

Commitment to Quality Services



**Professional
Development**
pg. 3

**Ithaca College Swim
Program is Back!**
pg. 4

**Come & Play
Cafe**
pg. 5

**EMDR at Counseling
for School Success**
pg. 6

From The Desk Of



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“Quality is not an act, it is a habit.” - Aristotle

There are so many factors that go into quality. At Racker, when we talk about our commitment to quality, we’re thinking about meeting (and exceeding) the expectations of the people we support, families, staff, and partners. We are thinking about how to grow and expand our capacity to meet community needs. We focus on ways that we can help our staff learn and grow in their skills. And how we can learn from our mistakes.

This issue of the Outlook is all about our commitment to quality and examples of programs and initiatives that help us continue to meet and exceed expectations. You’ll read about innovative programming to help the youngest babies and families connect and learn. **The Come and Play Cafe** is an excellent example of how a little money, extremely talented and creative staff, and a generous community can come together and make a huge difference. There is an article about the much beloved **Swim Program** that Ithaca College worked tirelessly with Racker to restart after a 5-year pause. Our new **CQL Accreditation** will also be a driving force for us to continuously improve what we do every day.

“Do the best you can until you know better. Then when you know better, do better.”
- Maya Angelou

We also have articles about Racker staff learning and growing in their skills. Our Children’s Mental Health program is more effective today thanks to the investment in **Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)** training for therapists. Our **Professional Development Team** works every day and partners with programs to bring new and innovative training to Racker staff. In the first quarter, these efforts included a 3-day Foundations of Leadership course and a jam-packed Early Childhood Conference Day.

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” - Margaret Mead

Lastly, we highlight two women, one who has already made an enormous difference at Racker and one who will make a huge difference! We are so lucky to have people like Nancy Corwin Malina and Jessie Janssen at Racker.

One of the wonderful things about working at Racker is our organizational value of growing, learning, and improving – every day, every week, every quarter, and every year. The opportunities to do great things, improve the quality of our work, and learn are endless!





PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

“But wait there’s more!”

These famous words may have echoed through late night infomercials for decades, but they still hold up every day when it comes to the sentiment and impact of the Racker community.

Racker professionals don’t just set it and forget it. They’re always taking it one step further, finding new and improved ways to support their colleagues and creating positive differences in the lives of people with disabilities.

Since the organization’s humble beginnings over 75 years ago, the staff who define our organization bring their own ambitions and motivations to building a world full of opportunity and connection. It’s the strong belief that they can make a difference that guides Racker staff in their work. This translates into the quality services that impact every aspect of the work that Racker staff are doing each day.

Maryah Wright and Rebecca Potter are part of Racker’s dedicated staff development team, ensuring training leads to meaningful action. While compliance is a standard component, it’s the attention to quality that goes beyond mandates and resonates into real, active growth for staff.

Two recent staff development opportunities included Foundations of Leadership and an Early Childhood Services Professional Development Day. Our Foundations of Leadership conference brings together supervisors from across Racker’s programs to explore innovative leadership approaches, effective staff development strategies, and ways to foster cross-program collaboration.

This three-day course, designed by program leaders and influenced by leadership models from around the world, provides participants with practical tools to strengthen their leadership skills. Through engaging discussions, interactive workshops, and real-world case studies, attendees gain insights into fostering a positive workplace culture, supporting professional growth, and enhancing team dynamics.

Racker’s Early Childhood Teams participated in a robust professional development day that positively impacts their work throughout the year. This Spring, the entire Early Childhood team had an opportunity to connect with their peers from different counties and participate in several workshops hosted by both internal and external leadership. These workshops covered strategies and concepts crucial in supporting students, as well as developing stronger teams.

Some of these workshops featured leaders from the Family Enrichment Network – addressing challenging behaviors for infant and toddler teachers; Brightside – building quality teams and Process Art (working with children on the doing of art, rather than the outcome); and Leckey – learning about new and beneficial adaptive equipment for children. ECS Staff left the professional development day well-equipped with sharpened tools, new strategies, and reinvigorated approaches to early childhood development that will resonate throughout their careers.

Professional Development is an investment in the future of Racker – staff, the people we support, and the culture we build.



ITHACA COLLEGE SWIM PROGRAM RETURNS!

The Ithaca College Swim Program is back! Two classrooms from the Margaret Gibson Preschool are benefiting from this opportunity to interact with Ithaca College students and experience the joys of swimming in a safe and supportive environment. By fostering confidence, inclusion, and meaningful connections, this program exemplifies the high standards of care and enrichment that define Racker's services.

The Swim Program is a collaboration between Ithaca College and Racker that has provided new opportunities for IC students and essential skills for Racker children for over 45 years. Lecturer Joanie Groome emphasizes its value, "For my students, they can get some hands-on experience working with kids with disabilities, build communication, and learn from the teachers. The fun and the joy is really important to me."

