become a credentialed alcoholism and substance abuse counselor (CASAC). She is employed at Syracuse Recovery Services and helps others navigate the same challenges she once faced.

"I'm just looking forward to giving back what has been given to me," Morgan said. "For the first time in a long time, I feel hopeful about my future."

To watch Morgan's treatment court graduation speech and to see more Stories of Hope, scan the QR code.



COSTS OUTPACE STATE FUNDING

State leaders recently approved a 2026-2027 budget that increases funding for the work Unity House does, but fails to keep up with inflation.

Many Unity House supporters joined in a statewide campaign for a 4% increase in funding for behavioral health and community-based services. The final budget included a 2.7% increase.

"I am grateful to our legislative partners who have heard

us and demonstrated their support," said Unity House CEO Darlene Podolak. "They know who we are and the excellent support our staff provide to our neighbors and community members."

The 2.7% increase, while less than is needed, will allow Unity House to raise wages and help ease the ongoing staffing shortage, Darlene said. However, continued investment is essential. Unity House has more than 70 open positions.

Programs that **EMPOWER**



FAMILY FUN DAY

Auburn Day Hab recently hosted its Family Fun Day for program participants at the Sicz Club in Auburn. The event brought together people with disabilities and their family members for a day of fun, connection, and community celebration.

Special thanks to caricature artist JP Crangle of Syracuse for adding a creative touch and helping make the day even more memorable.

Mary Weare (left) and Unity House community integration specialist Lynn Parsons pose with their caricature drawing.



STEPS FOR RECOVERY

In May, community members came together in Auburn for two recovery-oriented events: the third annual PROS Mental Health Awareness Walk, and the 21st annual Tim Durant Recovery Walk. Both events raised awareness of mental health and substance use while celebrating the power of

collaboration among Cayuga County service providers. The Recovery Walk honors the memory of Tim Durant, a Grace House counselor and beloved member of the recovery community who passed away in May 2006.

At the PROS event, participant Cliff Bond III spoke on the impact the program has had on his life:

"It warms my heart to see many who view mental health without stigmatized glasses. This program gave me hope in what I thought was a bleak world. I implore you all to find something that gives you reason ... This world is a brighter place with you in it."



Elizabeth Clune (left) and her mother JoAnn paint together.

CREATIVITY ON DISPLAY

Ithaca Day Hab hosted its Colorful Connections event at St. Catherine of Siena Church in April.

Program participants got creative alongside their family members, friends and support staff during a group painting session led by Nicole Bielowicz, owner of Nikki Biel Designs.

OUR TIME TO *Shine*

Ithaca Day Hab gathered at the pavilion at Stewart Park on June 12 for their annual spring talent show. Participants sang tunes and showcased their talents for their friends, families, and peers.



Unsung **HEROES**

When the kitchen sink springs a leak, who ya gonna call? Well, maybe not Ghostbusters, but at Unity House, we call our dedicated facilities team.

The six men on Unity House's maintenance crew respond to calls at over 100 locations spread across five counties. Together, they fulfilled 2,300 work orders in 2025.



Maurice Coit



Scott White



Caleb Davis



Alex Toro



Josh Campbell



Tim McNabb

"Our maintenance team spends every day, and sometimes evenings and weekends, handling emergencies and other general needs," said Unity House CEO Darlene Podolak. "In addition to all the good hands-on work they do, our guys enjoy interacting on the job with the people we support, and that makes a difference. They really support the mission."

On any given day, crew members may be called on to move furniture, clear snow, install appliances, fix wheelchairs and walkers, install flooring or paint.

Maurice Coit worked for Unity House for 13 years before being named facilities director 18 months ago. Since then, the department's completion rate on work orders is 96%, up from 87% the previous year.

"I set the bar high, and they meet it," Maurice said. "I don't ask my guys to do anything I'm not willing to do myself."

Maurice praised Facilities Manager Scott White and the rest of the crew for their dedication.

"Scott is a great manager, who goes above and beyond all the time," Maurice said. "The whole team works well together and is always striving for better facilities."



More than 20 Unity House staff members walked and ran in the Syracuse Workforce Run on June 9. The event, which drew over 4,000 participants to Onondaga Lake Park near Syracuse, promotes wellness and team building. Unity House participants sported matching T-shirts and enjoyed a team picnic, thanks to sponsor inDeed Wellness.

