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FROM THE DESK OF



CRIS DONOVAN

Executive Director
Racker

Home. When you think of home, what does it conjure? Family? Friends? Rest and relaxation? Safety and security? Maybe it brings up thoughts about shared meals, or movie nights? Space to pursue your hobbies and dreams? Cuddling with your pets? Do you think about caring for others? Or being cared for at home? Home can mean so many things to each of us. At Racker, our Residential Program is designed to fulfill all those visions of home, and then some.

I'm often frustrated at the pace of change in the disability service sector. As in most fights for civil rights, the changes that would truly make a difference can be molasses slow to come to fruition. We know what amazing and innovative service options could look like, but we get stuck in a maze of regulations and restrictions, not to mention a significant and long-term staffing crisis that shows no signs of relenting anytime soon.

Thankfully, over the past few decades, there has been a move away from institutions and toward community living, with the help of the ADA and the Olmstead decision. Residential support for people with disabilities is part of the fabric of any community these days. Chances are, you have a group home for people with developmental disabilities in your neighborhood. Maybe with a few more cars than you might typically expect, but with no less of the feeling of home, a right to be there, and an opportunity to truly belong.

The services provided in the houses are wide ranging from the most intimate personal care, to complex medical care, to teaching new skills, and helping find the things that bring joy and meaning to life. It takes a lot of work to create a home for every single person in the program and that happens every day thanks to the work of Direct Support Professionals (DSPs). This issue of the Outlook highlights the incredibly important work of DSPs with a look back at DSP Recognition Week, which was held in early September.

We are also excited to share some other stories and updates from our Residential Program and its new director, Marianne Odell. Racker's Residential program serves 136 people a year, in 25 houses across 4 counties, through the hard work of over 300 DSPs, leaders, nurses, and behavior specialists who work together to help people find opportunities for success and happiness. One of those opportunities has come through an initiative to help people living in the houses have full and meaningful days.

The programs and services offered at Racker are life changing and our Residential program is no exception. There's no place like home.





This year, DSP Recognition Week took place September 10th through September 16th. It's a time when we come together to express our gratitude and appreciation for the work of Direct Support Professionals and Community Support Professionals. Each year Racker celebrates DSP Recognition Week by highlighting some of the important work being done as well as providing small gifts of gratitude for staff.

The work of DSPs and CSPs, at Racker and around the country, is critical to supporting people with disabilities in their communities. These professionals provide care and support to people in our programs, enabling them to lead more fulfilling lives and participate fully in their communities. DSPs and CSPs are involved in the delivery of a wide variety of valuable work.

A key component of this work is to help support people with disabilities fully access their communities and to teach skills to help them reach their personal goals. DSPs must also tend to specific health and safety needs of each person, demonstrating proficiency in many highly skilled tasks. This often includes certification and training in administering medications, preparing specialized diets, following complex behavioral support plans, and using adaptive equipment. DSPs also assist individuals with any tasks essential to the upkeep of their homes. This includes assisting with shopping, cleaning, snow shoveling, providing recreational opportunities and many other tasks.

Direct Support is a skilled profession that is essential to the work of Racker. During DSP Recognition Week, we shone a spotlight on these professionals and acknowledge the essential role they play in our communities.

All of us at Racker would like to take a moment to express our heartfelt thanks to the DSPs and CSPs who make our communities more inclusive and welcoming. 🌳

2023 Award Winners:

Franziska Racker Award

Kellie Hummel

Physical Therapist

The Franziska Racker Award is given to a staff member who in word and deed exemplifies the high standard of caring and dedication to the agency's mission that is our legacy from Dr. Racker.

Mary Hutchens Award

Kim Belden

Senior Regional Residential Director

The Mary Hutchens Award is given to a staff member who embodies employee engagement by helping team members be fulfilled in their work. This award was created in honor of Mary Hutchens, whose approachability, integrity, empathy, and optimism brought out the best in her team during her years at Racker.

Tioga Inspiration Award

Tawana Smith

Shift Coordinator

Cortland Inspiration Award

Devin Martinez-Hernandez

Special Education Teacher

Tompkins Inspiration Award

Dr. Judy Isaac

Psychologist

The Inspiration Award is given to a staff member whose approach to work encourages and inspires enthusiasm in others to support the mission and vision of Racker.