While fun for all students, the program has significant educational and safety benefits for Racker children. Joanie, also an Adaptive Aquatics instructor at the Tompkins County YMCA, notes: "Kids with developmental disabilities have a 12 times higher rate of a drowning injury and drowning death." By teaching water safety and basic swimming skills, Racker students gain essential life experience that can prevent accidents. Racker Preschool Teacher Kristin Ink says, "We're teaching them safe ways to be in the water, and at least some of them will understand that it's safer for them if they're with an adult [in the water], but not by themselves."

For children with and without disabilities, water-based activities improve motor skills, coordination, and sensory integration. The program supports social interaction, emotional well-being, independence, and self-assurance in and around water as well. Kristin Ink remarks that for some families, this program was their child's very first experience ever in a pool. "They still think about that years later."

The benefits extend beyond what happens in the pool. Kristin shares that by going to Ithaca College the children are learning to navigate a new environment and follow a new routine. They're practicing interacting with unfamiliar people, which can be especially challenging for children on the autism spectrum, who often struggle even more with changes in social environments. "This is a program I will stand by over and over and over again."

Racker is grateful to be able to enhance the preschool program through the partnership with Ithaca College and the Swim Program. Not only does the program provide preschool students with experiences and opportunities they wouldn't typically have, but it also builds a future generation of people with knowledge of how to support people with disabilities.



LEARN MORE ABOUT THE HISTORY OF THE SWIM PROGRAM, SCAN OR VISIT:
www.racker.org/swimprogram





COME & PLAY CAFE

Early Intervention (EI) Services make a lifetime of change for a child – and they are historically the most underfunded by New York State. This makes it incredibly difficult to support the growing number of children in need of evaluations and services. Intervention, at the first notice of need, is one of the best ways to establish successes, growth and opportunity in a child’s life. With the underfunded state of EI services, a waiting list for evaluations and service has existed in recent years.

Racker’s Clinic Director Sue Raymond and Early Intervention Team Leader Kellie Hummel have worried about the impacts of the long waiting list for therapy services on families and children. An underfunded program of this scale and need means that creative ways of going above and beyond for those on the waiting list are always a point of discussion. Both Sue and Kellie reflect on the COVID-19 pandemic increasing an already bloated waiting list – many who are still facing the results of delayed services. There are currently long waiting lists in the counties that Racker supports.

Thanks to a grant from the Community Foundation of Tompkins County, Racker’s Clinical Services team was able to start the Come & Play Cafe. This is an open house traveling play space for children currently on the waiting list for Early Intervention Services and those children already receiving EI services in Tompkins County. Since starting up, the Come & Play Cafe has traveled to numerous locations throughout the county – offering easier

access and opportunities to the children and families who are waiting. To date, the cafe has engaged around 45 kids and families.

Sue shares that families attending these Cafes have been surprised at how successful they are for their children. Caregivers find that not only are the spaces safe and fun, but they are also developmentally appropriate for their children. Kellie shares that “it has been great to see families connect with each other and the Early Intervention Therapists who staff the cafes.” One family shared “my child typically plays alone and today they played and interacted with other children!”

Due to the generosity of community partners, Racker has been able to host more Cafes than originally envisioned, with additional cafes planned. Families are exploring welcoming community partners and spaces that can become new spots to visit. Families have an opportunity to connect with other families going through the same journey. They’re finding helpful, enjoyable, and connecting experiences for their children – not to mention a toolkit of new resources.

The Come & Play Cafes have attracted interest and a visit from therapists beyond Racker’s service area who are facing some of the same struggles related to waiting lists and underfunding. Racker staff plan to present this model to the NYS Physical Therapy Association later this year. We are hopeful that continuing to share about the Cafes successes will inspire others to think creatively about how we support children and families who are eligible for and are waiting for Early Intervention services.



EMDR at Counseling for School Success

In Spring 2023, therapy teams at the Counseling for School Success (CSS) program at TST BOCES were encountering a problem: client trauma histories so extensive and complex that many therapeutic modalities were either insufficient, ineffective, or inaccessible, especially for K-12 clients, many of them neurodivergent. But there was one therapy which, based on more than three decades of clinical research with complex trauma and dissociation, seemed like it could rise to the challenge—Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing, or EMDR.

The therapist had long been interested in EMDR, but the extent of his client's trauma pushed him to complete an industry-standard training in the therapy. Around half of the students on his caseload began to explore EMDR treatment, and the results were thrilling; clients eliminated eating disorders, PTSD, dissociation, impulses to violent aggression, and extreme anxiety, among other chronic mental health issues that had affected them for years.

