Spirit

NEWSLETTER

FALL 2026



Unity House

217 Genesee Street • Auburn, New York 13021

unityhouse.org

Spirit

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. Subscribe to our e-newsletter at unityhouse.org/connect.

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
Kyle Hostetler
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
Grateful



Darlene Podolak
Chief Executive Officer

As we enter the season of gratitude and charitable giving, **I want you to know how much your support has meant for Unity House and for me during my first year as CEO.** I began my tenure with an ambitious goal: strengthening an already strong organization. It's been challenging, but I feel a positive energy around what we've accomplished and where we're headed together.

With your support, we're:

- **making more accessibility improvements** at our group homes for people with intellectual disabilities.
- **fostering greater independence** by piloting technology supports in our residential programs and by using virtual reality simulations in our employment services programs.
- **fighting homelessness** by expanding our mental health housing program.
- **opening a new mental health clubhouse** next year to meet the needs of our residents and others in the community.
- **growing our workforce** to provide more representative payee support for people in need.

We're seeing high satisfaction rates among the people we support and their families; a rising staff retention rate; and new partnerships with community leaders. **Your exceptional dedication to our mission makes all of this possible.**

As we look forward to 2027 – Unity House's 50th year – **I'm grateful for you.** With your help, Unity House will continue empowering people with disabilities for the next 50 years.

With gratitude,

Darlene Podolak

P.S.: Check out the smiles on the cover of this newsletter to see what the accessibility upgrades mean for residents of our West Green Street IRA in Ithaca. **There's no place like home.**

On the cover: Unity House staff, residents and community partners gathered for a Summer Social and ribbon-cutting at the newly renovated West Green Street IRA in Ithaca. The renovation created a safer, more accessible and comfortable home for 12 residents who returned home in September. **You can read more about this project, plus other accessibility updates, on the back cover of this newsletter.**

STORIES OF HOPE

"The Old Me Is Back"

A decade ago, Eric O'Brien felt like he had nothing to live for.

"I felt asleep everywhere I went," he said. "My body was there, but my mind wasn't. I was nothing more than a routine."

Today, Eric is eight years sober, living independently, working full time and building a life he once believed was out of reach. With support from Unity House's PROSperity program for mental health (PROS), Eric is rediscovering what he is capable of.

"All the resources are here if you're willing to put in the work," he said. "PROS gave me that support system. I'm back to who I was: a 'nothing can stop me,' confident kind of guy. I'm so grateful."

In 2015, Eric's mental health became difficult to manage. He lost his job. He felt hopeless and alone. He was constantly tired, felt pressure in his head, and had trouble walking. He was also navigating an abusive relationship that eroded his confidence and independence.

"My whole problem was listening to someone tell me I wasn't capable," Eric said. "I heard it so often that I started to believe it… I basically let go of my freedom."

Eric got sober in June 2018, but his journey was far from over. After being diagnosed with anxiety, bipolar disorder and OCD, he survived a suicide attempt in 2020. Doctors discovered a benign tumor and fluid in his brain. Surgery to remove the cyst was followed by seizures, cardiac arrest and weeks in a coma.

Eric first connected with PROS later that year but was still experiencing complications. He struggled to engage with the program and left after three months.

When Eric returned to PROS in May 2022, things started to change. Eric began working with PROS Practitioner Erika Van Tassell. Together, they identified goals that mattered to him. Eric established routines, strengthened social connections and focused on returning to full-time employment.

"Each time I came to PROS, I felt like I could cross another thing off my checklist of who I wanted to be," he said.

Slowly, that checklist became reality. Eric learned more about his diagnoses and how to manage them. He participated in mindfulness, gardening, music and cooking. With encouragement from staff, he tried techniques to improve his motor skills, mobility and cognition. They worked.



Eric O'Brien (center) stands with PROS Practitioner Erika Van Tassell and fellow participant Cliff Bond III outside the program's location in Auburn.

