

Powering Progress

Technology Improving Lives



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From The Desk Of



CRIS DONOVAN

Executive Director Racker

Technology. For many, this word could elicit frustration, longing for the days without it, or downright fear. Technology is everywhere – and the changes in what technology can do for us have been happening since the Stone Ages. People have constantly learned to adapt and change to the latest and greatest (or the tech with the best marketing). For us at Racker, the question is always, what does technology mean in human services? How does a disability service organization ensure we stay person-centered in a tech-driven world? How can we use the tools at our disposal without compromising the importance of human connection?

I'll be celebrating my 28th anniversary at Racker in the next few months, and it truly is amazing how different our work processes are today. I remember getting my first Racker email. I remember discussions and the decisions that went into how we would distribute them and the specific naming conventions. Thinking about work life before emails is akin to thinking about how we planned trips before the internet. How on earth did we do that?!? In the years since, we've implemented systems that make actual paper use in our service documentation nearly nonexistent. We (mostly) no longer get hand cramps signing forms and automatic workflows reduce manual errors.

This issue of the Outlook dives into just some of the ways we're making a difference through the use of different technologies. You'll read about how technology helps with communication, reduces unnecessary emergency department visits while also ensuring people get the care they need during the off hours, and workflows and systems that help our administrative teams complete needed tasks.

In every area of our organization, investments in technology – in both the actual technology and the amazing team that make it all work on a daily basis - have improved our work, our effectiveness, our accuracy, and helped us manage our time better. In short, technology has made us better and allowed us to be more human-centered.

Cris

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.

StationMD

ON-CALL CARE AT HOME

Technology is powering progress in the medical field and it has made a tremendous impact at Racker. StationMD provides several services that work in collaboration with Racker's nursing team and puts people in Racker residential homes in near-immediate contact with a skilled physician whenever it is needed.

Access to community-based primary care is essential to true health inclusion, helping people with disabilities receive equitable, comprehensive care. StationMD builds on this foundation—supporting individuals when their regular doctor isn't available, often preventing unnecessary trips to the ER or urgent care.

Katie Boardman, Racker Associate Executive Director, shares that, "StationMD is a centralized, on-call physician service that gives individuals in our care direct access to a doctor—24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This isn't just a phone call or a basic telehealth chat. Every home is equipped with medical technology: a stethoscope, a blood pressure cuff, and a tablet. This setup allows for thorough and accurate clinical evaluations, right there in the home."

This remote triage service allows Racker staff to connect people served with medical providers after hours, on weekends, and even during harsh weather conditions. Non-emergency medical needs can now be addressed remotely through a tablet-based video kiosk, where vitals and other key health information are shared in real time—right from the comfort of a person's home. In over 95% of cases, ER visits are avoided altogether. And when a visit is needed, wait times are often shorter thanks to StationMD physicians coordinating directly with emergency room doctors.

With Racker's use of StationMD, staff overtime related to lengthy ER visits have been dramatically reduced. In the past, many after-hours or middle-of-the-night ER trips could take hours and cause significant staffing disruption. Now, in most cases, StationMD provides near-immediate, face-to-face consultations with medical professionals who can assess, treat, and prescribe for many medical issues. The impact on Racker's residential program has been overwhelmingly positive.



StationMD kiosk

Katie reports that, "In a short-staffed environment, constantly asking staff to stay late, cover unexpected shifts, or handle emergency room visits can lead to burnout and exhaustion. Often, because of staffing challenges, someone may cover an urgent care visit who is filling in and has had no experience working with the person. Minimizing these disruptions helps to improve work life balance for our teams and helps with continuity of care for the people we support."

Racker's use of StationMD also helps preserve valuable community resources. Many of Racker's residential homes are in rural areas, and the service has significantly reduced unnecessary emergency room visits at local hospitals. Over the past 12 months, StationMD was used 404 times, and in 388 cases, we were able to avoid an ER visit.

Racker's Medical Director, Dr. Lloyd Darlow remarks, "As an organization, Racker strives to minimize the impediments to health care for those we serve, and StationMD is an invaluable, indispensable tool for us in our efforts. The data speaks for itself in the number of Emergency Room visits prevented and the importance of this cannot be overstated, especially during the 'cold and flu season' when exposure to contagious illness could have significant repercussions not only for the individual but for others in the residence who might then be exposed themselves. ER's are places of necessity and not convenience, but the Racker population is one for which convenience is actually important and occasionally critical. StationMD is an essential component of the kind of accessible, compassionate care Racker wants to provide."

StationMD also offers after-hours on-call nursing services. The combination of nursing and physician support during off hours has streamlined care and communication. Through these services, Racker nurses have clear, direct insight into health concerns that occur during off hours, supporting them to provide the best possible care.

Technology like StationMD isn't meant to replace human connection, but rather to enhance it. By supplementing the in-person care provided by Racker's dedicated nurses and community physicians, this innovative approach ensures that people receive timely, compassionate support whenever they need it. The result is a seamless blend of technology and human touch that promotes health, dignity, and the best possible outcome for those Racker serves.



Scan this QR Code to read a powerful perspective about one Racker Family's journey.