Special Friend Award

David Barr

The Special Friend Award is given to a community member in our service areas in recognition of their support, service, and devotion to Racker and its ideals.

Community Partner Award

Lime Hollow Nature Center

The Community Partner Award (Formerly the Brick Miscall Award) is given to a community member or organization that works to improve the lives of people with disabilities and exemplifies our mission and vision.



A BROTHERHOOD AT RIVERS EDGE

The group of young men living at Rivers Edge, one of the houses in Racker's Residential Program, have seen tremendous personal growth over the last few years. As is the case for many, their growth is the result of relationships. The relationships between the young men, their support staff, and their families have made all the difference. It is a testament to communication and teamwork, and the change is remarkable.

Peter, Niccolo, Nate and Ryan haven't always been as close as they are today. When they first moved in together, and throughout the pandemic, there were some difficult moments. Even on the good days, they had fewer interactions with each other. This is when the staff and families came together to make a change.

Rivers Edge benefits from a consistent team of staff who work together and effectively solve problems. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, they stayed in constant communication with the families and identified some common interests. The guys at the house started collaborating with each other more often and self-advocated for some changes in the house. They created an activity room to do work outs, play board games, create crafts and just have a good time with each other. They listened to each other's opinions and realized they shared some interests. As COVID restrictions began to lift, these housemates began to plan some adventures together and supported each other's individual activities.



These changes were noticed by their families. Nate's mother sent a note of thanks when she noticed familiar faces at her son's tournament: "I want to thank you for coming to Nate's tournament today. In past years he's been participating, and no one would come to see him play." Belonging always makes a difference.

As a group, they planned an overnight trip to Lake George where they all agreed on the agenda and coordinated the planning together. They enjoyed the sights of the town and took a dinner cruise on the lake. Everything on the trip was discussed as a group, where everyone had a voice. Each person advocated for their interests and they developed a plan as a team. Team Director, April Hopkins describes them: "They're a lot like fraternity brothers. They look out for each other." The new friendship was evident to everyone's family. Peter, Niccolo, Nate, and Ryan developed a brotherhood that is a result of everyone working together, communicating positively, and supporting each other.

The team at Rivers Edge has made a remarkable difference by promoting individual achievement, fostering friendships, and providing a nurturing environment for each one of the residents. Friendship, communication, opportunities for learning and for giving all played a role in helping the Rivers Edge housemates thrive. 🌳





MEANINGFUL DAYS

In March 2020, day programs that serve people with disabilities closed and everyone stayed home. There were a variety of different resources available to help ensure that people living in Residential programs had full days while at home. Virtual day programs and in-house activities kept people busy. Since that time, some day programs have opened fully, and some are still being rebuilt which has left many people without full time day programming. Racker supports people to have opportunities to lead fulfilling lives. When viewed through the lens of the Circle of Courage, people need opportunities to experience mastery, to be generous, to be independent, and to belong. For many, these opportunities are still lacking because of the pandemic recovery and the on-going staffing crisis in the disability service sector.

Without the pre-pandemic support available, Racker's Residential Program is working to fill the gaps for the people living in the program who no longer have full time opportunities outside of their home. Nick Dalrymple, Residential Support Coordinator, is leading residential staff in crafting meaningful day support. for a group of people, driven by a person-centered and community-based mindset. Whether it's honing independent living skills, fostering social opportunities, or broadening their knowledge, the team provides the necessary support and resources to help individuals thrive.

Dalrymple enjoys watching the growth of this group: "We want each person to end the day saying, 'I wrote my own narrative today'. It provides room for creativity and ownership of their experience."

Nick and the team made meaningful connections with a network of community organizations and businesses. To create and preserve unique social opportunities, they've forged partnerships with local establishments such as Court Lanes, Heroes and Villains comic store, and Area 51

THANK YOU TO OUR PARTY IN THE PARK VOLUNTEERS!