In February, Eric moved into his own apartment, leaving the abusive relationship behind. With support from PROS, he began applying for jobs. In May, Eric started working in sanitation at Cayuga Milk in Auburn – his first job in years.

Today, Eric is financially independent, off psychiatric medication and no longer relies on public assistance. Outside of work, he rides his bike, plays bass guitar, exercises and looks forward to graduating from PROS soon.

But his biggest accomplishment is how he sees himself.

"I love myself. I love life. I'm a spiritual person now. I found God. The old me is back — and now it's full speed ahead."

We have more great news to share!

Visit our Stories of Hope web page to read about even more lives changed.

Scan the QR code.

The Heart of our Mission

CELEBRATING STAFF APPRECIATION MONTH

Unity House employees really deliver on our important mission. Every September, we go all out to make sure our staff knows how much we appreciate their dedication and how grateful we are for their talents.

A highlight of the month was Direct Support Professional (DSP) Appreciation Week, September 13-19. We presented gifts, snacks and other tokens of appreciation to each of the 290 DSPs who provide compassionate, person-centered support every day.

The month also featured:

Longevity Awards

We recognized employees celebrating 3, 5, 10, 15 and more years of service. At gatherings in both Ithaca and Auburn, awardees received a special gift and peer recognition.

Unity Games

Dozens of employees formed 15 teams to participate in this month-long series of friendly competitions. This year's challenges involved cooking, dancing, a step challenge, chalk art, Spirit Week dress-up and more. Following a Unity Family Feud showdown at the end of the month, we crowned the Sunnydale Slayers, consisting of Sara Jackson, Darlene Podolak, Sara Bilinski, and Valerie Longley, as this year's top team. Congratulations on a first place win!

Chair Massages

We offered relief for staff members throughout the month, thanks to a partnership with New Leaf Massage Therapy.

We're thankful to all Unity House employees for everything they do to make our mission possible — and we thank our loyal friends and donors for helping us support our valued staff.



Unity Games winning team


Auburn Longevity awardees


Ithaca Longevity awardees

Grateful for GRANTS

Unity House is thankful to receive grant funding from:

Tompkins Today and Tomorrow Fund of the Community Foundation of Tompkins County - $7,500

General programmatic support for Ithaca Day Habilitation

New York State - $248,000

Thanks to a grant nomination by Senator Lea Webb, Unity House will soon be able to complete $248,000 worth of accessibility improvements at four group homes in Tompkins County. This grant is part of a larger effort to improve accessibility at all Unity House residential locations, ensuring that the people we support are able to live in the homes they love for as long as they wish.

New York State - $2.8 million

Gov. Kathy Hochul recently announced that Unity House will receive a five-year, $2.8 million state grant to open a Clubhouse — a community-based recovery program for adults with serious mental illness — in Auburn. The program model, developed by Clubhouse International, is built around community and self-determination. With guidance from Unity House staff and an advisory board, members will decide what programs and supports their Clubhouse will offer.

Programs that **EMPOWER**

TACKLING FOOD INSECURITY

A new food pantry at Unity House's Mental Health Treatment Apartments program in Auburn is helping residents access fresh food, pantry staples, toiletries, and other essentials close to home.



Thanks to grant funding from the Columbian Foundation, the pantry includes three new refrigerators, two chest freezers, and metal shelving for dry goods and personal care items. The added storage helps the program keep a wide variety of necessities on hand, reducing barriers to basic needs and supporting the well-being of Unity House residents.. The pantry now hosts on-site distribution days and provides deliveries to Unity House residents living in apartments throughout the city, extending its impact beyond the Grant Avenue program location.

UES PARTICIPANTS EXPLORE CAREER INTERESTS

A new virtual reality platform at Unity Employment Services is giving program participants the opportunity to explore careers and build vocational skills through immersive, real-world simulations. Using VR headsets, participants can safely practice tasks in a variety of fields, including electrical work, carpentry, warehouse operations, firefighting, nursing, veterinary care, and more. This technology provides an engaging, hands-on way for participants to develop practical job skills and explore career paths that align with their interests and abilities. Unity House is grateful for grant funding provided by the Metcalf Foundation in support of this new initiative.



