

Journey to a Living Wage



Certified Living Wage Employer by Tompkins County Workers' Center

FOUNDER'S WAY • WHAT'S NEW IN FSS • CONSISTENCY OF CARE



FROM THE DESK OF

DAN BROWN

Executive Director, Racker

The Journey To A Living Wage

We have done it! We have been working hard to get all staff to a Living Wage as calculated bi-annually by Alternatives Federal Credit Union (AFCU) and endorsed by the Tompkins County Workers Center. Under their Living Wage methodology, staff must earn at least \$15.32 per hour. I am thrilled to say that the 735 staff at Racker are above that wage rate!

I became Executive Director in January 2013. As I visited programs in those first 100 days several things became very apparent:

- The passion staff brought to their work
- How hard they worked
- The high-level of responsibility that we asked of them
- Our success as an organization comes directly from the people working with the individuals that Racker supports

Those items made it abundantly clear that the staff deserved a rate of pay that was commensurate with their responsibilities AND that they could live on! We looked for a Living Wage standard and found the Tompkins County Living Wage (TCLW). In 2013, the TCLW was \$12.42 and we were starting most staff at \$10 per hour. The cost to move everybody to at least \$12.42 was \$3 million...

In April 2013, I told the board: "include in our Strategic Plan paying all staff a Living Wage. The need to do this became more important to me as I witnessed over the past few months the dedication of our staff, their passion for supporting individuals with disabilities and just how hard they work."

This created in Strategic Planning words a BHAG, a Big Hairy Audacious Goal! To achieve a BHAG you have to think creatively, put all options on the table and directly connect its achievement with the Mission and Vision of Racker!

Our Mission:

We support people with disabilities and their families to lead fulfilling lives by providing opportunities to learn and be connected with others.





Drawing a connection from a Living Wage to its impact on our ability to achieve our Mission was not difficult. If you have read the book “Riding the Bus with My Sister” by Rachel Simon, you know what I mean. Rachel describes her sister’s heart as being hardened by the constant turnover of the staff that support her. This anecdote illustrates why our most important asset is our staff, the staff that work directly with the people we support. Turnover in that staff, due to inadequate compensation, directly impacts our ability to assist people with disabilities to lead fulfilling lives.

One element of our current strategic plan states: Racker will have skilled staff to support people with disabilities and their families. To do so, we will:

- Implement a living wage
- Enhance our organizational culture of belonging
- Invest in our staff through learning opportunities & professional development

What have we done to achieve this BHAG? Most importantly get everybody on-board with the Goal. The management team and board signed on to the importance of this BHAG in 2013.

Look at how we were spending our money as an organization moving as much as possible of it to the staff providing direct care.

Advocate, advocate and advocate some more with our legislators, including Governor Cuomo.

We began an intensive effort of advocacy as an organization for the first time. Each year from January to March, we made six to seven trips a year to Albany. In each of those years, one of the trips was with staff, families and individuals that we support to help our legislators see and hear the need for a Living Wage directly from the people being impacted. We worked hard on the #bFair2DirectCare campaign, making it one of the most effective campaigns statewide EVER. Those words about its effectiveness came from Assemblywoman Barbara Lipton and Senator Fred Akshar.

Year after year we pushed OPWDD and SED to increase funding for staff wages. This culminated in late 2021, with OPWDD getting approval to use Federal monies from the American Rescue Plan to pay Direct Support Professionals bonuses in 2022 equivalent to 30% of what they made in 2021!

There have been times during the last eight years when I didn’t think we would ever reach the goal! I am so thankful to those that helped on this journey and to those that have stuck with Racker during this time.

I am confident that this will have a huge positive impact on our Mission to help people with disabilities lead a fulfilling life.



COMING SOON: Founder's Way

INTEGRATIVE SUPPORTIVE HOUSING

Founder's way is an exciting new housing project opening in fall 2022, in partnership with the Ithaca Neighborhood Housing Services (INHS). It is a 75 unit apartment complex currently being developed in Tompkins County with nine units offering "Integrative Supportive Housing" to tenants with developmental disabilities. In addition to the newly constructed apartments, the property will host a variety of amenities including coin-operated laundry, bike storage, on-site parking, community rooms, and offices. The property is centrally located at 320 W. Buffalo Street in the heart of Ithaca NY. The former site of a school, it is conveniently located near a TCAT bus stop, parks, banks, medical/public offices, and a variety of business.

To qualify for the Integrative Supported Housing Units at Founder's Way you must be over the age of 18 and have OPWDD eligibility. People who are self-directing their services are also welcome to apply! Each prospective tenant will submit an initial "Document of Interest" and will work with a Certified Housing Navigator at Racker to develop their individualized housing plan, which will be used for tenant selection. The plan helps identify needs, so that each tenant has the supports and accommodations in place to be successful renters.

The 9 tenants with developmental disabilities will have a standard INHS lease but will be offered additional supports from the Housing Navigators and Racker staff to help them live independently. Tenants will also be offered the opportunity to join Racker's experienced Community Habilitation program, where they can get individualized hands-on support from a Community Support Professional. To prepare, the housing team at Racker has also developed an 8-part workshop series, dedicated to teaching core independence skills. Workshops are currently being offered virtually via ZOOM, to both prospective tenants as well as the general public. Workshop topics include finances/budgeting, community safety, public transportation, tenants' rights, and more.

Racker is currently in the early stages of the tenant selection process and is still looking for prospective tenants. For more information about the supported housing units at the Founder's Way project or to obtain/submit a "Document of Interest" please contact the housing team at housing@racker.org or by calling Lyndsey Paulin at (607) 220-4806. For information about the upcoming Independence Workshops via ZOOM, please visit our website www.racker.org/events for the registration flyer or contact Lyndsey Paulin at LyndseyP@racker.org or (607) 220-4806.