Sue Budney
Marianne Odell
Kristi Lieber
Daryle Jennings
Jeremy VanMarter
Lindsay Crampton
Meghan Lopez
Gayle Pado
Jessica Lindsay
Maria Skezas
Maryah Wright
Shelley Massery
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Yvonne Lomax
Robert Monroe
Jake Blaine
Cecilia Campbell
Jason DeHaas
Chris Scaglione
Kelly Snedeker
Amber Stilwell
Doug Cole
Jess Gardner

Gaming Store for unique social opportunities. They take full advantage of the accessible facilities in the community, such as The Finger Lakes Library System, which is a great resource for people to learn and explore.

As the disability service sector continues to recover and choices for meaningful day services return, Racker is working to minimize the gaps for the people living in our Residential program using the same values and ideals to provide opportunities for learning, growth, connection, and fun! 🌳





MARIANNE ODELL
LEADING THE WAY IN
RESIDENTIAL SERVICES

As we continue to look forward to the future of Racker and the valuable services we provide, let's take a closer look at one such program with a familiar face at the helm. Marianne Odell, a dedicated member of our Racker family for over 23 years, has taken on a new and exciting role as our Director of Residential Services! We are thrilled to announce this important milestone and want to share some insights from Marianne herself about her journey and vision for the Residential Program.

A Closer Look at Racker's Residential Program

The Racker Residential Program is an integral part of our mission to create a world where all people know they belong. This program supports 136 individuals living in homes integrated across the Cortland, Tompkins, Broome and Tioga counties. Our residential homes are not just brick-and-mortar; they are vibrant ecosystems where over 300 dedicated Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) work hard to provide 24/7, 365-day care. The core of this program lies in promoting independence, skill development, individualized support, and fostering inclusive communities.

Marianne's Transition: Challenges and Positives

Marianne's journey from Community Support Services to Residential has been marked by personal growth and valuable lessons. She notes the importance of viewing services through the lens of family. During her work as Assistant Director of Community Support Services, Marianne often found herself in shared spaces like family homes of supported individuals, "I had the opportunity to hear how families feel regarding services. Some families, rightfully so, approach services with apprehension, vulnerability, and trepidation. I learned how important it is to build relationships with families.

If they are entrusting their loved ones to our care, we have the responsibility to get to know them and learn all we can." Marianne highlights that family input is invaluable when providing services, reinforcing the belief that family plays a crucial role in our mission.

As the Director of Residential Services, Marianne's main goal is to create meaningful day programs for the individuals in our Residential Program. She recognizes the responsibility of supporting people in truly being an active part of their communities and aims to implement innovative, person-centered approaches to achieve this balance. Looking ahead, one of Marianne's long-term aspirations is to address the staffing challenges faced by the human service sector. The turnover rate for Direct Support Professionals nationally is a staggering 43%, and Marianne believes that embrace new technologies can provide creative solutions to mitigate staffing shortages and enhance the quality of care we provide in Racker's Residential Program, and throughout the rest of the agency.

The Heart of Fulfillment: Racker's Dedicated Staff

When asked about what she finds most fulfilling about the services the Residential program offers, Marianne's answer is clear: it's the amazing staff who make it all possible. "They work hard to ensure those who receive supports from Racker's Residential Program lead full and independent lives. The work can be challenging and exhausting, but Racker Direct Support Professionals handle their role with grace and professionalism." Direct Support Professionals are the backbone of the Residential Program. They work tirelessly to ensure that the individuals being supported are happy, safe, and well taken care of. The work of DSPs inspires Marianne daily. Marianne highlights that her belief in Racker's vision of belonging is a skill paramount for DSPs. The belief that everyone has a right to be part of their community, and to be driven to make that happen is vital for success in the field. It's not just a job; it's a commitment to making our vision a reality.

A Place of Belonging

But what has kept Marianne at Racker for 23 years? She says she's found a place where she truly belongs. It's this sense of belonging, both for Marianne and for the individuals we serve, that makes Racker's Residential Program so special. Racker aims to go beyond our programming to provide care and community for those we serve, and it is indeed inspiring to witness the incredible impact of the Residential Program on the lives of those we serve. We extend our heartfelt congratulations to Marianne Odell on her new role as Director of Residential Services and look forward to the positive impact she will continue to have on our organization and the communities we serve. Together, we will keep striving towards a world where all people know they belong. 🌿



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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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