Grateful for **GRANTS**

Unity House is thankful to receive grant funding from:

Columbian Foundation - \$3,800

Unity House is setting up its own food distribution center to ensure that the residents in our mental health treatment apartment program get the food they need and receive state funding for. Funds from the Columbian Foundation will allow us to equip an existing garage with two large chest freezers, two commercial refrigerators, and shelving units to hold dry goods.

Stanley W. Metcalf Foundation - \$8,500

Unity Employment Services requested funding to purchase a virtual reality program. A contract with TransfrVR will offer our vocational participants (about 40) hands-on, immersive virtual reality experiences to help them explore and receive training in high-demand job areas such as food service, healthcare, automotive and construction.

D.E. French Foundation - \$2,580

Thanks to funding from the French Foundation, Auburn Day Habilitation will purchase classroom equipment to make learning easier for adults with disabilities. An 85" smartboard, a projector, and a movie screen will help staff adapt lessons in real time and provide inclusive, hands-on learning opportunities for about 30 daily program participants.

"HOPE STARTS WITH YOU"

An Evening of Celebration

More than 160 friends came out on April 27 to join Unity House in celebrating its 49th year. Held at the Hilton Garden Inn in Auburn, the annual award dinner included recognizing our board of directors, donors and sponsors, 2025 employees of the quarter, and program participants.



Speakers Terri and Bart Wasilenko made remarks entitled "Hope Starts With You." The Wasilenkos co-founded NAMI Cayuga County in 2002 to provide information and resources for those struggling with psychiatric issues.



Businesswoman Gwen Webber-McLeod (right) presents Melody Smith Johnson with the 16th annual Fred Atkins Community Service award. The first African American to win the award, Melody is dedicated to advocating for and uplifting women and girls and people of color in our community. She devotes hundreds of hours each year volunteering.



Unity House board members and friends enjoy dinner together. Left to right: Treasurer Taylor Symes, Director Mike Antonacci, Vice President Patti Festa, Cayuga County District Attorney Brittany Grome Antonacci, friend Sue Phillips-Coe, and President Ken Knight.



Surrounded by the women who nominated her for the honor, Julie Bennett of Aurora accepts the 15th annual Open Arms award. Julie is a 12-Step recovery advocate who offers guidance grounded in empathy and authenticity, helping residents of Grace House and others rebuild their lives.

Unity House observes 50 years of excellence in 2027. We are planning a year-long schedule of festivities, including our golden anniversary gala on April 26. We hope you'll join us – details coming this fall.

Become a Leadership Donor

The 1977 Society honors leadership donors who give \$1,000 or more over the course of each calendar year to advance our mission. Many donors are so close to meeting that threshold. We invite you to consider making a stretch gift to hit that milestone.

Your \$1,000+ donation to Unity House this year is a win-win for you and for Unity House. You will experience the joy and satisfaction of supporting people with disabilities in the most meaningful way, and we get to celebrate YOU as a leadership donor!

We'd love to welcome you into the 1977 Society in 2026. And this year, thanks to changes in tax laws, there's a new incentive. Your first \$1,000 in charitable contributions (\$2,000 if filing jointly) is deductible even if you take the standard deduction. Additional tax benefits are possible by giving appreciated assets (such as stocks) or by directing part of your IRA required minimum distribution to Unity House.

Join Our
1977
SOCIETY

To discuss how to maximize your charitable impact through gift planning, contact Chris Iven at 315-253-6227, ext. 360.

UNITY HOUSE WELCOMES TWO NEW BOARD MEMBERS

April Rendsland is a caseworker at Onondaga County Department of Children and Family Services. She was a direct support professional at Unity House from 2017-2019, and currently sits on the board of directors of East Hill Medical Center.



April holds a bachelor's in human service and development from SUNY Empire State College and recently completed degree requirements at Keuka College for her master's in social work.

"I look forward to utilizing my knowledge of this agency and other non-profits to support the mission of Unity House as a board member," said April. "I would like to advocate for staff who are out in the field, especially direct care staff supporting people with disabilities."

Rhonda Sheffield is a certified personal banker, and has been with Five Star Bank since 2018. She is the branch manager in Auburn, responsible for business development, loans and mortgages, account maintenance, customer service, and staff development. Rhonda has pursued business administration courses at Cayuga Community College. She serves on the boards of Cayuga Counseling and Safe Harbors of the Finger Lakes. She is a member of the Auburn Rotary Club, and maintains bank membership in the Cayuga County Chamber of Commerce.



