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FROM THE DESK OF



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Associate Executive Director
Racker

Our Vision

We envision a world where all people know they belong.

Our Mission

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

Racker's history is deeply rooted in family. Founded in 1948 as the Cerebral Palsy Association of the Ithaca Area, the organization began with families who joined a movement to advocate for their loved ones with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Seventy-seven years later, families remain at the heart of Racker and continue to shape the work we do each day.

In this issue of the Outlook, you'll read about our ongoing commitment to families in meaningful and lasting ways, across all our program areas. Family Support Services and Family Reimbursement programs help caregivers by providing support that enhances quality of life and well-being for the whole family. The Family Resolutions Project offers structured, strength-based support for families. Our Residential Program has implemented new initiatives to bring families and staff together through education and open dialogue. In Early Childhood Services, family groups, workshops, and events are building stronger school-to-home connections, fostering collaboration, and creating opportunities for shared learning.

We are also excited to share that Dr. Lloyd A. Darlow joined Racker as our new Medical Director. You will read in this issue about his dedication to supporting individuals and his strong commitment to families as partners in care. Dr. Darlow's roots in family practice make him a perfect fit and we are thrilled to have him join us.

In keeping with our mission, and across every stage of life, Racker works side by side with families to strengthen relationships and expand opportunities for learning and connection. Families are essential partners in all service areas, and our collective and collaborative work is what makes our programs effective and impactful.

Families were instrumental in developing the current service system for people with disabilities. Their lived experience, passion, and expertise is needed now more than ever. We developed a Family Advisory Council over the past year and are continuing to build the group to assist in the development of resources, advocacy campaigns, and training. The work of the Council will help us ensure Racker continues our steadfast commitment to families, our founders. If you would like to join this growing this effort, please join us and indicate your preference here:

Sign up for the Family Advisory Council



<https://forms.office.com/r/K8VkBsjYHv>



Family Resolutions Project

Racker's commitment to meeting the evolving needs of young people and families has led to a number of impactful collaborations. A notable example is the Family Resolutions Project, developed in partnership with the Department of Social Services (DSS). This initiative is facilitated by Jessica Brown, Licensed Master Social Worker (LMSW) and Possibilities Program Specialist, who works within the Counseling for School Success program at TST BOCES.

The Family Resolutions Project has been active for almost 20 years and helps facilitate difficult discussions for families in crisis who are working with DSS. Jessica, Racker's sole facilitator for the Family Resolutions Project shares, "The project encourages the best possible outcomes for children involved in child protective services by creating space for caseworkers and families (as well as other service providers and legal counsel) to increase communication and creatively solve problems that interfere with the needs of the children."



Jessica Brown, LMSW

Per requests from DSS, Racker's Family Resolutions Project facilitates a Service Plan Review to take a fresh new look at a specific case. Alternatively, a Family Support Conference (FSC) may be requested. Jessica shares, "A Family Support Conference is a meeting called to address difficult situations and come together

creatively with the family's wider support network (extended family, service providers, friends). FSCs are frequently requested by parents who have had experience with facilitated meetings in the past."

Jessica, who was formerly a mediator for the Community Dispute Resolutions Center, brings her understanding and experience to the meetings and states, "At its core, we hold space for listening differently and deeply, seeking to highlight strengths and efforts and to build trust and empower families."

The Family Resolutions Project mainly works in collaboration with DSS but also frequently works with Treatment Court, mental health and substance providers, family court attorneys, advocacy centers, foster parents, kinship caregivers, and of course parents! While the respective child/children don't usually attend these meetings, they are the central focus of every meeting.

As Racker's facilitator, Jessica works to create a space where everyone can understand the process and next steps. Jessica explains, "this increases hope and can motivate [those involved]" and that Racker "strives to make the meetings strength based" as these meetings can be painful and challenging for everyone. Jessica carefully prepares to help the meetings run smoothly, positively, and effectively. Pre-planning and pre-meeting conversations occur to eliminate any surprises and encourage everyone involved to be reflective and intentional in their communication. She finishes by saying "Through careful preparations I set the stage where hopefully everyone can just bring their best selves."



Racker at the 2025 Ithaca Festival Parade!

Racker staff & families participated in the Ithaca Festival Parade this summer, as well as the Cortland Dairy Parade and the Owego Strawberry Festival!

Creating Purpose with Family Reimbursement



Racker's Family Support Services and Family Reimbursement programs are grant-funded by the New York State Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD). These programs are open to all families who are caring for a loved one with a developmental disability with OPWDD eligibility - no matter the person's age, household size, or income level.

Lyndsey Paulin, Home Service Director, explains: "The primary goal of Family Support Services is to enhance the quality of life for both individuals with developmental disabilities and their caregivers by providing meaningful support, reducing stress, and helping families remain together in their homes."