LIVING WAGE AND THE CONSISTENCY OF CARE



Providing a living wage for all of Racker's staff has a direct effect on Racker's staffing levels and consistency of care. For years, our programs have struggled with staff retention because our rate of pay was too low, and these jobs require a high level of patience, attention to detail and long hours. The high turnover rate, and consistency of care, remained a constant concern for families as their loved one adjusted to new staff.

For residents in group homes, those consistent relationships have a significant impact on their daily lives. Racker's long time staff members understand the intricacies of each person's personality, their likes, dislikes and tools to cope with difficult days. They develop relationships with family members and create open lines of communication. It is through that communication that families learn about the staff members and how they interact with their loved one. Much like every close relationship, it takes time to build trust, and having consistent staff in a program is the first step in building that trust.

For SS and his parents, inconsistency of staff has been a concern for years. SS is non-verbal autistic and uses basic sign language. His family has also attempted to introduce assistive technologies that would help facilitate communication in order to minimize dysfunctional and self injurious behaviors which is frequently the result of communication and relational breakdowns. It obviously takes time for new staff members to establish rapport, acquire necessary communication tools and build trust. Constant staffing change fundamentally challenges the family's and the agency's shared interest in keeping SS safe and adequately supported.

A series of behavioral crisis during the pandemic led the family to Dr. Amanda Laprime, Director of the Intensive Behavioral Support Team at University of Rochester Medical Center. In her work with SS, Dr. Laprime has discovered great potentials in SS' ability to thrive through intentional behavioral support. A young man known for his fleeting attention span is now observed to be able to regularly substation 40-50 minutes of continuous on task behavior and meaningful interactions in his clinical visits with Dr. Laprime. To translate this clinical success to SS' residential setting

requires consistency of staff presence, ongoing training and disciplined execution on the part of the staff team, all of which are essential when it comes to supporting autistic individuals. All takes commitment and time.

According to Dr. Laprime: "Consistent staffing is one of the most essential components of residential and day programs for the individuals Racker supports. It is truly the therapeutic and supportive relationships that staff form with each person, which contributes to their daily success and stability. When there are frequent staff changes, or new staff coming in and out, it can create a situation where not only is there a lack of consistency, but people do not have long standing and deep connections with those who support them. This can result in a lot of "near misses," missing changes in the individual that could indicate medical events, lack of a deeper understanding of an individual's mental or behavioral health needs, and lack of a relationship where there is shared trust and understanding."

Racker's ability to pay our staff a living wage is a large step toward creating that consistency of care. When staff are able to continue doing a job they love AND can do so while earning a living wage, it makes it less likely to lose quality staff members to other roles. This job requires a person with patience and understanding, dedication to advocacy and empowerment, and a commitment to serving others. We know that the increase in their compensation will allow our staff to continue their journey with Racker and will help all of us in the development of a strong and consistent workforce, which, in the end, will help people like SS stay safe, find happiness and fulfillment in their lives. 🌱



Scan QR to watch a one minute video SS' mom captured of a breakthrough moment after an hour long clinical session with Dr. Laprime

WHAT IS HAPPENING IN FAMILY SUPPORT SERVICES:

PARENT NETWORK:

Join us **Wednesday May 18th**
from 5-7pm for

"Welcome to MY Home: Housing Options"

Learn about local housing
options & creative solutions for
independence.



Join us **Saturday June 11th**
from 12-2PM for

Bowling at Cort-lanes

A free event in Cortland ny
for families living in
Cortland, Madison,
& Onondaga Counties.

Registration is required!

For more info contact:
Diana at (607) 272-5891 Ext 206
or DianaG@racker.org

\$\$\$ FUNDING: \$\$\$

Need Help Paying for Items & Services?

We may be able to help with things
such as:

**Food, clothing, medical,
equipment, housing, camp,
conferences, and so much more.**

For more info contact:
Marlene at (607) 220-8763 or
marlenet@racker.org

RESPITE:

Tired? Need a Break?

We may be able to help pay for the
care of your loved one.

For more info contact:
Lyndsey at (607) 220-4806 or
respit@racker.org

LIBRARIES:

Want to Explore Sensory Items & Books?

Check out our libraries & ask about
how items can be delivered directly to
your door.

**Try before you buy, inquire
about how we can help pay.**

For more info contact:
Marlene at (607) 220-8763 or
marlenet@racker.org

VIRTUAL ACTIVITIES



Participants must be enrolled in, or eligible for, family support services.
FSS services are for individuals that live at home with a family member, in a participating county.
Contact a team member if you have any questions.

Signs of Spring

Post your favorite Spring
photos with the hashtag:

#RackerSignsOfSpring

Racker will feature the best
photos in a special spotlight post
on Facebook & Instagram

@rackeragency



SAVE THE DATE!



Racker
RIVALS
BIG RED
presented by **TOMPKINS**
Trust Company

Saturday, July 16, 2022

Lynah Rink @ Cornell University

Racker
3226 Wilkins Road
Ithaca, NY 14850

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OUR MISSION:

We support people with disabilities and their families
to lead fulfilling lives by providing opportunities to
learn and be connected with others.

EDITOR Bob Brazill, Director of Community Relations and Development
DESIGN Mac Myers, Creative Content Strategist
CONTRIBUTORS Bob Brazill, Yvonne Lomax, Mac Myers, Lyndsey Paulin,
Jen Westling & Katie Williams
PHOTOGRAPHY Racker Staff & Friends of Racker

