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FROM THE DESK OF
CRIS DONOVAN
Executive Director, Racker

Advocacy. This is a word and an action that comes up a lot in our day-to-day work here at Racker. Often, we are working to help everyone we touch (people we support, families, and our staff) become effective self-advocates. Knowing what we need and then communicating it effectively is something we all need help with from time to time! We advocate with, and for, people with disabilities and their families to help them access what they need to achieve their goals. The right support, accessibility, and accommodation can make all the difference. We also do a lot of work around systems advocacy to help overall service systems and structures work better for all people. Sometimes these are disability-specific committees and groups where Racker staff help shape the direction of the service system as a whole. Lastly, we have a role in advocating for our mission. We need to be sure that our communities and legislative representatives know and understand the critical role that organizations like Racker play for thousands of people each year. That work helps us to be sure that we have the support, resources, and tools we need to continue to make a difference.

Racker's foundation is in advocacy work. It was families who came together to push back against the status quo to be sure that their children could stay in their families' homes and local communities and receive the services and support they needed. Those families set the stage for us to continue this work today. How can we continue to move forward? Through our advocacy work.

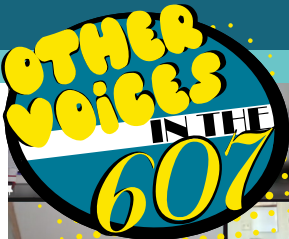
This issue of the Outlook is all about advocacy. It's not the BIG advocacy you might think of, but it's in the day-to-day work of our staff who were honored by CP State at their annual conference. It's in the work of the Voices in the 607, a self-advocacy group that was born out of the COVID pandemic. You'll read about a very successful advocacy campaign to make the region's public libraries more accessible for people with visual disabilities. And you'll also read about upcoming opportunities to help Racker have the resources we need to achieve our mission impact.

Advocacy, in all of its forms, is incredibly hard work. It can be exhausting to have the same conversations over and over again. It can be frustrating to bump up against the same barriers. Standing up for what we know is right for ourselves can make our voices shake. But, where would we be without it? 🌳

Cris



SELF-ADVOCACY



Other Voices in the 607 is a self-advocacy group for adults with developmental disabilities. Since May of 2020, they have met nearly every week. Currently, these meetings take place 6pm on Thursdays via Zoom.

The group meets virtually, they share their stories, discuss issues and challenges to try and find solutions, as well as share their experiences of their respective living situations.

Recently, they have written a letter to the Mayor and to common council championing better snow removal for the city of Ithaca, and connected with Ithaca Coalition for Snow-free Sidewalks and Crosswalks, another advocacy group in Ithaca seeking that same goal. Other Voices in the 607 members are learning more about the efforts of this other group to strengthen the power of their collective voices.

They use this larger voice not simply to enact changes, but also to celebrate. This year, their Halloween party had a special guest performance by entertainer Tom Knight, who played guitar and led sing-along songs, as well as performing some puppetry.

Other Voices in the 607 have officers elected from within their ranks, which allows for leadership opportunities. One member, Mike A., expressed that by participating he has learned to speak up, advocating for himself more broadly, "I've grown as a person". 🌱

To join or learn more about Other Voices in the 607, please visit: www.racker.org/othervoices or scan this QR code.



2022 NEW YORK CP STATE CONFERENCE



Left to right -

Nick Dalrymple, Joshua Gillespie, Rob Monroe, and Brian Perkins

Racker Staff and Disability Advocates recognized at the 2022 Annual CP State Conference held October in Albany.

Several Racker award winners were recently honored at the statewide Cerebral Palsy Associations of NYS conference held in Albany this Fall. We're proud to share that Nick Dalrymple - Family Support Coordinator, Joshua Gillespie - Senior Team Director, Rob Monroe - Community Support Professional, and Brian Perkins - Facilities Field Supervisor have been recognized across the state and in front of many like-minded organizations supporting people with disabilities.