One of the main supports offered through Family Support Services is Family Reimbursement Funds. Eligible families can apply each year for help to cover costs related to caregiving such as: respite care; camp; emergency needs; classes; sensory items; and more. Racker currently serves families in Broome, Cortland, Chenango, Delaware, Otsego, Tioga, and Tompkins Counties through this program. The Family Funds program is carefully managed by Marlene Tagliavento, Senior Family Support Services Coordinator.

Family Reimbursement Successes

Lyndsey and Marlene have seen many families benefit from these funds. One family in the Finger Lakes region received support for a variety of experiences. The team shares, "They were able to apply for and received funding from the Family Reimbursement Funds for activities such as adaptive CrossFit, Swim Lessons, and Hippotherapy. The family shared that their daughter has been enjoying Hippotherapy with Penny, the horse."

The benefits of hippotherapy are vast. Marlene notes, "Hippotherapy helps build core strength which benefits her physically and also increases her independence and ability to help with her activities of daily living (ADLs). Additionally, it provides an activity that she enjoys and benefits from emotionally, increases her ability to play with other children, and increases her overall happiness." Hippotherapy is also known to help reduce stress and anxiety, build confidence, and improve communication skills.

Respite Reimbursement is another important part of the program. Respite is a short-term relief service for primary caregivers - offering anywhere from a few hours of temporary relief to an overnight stay. Marlene shares: "A few families have been able to visit family they have not seen in years, go on weekend trips with friends, have date night and simply do things they enjoy. Respite allows families to practice self-care so they can continue to care for their loved one." One family stated, "Family Respite Reimbursement has made a huge impact on our family life. It was a step forward we needed."

These activities and supports aren't just fun - they are meaningful and therapeutic. Whether it's swimming lessons that build safety and strength, dance classes that spark joy, or sensory items that make everyday life more comfortable, Family Reimbursement Funds help families access what works best for their loved ones. Every success shows how these supports help individuals grow, connect, and thrive, while giving families the tools they need to care for their loved ones.



Family Meetings in Residential

Our Residential Services team holds regular meetings with the families of loved ones living in Racker supported homes. These are an opportunity for families to connect with the Residential leadership team and are beneficial for the entire circle of support – the person receiving supports, the families, and Racker staff.

Marianne Odell, Director of Residential Services, shared “these meetings provide a space for open communication, updates, and shared learning.” The family meetings are held quarterly on Zoom and are one of the ways the Residential program is strengthening partnerships with families. For the people living in the Racker supported homes, a strong collaboration between their families and staff leads to more personalized and consistent care. For families, these quarterly Zoom gatherings offer a chance to stay informed, ask questions, build relationships with Residential leadership, and establish connections with other families! Finally, for Racker staff, these meetings help them to better understand the family perspective. It’s an opportunity to build trust and stay aligned with families while supporting their loved ones.

For some families, traveling on a regular basis to attend these meetings may be difficult or impossible. Holding the family meetings virtually, via Zoom, every few

months makes it easier for more families to participate, regardless of their location or schedule. Marianne also shared that a monthly Residential newsletter is sent out to all families by stating, “The Residential newsletter is a monthly communication sent to all families connected to Racker’s Residential Program. Its purpose is to keep

families informed, connected, and engaged with what’s happening across the agency.” Marianne noted that each newsletter contains updates, successes and highlights from the homes, upcoming events, and other helpful information to keep families informed about policies and community resources.

Marianne and her team select discussion topics based on questions from families and emerging program initiatives. Recent sessions have covered areas such as money management, establishing special accounts, health care proxies, and understanding the responsibilities of various roles within the service system. These meetings are designed to educate and empower families, supporting them in being as involved and engaged as they wish to be in their loved

one’s life. They have fostered stronger connections between families and the residential program while also leading to practical outcomes, such as families assisting their loved ones in establishing health care proxies and special accounts. These steps provide added peace of mind for the future.

Family meetings and the Residential Newsletter offer transparency, teamwork, shared success and celebration. All

residential families (including siblings, parents, advocates and other friends and family members) are encouraged and welcome to attend. If you would like to find out more, or to receive the information shared at previous meetings, please contact Marianne Odell at Marianneo@racker.org.



Preschool Family Groups

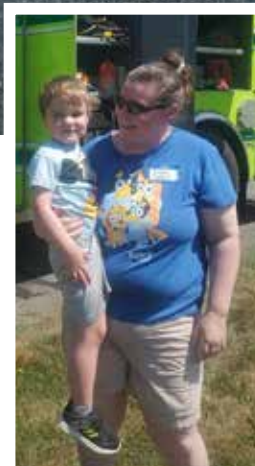


The transition into childcare and preschool can often be filled with emotions ranging from excitement and pride to nervousness and worry. At Racker, family partnerships are the foundation of child enrichment. Racker’s Early Childhood team offers many family groups as opportunities for parents, guardians, and families to take an active role in their child’s early educational journey.