"I joined the Unity House board because I wanted to give back to my Auburn community," said Rhonda. "I had two uncles who were mentally challenged, and this is my way of paying back the support that was given to my family when we needed it. My goal is to help Unity House continue to be the strength and support that our community needs."

Recognizing EXCELLENCE

We couldn't deliver on our mission without our amazing employees. That's why we're proud to celebrate two of them here. Congratulations to our Q1 Employees of the Quarter.



David Lackey
Employment Specialist, UES – Geneva

"For the past several months, Dave has single-handedly kept the Geneva UES office afloat while providing high quality services. He has demonstrated his dedication and team mentality by covering in Auburn while maintaining his caseload in Geneva. Dave has

also played an integral role in training and mentoring new staff. His dedication to the UES department and his desire to expand services in Geneva are instrumental to the success of the program."

-Amanda McManus, director of Unity Employment Services



Scott White
Facilities Manager, Maintenance

"Scott is an incredible asset. He is always willing to jump in and help, no matter the situation. Scott has responded to emergencies like flooded bathrooms and A/C issues, but has also fixed something as small but meaningful as a keychain

for a participant. Scott approaches every task with care and dedication. Beyond his reliability and problem-solving skills, Scott is genuinely friendly and engaged. He takes the time to connect, is always welcoming, and makes everyone feel seen and valued."

-Ryan Wilcox, program manager at Ithaca Day Hab



217 Genesee Street
Auburn, New York 13021

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
AUBURN, NY 13021
PERMIT NO. 128

UNITY HOUSE STEPS UP FIGHT AGAINST HOMELESSNESS

Since the start of this year, Unity House has enrolled 26 recently unhoused Cayuga County residents into its mental health housing. All of the enrollees have a diagnosed serious mental illness. Most came from hotels, where they had lived for months, their rents paid for by county taxpayers.

One recently admitted resident had been living with her two minor children in a hotel for nearly two years, said Mental Health Housing Director Ashley Manning.

"They just thought they were going to be stuck there forever," Ashley said.

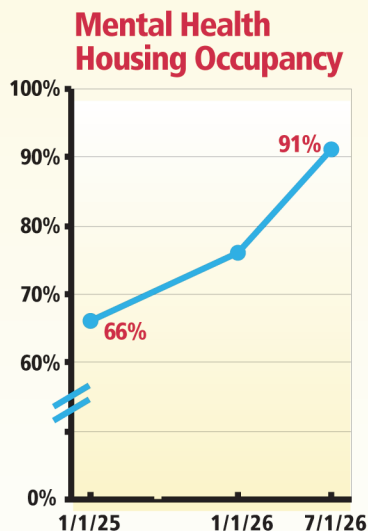
Cayuga County has a homelessness crisis, said Sarah Van Doren, executive director of Cayuga Counseling, which screens people for placement in housing programs. Long-term stays at hotels can be dismal, especially for families, she said.

"They have no privacy," Sarah said. "They don't have access to a kitchen or laundry facilities — the basics we all take for granted... It has such a negative effect on children."

Unity House's new role in reducing homelessness has been transformational, Sarah said.

"This program is critical. It changes long-term outcomes for families. It means they have a chance."

For residents like Terence, that chance means stability and hope. As of May, he has a place in Unity House's Permanent Supportive Housing Program.



Previously unhoused, Terence moved into his new Auburn apartment in May.

"I'm grateful for the program, the roof over my head, and the people helping me," he said. "It feels different now. I always have someone to talk to."

Unity House has two housing programs for people with serious mental illness in Cayuga County: Certified Treatment Apartments and Permanent Supportive Housing. Both provide case management, life skills development, access to clinical treatment, and financial support for people who are transitioning from homelessness, incarceration or foster care.

Both programs had significant vacancies in recent years because they lacked the staff needed to provide that support. Thanks to charitable gifts and increased state funding, Unity House increased wages and built a full, strong staff team by the end of 2025.

Since then, Ashley has pushed to fill every available bed. The few vacancies that remain — 12 across both programs — should be filled this summer. Unity House is seeking funding and regulatory approval to expand the program in future years.