A FRESH START IN A NEW SPACE

Unity House's Mental Health Crisis Respite program has relocated to larger, brighter apartments in Ithaca to better support residents' wellness and independence. The new location offers easier access to public transportation, grocery stores and downtown Ithaca.

Resident Jon (second from right) said the support he has received since his last hospital stay has made a significant difference.

"At first, I didn't know how much support I was going to get," Jon said. "But it's been great. I'm doing better, and being here in this space opens up more opportunities for me. I'm in therapy, I'm learning bus routes… the team here has been great. Without them, I don't know where I'd be right now."



FUN WITH FOAM

Our Auburn Day Hab summer picnic and foam party at Emerson Park was a huge hit. Participants and staff enjoyed burgers and hot dogs fresh off the grill, great company, and plenty of carefree fun in a massive wall of bubbles. It's a summer tradition we look forward to each year!



YEAR-END GIVING ADVANTAGES

As we approach the season of giving, here are four ways you can support Unity House's mission that could also help reduce your 2026 taxes:

1. Give cash — even if you don't itemize
New in 2026, you can deduct up to $1,000 ($2,000 if married filing jointly) in cash donations directly on your tax return, no itemizing required.

2. Donate appreciated securities
Giving stock you've held for more than a year lets you avoid capital gains tax while still claiming a deduction for the full value. It's typically more tax-efficient than donating the cash you'd get from selling it first.

3. Make a Qualified Charitable Distribution (QCD) from your IRA
If you're 70½ or older, you can donate directly from your IRA to Unity House — up to $111,000 in 2026. A QCD counts toward your Required Minimum Distribution but isn't included in your taxable income. That's a tax advantage, even if you don't itemize.

4. Donate through a Donor-Advised Fund (DAF)
If you have a DAF, you can recommend a grant to Unity House quickly and easily using the DAFDirect tool on our website's donation page. DAFs let you take a deduction when you contribute to the fund, then decide which charities to support over time.

DAFDIRECT
FIDELITY Charitable · BNY MELLON · SCHWAB CHARITABLE

Check with your accountant or financial advisor to learn which strategies would work best for you. You can easily make a gift online at **unityhouse.org/donate.**

Scan QR code to give now!

However you choose to give, thank you for supporting Unity House's mission! For more information, contact Chief Advancement Officer Chris Iven at 315-253-6227 ext. 360 or email development@unityhouse.org.

Become a PEER-TO-PEER FUNDRAISER!

GIVING TUESDAY

Giving Tuesday is coming on December 1

Our goal this year is to raise $40,000 by midnight. Will you help us reach it by becoming a campaigner?

By inviting your friends, family, and coworkers to give, you'll help raise vital funds that support Unity House's people and programs.

Getting started is simple, and it's all online. We'll create a personalized fundraising page for you, provide easy step-by-step instructions, and share ready-to-use content for social media and email. You don't need any special skills — just your enthusiasm and willingness to spread the word.

Put your passion into practice.
Tell your Unity House story.
Inspire gifts that change lives.
To get started, just scan the QR code.

Need help? Contact Chris at 315-253-6227 ext. 360 or chris.iven@unityhouse.org.



Unity House will celebrate its 50th birthday in 2027. Watch for announcements about exciting events and activities taking place all year. We invite you to join us as we reflect on five decades of outstanding human service, and look forward to the next 50 years!