Believing EMDR should be available to any client open to healing from trauma, a team of Racker staff applied for grants from Guthrie and The Community Foundation to offer an industry standard EMDR training to all program therapists. Last spring (2024), twelve counselors

completed the training over three months, and began offering EMDR as an option to their clients, both at TST and OCM BOCES.

Therapists soon found that, though they had a powerful tool to treat complex trauma, clients were skittish or refused to try the therapy. To keep themselves ready—and continue to practice when clients hesitated—the newly-trained therapists at TST BOCES began meeting for biweekly EMDR consultation and practice amongst themselves, which soon turned to weekly sessions. Slowly, a few more clients began to engage with EMDR across more therapists' caseloads, some making contact with buried, dissociated emotion for the first time, and reprocessing it to resolution, and others developing resources to build themselves up.

In the fall, Racker will be hosting an advanced training by two of the world's leading EMDR therapists in adapting EMDR for K-12 ages. This marks an exciting next step in the progression of EMDR expansion into the Counseling for School Success program, which serves kids exclusively, and will be offered to other community therapists as well. CSS therapists will continue to support each other in developing EMDR skills in weekly meetings and, in EMDR parlance, "go with that."



Racker Welcomes Jessica Janssen as Director of Quality Standards

Racker is proud to welcome Jessica Janssen as our new Director of Quality Standards! With a strong background in nonprofit leadership, Jessica brings years of experience in program oversight, compliance, and service excellence.

Previously, Jessica served as the CEO of Cayuga Addiction Recovery Services (CARS), where she managed three programs, oversaw a \$6 million budget, and led a team of 75 employees. Under her leadership, the organization achieved top-level certifications, expanded treatment services, and secured over \$2.5 million in grants to support its mission. Jessica established an affiliation between CARS and Cayuga Health System where she served as Transformation Specialist prior to joining Racker's Quality Standards team. Before that, she worked at Elmcrest Children's Center as Chief Program Officer, where she oversaw behavioral health and educational programs, led 260 employees, and



managed an annual budget of \$12 million. She also played a key role in transitioning services to a Medicaid Managed Care model, improving care and financial sustainability.

Jessica also held leadership roles at Unity House of Cayuga County, where she expanded residential programs and improved staff training.

Jessica shares, "I am excited to join to Racker because I believe in the vision of a world where all people know they belong, and I am eager to contribute in meaningful ways that enhance the quality of services we provide. As the Director of Quality Standards, I am committed to fostering a culture of transparency and collaborative, continuous improvement to ensure we continue to be a leader in serving individuals with disabilities and their families." Please join us in welcoming Jessica Janssen to the Racker team!



CQL Accreditation



Racker is excited to announce a recent Quality Assurances Accreditation by the Council on Quality and Leadership (CQL). Since 1969, CQL has been a leader in working with human services organizations to improve the quality of life and quality of services to people with disabilities. The Council on Quality and Leadership staff will be working with Racker teams over the next three years to further integrate person centered practices and approaches into our work, implement internationally recognized tools for outcome measurement, and strengthen our systems and measures for quality improvement. Together, we will further enhance our skills and improve the services we provide.

This accreditation aligns with a longstanding value and strength of Racker: our ongoing commitment to learning and improvement. Racker has had a relationship with CQL through training and consultation for many years. CQL standards, which go beyond regulatory requirements, require a focus on the impact of a service on the quality of life and human rights of the person receiving it. As an organization dedicated to helping people live fulfilling lives, seeking accreditation from CQL was a natural fit.

For more than a year, dozens of Racker staff from across the organization embarked on a journey of honest self-assessment as we prepared for the accreditation which culminated in a visit from CQL in January of 2025. As part of the process, CQL visited many sites to observe service provision, and conducted focus groups with staff, people served, and families. Together, Racker and CQL developed a plan to improve service quality over the three-year accreditation period with a focus on broadening our assessments, training, and processes to ensure people can exercise their rights, continue to build our skills to ensure people have meaningful work and activity choices, and to broaden and formalize our family engagement and communication.

As part of our plan, CQL will work with Racker through ongoing support, guidance and aggregate best practices from accredited organizations across the globe to further support and improve the quality of services we provide.



Nancy Corwin Malina Retires

With gratitude, we say goodbye to long time board member and Racker advocate Nancy Corwin Malina. Nancy is retiring from the Racker Board of Directors after years of dedication and support. Nancy has supported Racker for numerous years in many different capacities, helping Racker build and maintain our quality services. Through her work with the board of directors, her countless volunteer hours, and many major gifts, Nancy has shown a commitment to the mission and vision of Racker – an impact that will last for years to come. Always ready to represent Racker—whether traveling to and advocating in Albany or attending events—Nancy has been a steadfast supporter and embodies Racker’s mission of belonging. We thank Nancy for her time and generosity and wish her luck in her new endeavors.



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