Emily Eames, Family Support Coordinator in our Early Childhood Services Program, shares, “Family groups are beneficial for Racker staff as they create an opportunity to have face-to-face conversations that help maintain and foster the school-to-home relationship.” When staff and families build strong, trusting relationships, everyone benefits!

As good relationships foster open and honest communication, families feel more comfortable asking questions and sharing their experiences. This leads to new ideas, and better teaming and consistency with supporting the students, between home and school.

When school and home work together, students are more likely to feel supported and stay engaged in learning. These connections also give families a chance to meet others who may be going through similar experiences such as navigating ‘picky eating’ or other shared challenges.



Racker’s Early Childhood team is building and strengthening partnerships by holding regular family events each month. The Early Childhood CARE Team (Collaborative Approach for Resilient Early Learners and Families) plans events based on what families say matters most. We invite experts, including Racker staff and professionals from other organizations, to share helpful information. This year, we partnered with the Mid-State FACE Center and received great support from Racker’s Family Support Services team.

Here are some examples of programs and opportunities provided to families:

Family Workshops - Learning Together to Support Preschoolers

We offer free workshops for parents and guardians of preschool-aged children. These sessions cover helpful topics for families of all children – regardless of abilities. We started these workshops to support families in our Partnership classrooms, and now they’re open to all families in our preschool programs.

This year’s topics included:

- *Preventing challenging behavior at home*
- *Helping children communicate more*
- *Toilet training*
- *Making mealtimes easier*
- *Preparing for the move from preschool to kindergarten*

During the workshop on challenging behavior, families were able to create their own visual supports kit to use at home — a fun and practical “make and take” activity!

Playground Night and Open House

Playground Night is a welcoming event for children who are new to Racker and their families. Families can explore the playground, tour classrooms, and get to know the Racker site. It’s a great chance to meet the teachers, teaching assistants, daycare staff, and paraprofessionals who will be working in the classrooms. Families can also visit the Sensory Lending Library and connect with the caring community at Racker that is here to support the children.

Racker Welcomes Dr. Lloyd Darlow as New Medical Director



Lloyd A. Darlow, MD, FAFP

Lloyd A. Darlow, MD, FAFP is a Board-certified Family Physician, educator and medical practice leader with over 30 years' experience in Clinical Medicine, teaching and Health Administration. He is a graduate of the Medical College of Pennsylvania and completed his

Family Medicine training at Deaconess Medical Center in Saint Louis, MO. Dr. Darlow joined Family Medicine Associates of Ithaca in 2000 and has been actively involved in local Physician leadership as a Department Chair, President of the Tompkins County Medical Society, and Vice President of Clinical Integration at Cayuga Medical Center. A Fellow of the American Academy of Family Physicians, Dr. Darlow has had a career-long commitment to medical education, having held teaching positions at six Medical Schools, contributing to the medical literature and lecturing around the country

on a wide range of topics for the Academy, including educational and behavioral disabilities.

"I am incredibly excited to join the outstanding team at Racker," said Dr. Darlow. "I have worked with the organization for more than 20 years as a Primary Care colleague and could not be a stronger believer in its mission. I have known the population whom Racker serves both personally and professionally for the entirety of my career and understand the daily challenges they and their families face. Advocacy on behalf of my patients has been the main driver behind everything I've done for the last three decades, and I pledge to bring that same energy every day to my work at Racker."

Cris Donovan, Racker Executive Director, states "We are so excited to welcome Dr. Darlow to Racker. Health equity for people with disabilities is a prime focus for Racker and having Dr. Darlow's experience and expertise on our team will help us continue to move the needle for the people we serve and the community at large."

Please join us in welcoming Dr. Darlow to the Racker team and celebrating the experience and care he brings to our programs.



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Holiday Gift Drive and Classroom Parties

In 2024, the CARE Team organized a holiday gift drive to support families who needed extra help during the season. Thanks to this effort families received gifts, gift cards, and various supplies.

Classroom parties are held during the school day and give families a chance to join their child in the classroom, celebrate together, and build connections with staff and other families.

Spring Break and Family Events

During spring break, Racker partnered with the Tompkins County Public Library to host a fun event for all early childhood families.

Racker also hosts Family Fun Day, a joyful event where families come together to play, connect, and celebrate.



Graduations

Graduation is a special time to celebrate all our preschool students — especially those moving on to kindergarten! Families are encouraged to join us for this meaningful milestone.



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OUTLOOK

WWW.RACKER.ORG

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**SAVE
THE
DATE**

OCTOBER
23rd

Racker Celebration 2025

**Rooted
in Purpose**



For more information,
please visit: racker.org/events



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