Congratulations to these staff! Their dedication to building a world where all people know they belong does not go unrecognized in our state!

The essence of Racker staff is more than just a job they clock in and out of. Many staff come to the organization as lifetime disability advocates; and many staff strengthen, build on, and fine-tune their advocacy skills during their tenure at Racker and for the rest of their lives. Advocacy is more than a commitment or a checklist to check off – advocacy is an attitude.

The attitude that a world where all people know they belong is a natural human right – and the fight for that right doesn't stop at the end of the shift. Nick, Joshua, Rob, and Brian radiate this attitude.

They cultivate a culture in Racker that permeates our communities and throughout New York. They can't stop and won't stop and that's a good attitude to have as a disability advocate. 🌱

EXPANDING ACCESS **KYLE WILLIAMS**



Kyle Williams is on a mission. A mission that developed through thirst for knowledge and accessibility. He wants to ensure that people with visual impairments have the same access to public libraries as everyone else. In recent years, he has found the computers in the local libraries difficult to use. Or to quote Kyle directly, “a pain in the butt.”

Kyle is visually impaired and enjoys visiting the libraries in Vestal and Apalachin. He loves to spend hours researching and navigating the library system. The problem is the software is clunky and difficult to use, so Kyle decided to research a solution to that problem. What he found was NVDA, Non-Visual Desktop Access, an open-source software that is free to download and can be used on multiple computers.

As Kyle became more familiar with the software, he came to the conclusion that all libraries needed to have this accessible solution. It increased his ability to access information and allowed him more choices with multiple add-ons

and different voice options. For Kyle, this was a game changer and he was not stopping with one library. He said, “OH. MY. GOD. I’m taking this worldwide baby.”

His first step was to reach out the Executive Director of the Four County Library System in Binghamton, Steven Bachman. Through multiple emails, Kyle made his case to download NVDA to all the libraries in the four-county system. His passion for accessibility was evident to Steven, and he expressed his appreciation for Kyle’s work.

“Kyle is an incredible advocate. He was able to present to us, in very relatable terms, the challenges he faces along with improvements that could be made to increase and expand access. His perspective and experience will help us ensure greater access to library resources for all” said Bachman.

Mr. Bachman listened, and a few months later Steven found NVDA downloaded on the computers in all the libraries he visited - but



he didn't stop there. Through Racker, Kyle receives services through the Community Support Program and is joined by his CSP Shelly Hyde when he visits the library. Shelly's daughter serves on a committee in Chicago whose mission is to make the city more accessible for people with disabilities. She brought NVDA to the attention of the committee chairman who sent the idea back to his home town in Canada- "Worldwide baby!"

Kyle's drive comes from a strong desire to advocate for himself and help others in the library communities. Like all strong people with a mission, Kyle will continue to find solutions when obstacles are in his way. Congratulations to Kyle for creating another part of the community where all people know they belong. 🌱

"You do not know what a child is able to do or not able to do.

All you know is what that child does, or does not do, in that moment."



Visit our website to learn about Alison Bryan's story, and how she advocates for the children in our community:
racker.org/alison-bryan-speech

Do you have a Racker story to tell?



We are seeking stories from our Racker Community as we prepare for our **75th Anniversary** in 2023.

Please follow this link to share your story with us.

racker.org/your-racker-story

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS: COMMUNITY & SUPPORT

Racker often reaches out to our friends in the community to help in our advocacy efforts. To stay current, we maintain an advocacy page on our website to help our constituency keep up with new efforts and proposals at the state and federal levels. We send out emails to our community asking for help. One example of the success of these efforts was when we received a 2% rate increase to our direct support professionals as part of Be Fair to Direct Care initiative in 2018 and the recent 5.4% COLA for OPWDD programs. This success was built on the collective voice of the disability community. Every agency, thousands of families and staff members helped spread a single message of need from across New York state. This is the heart and soul of our advocacy work, and we are constantly seeking your voice and passion.