EMPLOYEES OF THE QUARTER - Q3 2026

Direct Support Professional



Beth MaDill, Community Integration Specialist, Auburn Day Hab

"Beth often works closely with a resident from one of the newer IRAs who spent years waiting to begin a day program. Because this resident is nonverbal, it can sometimes be challenging to understand her needs and interests. Adjusting to a loud, busy program with new people can also be difficult for anyone, but Beth has been dedicated to creating a program experience that feels enjoyable for her. Through Beth's patience and understanding, aggressive behaviors have been minimized and she has developed a daily routine of engaging activities.
-Alyssa Militello, Behavior Intervention Specialist

Support Staff



Kim Zimmer Program Manager, Beam Hill Rd IRA

"Our Beam Hill site in Dryden is a very large program that supports 16 individuals. Kim seems to run it with ease, as she exhibits a mix of organization and compassion. It is these personality traits that also have led to her helping the new IRAs in Auburn become situated. She is incredibly responsive and willing to assist well beyond her own program. She is also creative and has wonderful ideas which have enhanced the lives of the people we support at Beam Hill."
-Alyssa Militello, Behavior Intervention Specialist

NEW LEADER JOINS BOARD

Kyle Hostetler joined Unity House's board of directors in August. He is a program manager at CNY Works, where he leads regional workforce development initiatives.



"As a resident of Auburn, I have seen first-hand the positive impact that Unity House has had in our community," said Kyle. "I believe in the mission of helping people and families build greater stability, independence, and opportunity in their lives. That mission resonates with me both personally and professionally."

Kyle brings experience in managing government-funded workforce programs, leading strategic partnerships, developing employer engagement strategies, and overseeing multimillion-dollar budgets. This expertise will especially benefit the organization's Unity Employment Services programming, which helps people with disabilities gain competitive employment in the community.

"Throughout my career in workforce development, I've seen how access to the right resources, supportive relationships, and meaningful opportunities can make a lasting difference in someone's life," continued Kyle. "I hope my experience helps Unity House continue to grow its impact."

MISSION SURVEY

Unity House celebrates 50 years of excellence in 2027. We recently asked for your feedback on how we're doing and where we should focus our efforts. Unity House is thankful for the 181 people who took the time to respond to the survey.

On October 6, about 20 people gathered for a workshop at the Case Mansion in Auburn, taking part in a facilitated discussion which included your responses. Your input helps us plan for the future and ensure we can continue meeting our mission for decades to come.

Unity House
217 Genesee Street
Auburn, New York 13021

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

MAKING HOMES MORE ACCESSIBLE

With your support, Unity House is completing more than $2 million in accessibility improvements at our homes for people with disabilities. The upgrades are allowing residents to stay in the homes they love, with their friends, for as long as they need to, even if their mobility decreases over time.

Here's the latest:

One-story living for New Life residents

By this time next year, the seven residents of Unity House's oldest IRA will move together into a brand new, fully accessible home in Auburn. Unity House recently purchased a buildable lot on Dunning Avenue. Sections of a new manufactured home will be built off-site, trucked to the lot and installed next spring. The project was made possible through a $647,000 state Health Care Facility Transformation Program grant awarded last year. The new single-story home will replace the two-story New Life IRA, west of Auburn, which opened in 1993 in a house that's more than 200 years old.

West Green Street residents return to a better home

For almost two years, the 12 residents of our West Green Street IRA have called a state-owned house on Abbott Road their temporary home while their downtown residence underwent a transformative $577,000 renovation. Now, they're finally home, and it's safer, more accessible and thoughtfully designed to promote greater autonomy and comfort. Upgrades include a new entrance ramp, an accessible front porch, expanded living areas, accessible bathrooms, more functional kitchens, and structural repairs.



Pictured are Assistant Program Manager Gladys Wells (left); residents Phil, Kang, Bob and Joe; and staff members Ashley Wright and Rhythm Chakma (right) during a ribbon cutting event at the renovated West Green Street home in August.

A new home for Hamilton IRA residents

Unity House recently purchased a house on South Street Road, just south of Auburn. After renovations, the single-story house will become home to the four residents of the two-story IRA on Hamilton Avenue. The Hamilton IRA is the oldest of the three Auburn group homes that the state transferred to Unity House earlier this year. Renovations at the new house will include a new entrance ramp, a ceiling track lift system, and a roll-in accessible bathroom.