Racker is a 501c3 nonprofit organization that currently maintains a \$40 million budget to provide services to people and families in our community. Most of our revenue comes from state contracts and rates set by five different New York State entities: the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities, Office of Mental Health, the State Education Department, the Department of Health, and the Office for Children and Family Services. These rates are how we set our annual budget, pay our staff and determine which programs are sustainable.



With that in mind, part of our responsibility is to advocate for our staff, programs, services, and people with disabilities in our community. This is our mission advocacy work.

Racker works with other human service organizations, including the New York Disability Advocates, New York Alliance, and CP State, to create a large, collective voice to help tell the story and advocate for appropriate rates to ensure we can properly staff our programs and classrooms in a way that further supports individual goals and community inclusion. To do this, we need to pay a market-based wage that is competitive with schools and state-run residential programs. The disparity in reimbursement is vast and it affects the number of staff we can hire, and ultimately, the quality of care that we are able to provide to the people and families in our programs. Simply put, if we can pay our staff the same rate as the state is paying their own employees, who perform the same job, then we can reduce our vacancy rate and provide a higher quality of care. We rely on our Racker community to help spread this message and lend their voice. There is strength in numbers. You will see priorities listed for next year's state budget. And you will receive emails from our agency asking you to lend your voice. Our requests



usually involve a quick link and very general information (name, email) to send a personal message to your local legislator asking for help. Racker's website will include information and links to help you research why we are asking for your help, and we strongly encourage you to make an informed decision to advocate.

Racker meets regularly with our local legislators to inform them about the issues that are important to people with disabilities and their families, the important work we do as an organization to help, and the critical work that our staff do on a daily basis. We also ensure they understand the struggles we face as an organization. They always listen and provide us with suggestions on how we can most effectively spread our message. Their message is the same, use the voice and stories of your constituency to help affect change. That is why we ask for your help today, and many days ahead. Here are some of the top priorities for Racker and people with disabilities in the 2023-2024 New York Budget season:

Direct Support Wage Enhancement

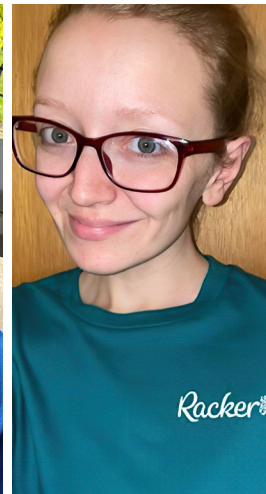
Racker and its partners in CP State and New York Disability Advocates urge lawmakers to include the establishment of a new Direct Support Wage Enhancement. Under the DSWE, provider agencies will receive \$4,000 per eligible employee to be used for the purpose of enhancing the hourly rate of pay for all staff that have direct care/support responsibilities for individuals with I/DD. This wage enhancement will enable provider agencies to raise DSP wages by approximately \$2.19 per hour.

8.5% Cost-of-Living Adjustment

We urge the support of an 8.5% cost-of-living adjustment as part of the 2024 State Budget. Due to significant inflation and supply chain disruptions, agencies' operating costs have increased significantly over the last year. These cost increases have resulted in significant financial pressure on agencies, necessitating an 8.5% COLA to be included in the 2023-24 NYS Budget to ensure the long-term sustainability of non-profit disability service providers. 🌿

STRENGTHEN THE DIRECT SUPPORT WORKFORCE

Years of underfunding coupled with rising operational costs have exacerbated a decades-long workforce crisis affecting the quality of care for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.



Due to the lack of Direct Support Professionals:

- 38% of providers are discontinuing or reducing programs and services
- Turnover costs non-profit providers more than \$100 million annually
- An 18% vacancy rate means New Yorkers with disabilities are losing critical supports!

NEW YORKERS WITH DISABILITIES DESERVE BETTER!

To assist Racker and people with disabilities across the state to have the services they need, please contact:

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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.

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