OUTLOOK Racker

EDITOR Joshua Skellett, Assistant Director of Community Relations & Development

DESIGN Mac Myers, New Media Specialist

CONTRIBUTORS Katie Boardman, Bob Brazill, Alison Bryan, Monique Delagey, Mike Leiter, Joshua Skellett

PHOTOGRAPHY Edna Brown, Racker Staff & Friends of Racker





More than 200 staff and community members gathered at the Ithaca Downtown Conference Center to celebrate our roots: supporting people and families in our community to lead fulfilling lives with opportunities to learn and be connected with others. The annual celebration introduced Racker's continued vision for the future with five strengths and values: *Belonging, Focus on What Matters Most, Supportive and Ethical Culture, Learning and Improvement, and Effectiveness and Impact*. As part of the celebration, we honored five employees whose dedication and impact throughout their time at Racker have made a meaningful difference for their colleagues and the people we support.

Racker Executive Director Cris Donovan opened and closed the program, emphasizing an era of innovation for Racker. "We've integrated new technologies and workflows into our service areas and in our administrative functions to streamline our work and allow our teams to focus on what matters most in their days," she said. Leaders from Racker programs shared how Racker's five strengths and values are rooted in the work their teams are doing every day.

Physical Therapist Kellie Hummel spoke on the importance of Early Intervention, a program that serves infants and toddlers (from birth to age 3) with developmental delays or disabilities. Kellie shares that in 2024 through grant funding from the Community Foundation of Tompkins County, her team was able to create the *Come and Play Café* - "a free, monthly developmental playgroup for children and families on the EI waiting list or those children and families who receive EI services in Tompkins County."

While Early Childhood Services continue to face challenges across the state and country, such as staffing shortages and limited budgets, Special Education Coordinator Katie Bassity emphasized the dedication of Racker's educators and the entire Early Child Services



team. "Across three sites, 137 kids arrive each day needing adults who can meet them where they are; 73 staff arrive each day wanting to make a difference," she said.

Residential Regional Director Charlie Dorsey reflected on the importance of belonging at Racker, particularly within the Residential program. "More than 300 dedicated residential staff members work every day to bring that vision to life," he said. Charlie shared the positive impact that helping two friends live together had on their lives. Quality Standards Director Jessie Janssen further highlighted the sense of belonging seen throughout the workplace. She notes, "At Racker, belonging isn't a slogan. It is something we strive for every day, one interaction at a time. As leaders and staff, we know belonging fuels not only a workplace, but also a community where everyone can thrive and feel safe."

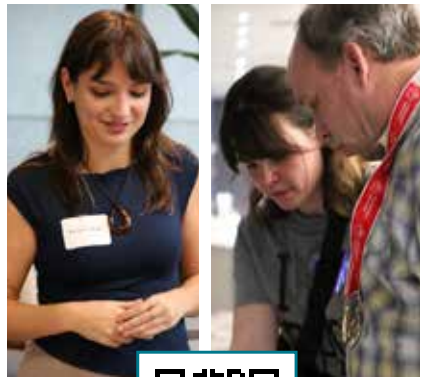
Prestigious awards were presented to several staff members for their dedication and impact. Cindy Bachelor, Emily James, and Chris Scaglione received the Inspiration Awards, given to staff whose approach to work encourages and inspires enthusiasm in others to support Racker's mission and vision. Bailey Phipps received the Mary Hutchens Award, recognizing an employee who embodies engagement by helping team members find fulfillment in their work. Kim Steiner received the Franziska Racker Award, presented to a staff member who, in word and deed, exemplifies the highest standard of caring and dedication to the agency's mission.



The celebration was made possible with the continued support of sponsors such as Visions Federal Credit Union, MVP, Mutual of America, and McNeil Development. The evening was both a celebration of the past year's achievements and a tribute to Racker's ongoing commitment to belonging, service, and community impact.

Celebrating Our 2025 Award Winners

<i>The Franziska Racker Award</i>	<i>The Mary Hutchens Award</i>	
Kim Steiner	Bailey Phipps	
<i>Inspiration Awards</i>		
<i>Cortland County</i>	<i>Tioga County</i>	<i>Tompkins County</i>
Cindy Bacheller	Chris Scaglione	Emily James




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FROM BACKLOG TO BREAKTHROUGH

How Automation Transformed Our Billing & Referral Process

Technology is making a difference for Racker's direct services, but also for our systems that allow those services to happen.

Not long ago, one of our billing processes was a mix of printouts, spreadsheets, and manual entry into multiple billing systems. Every month, more than 2,500 therapy sessions performed by licensed clinicians generated paperwork that had to be reviewed, printed, and re-entered by hand. Even with careful effort, the volume quickly became overwhelming. Over time, we found ourselves facing months of backlog in billing and reimbursement totaling nearly \$300,000 in delayed payments.

Recognizing the strain this created for both our administrative and clinical teams, we set out to redesign the process from the ground up. Our goal was to automate wherever possible, reduce manual data handling, and give therapists more time to focus on client care.

We developed an automated billing system that replaces manual data entry. Now, information is submitted online and checked in real time to make sure everything is accurate. Therapists can now enter their session information once, and the system automatically routes and checks it before submission. Built-in alerts help staff quickly identify and correct missing or inaccurate data—issues that once caused weeks of delay are now resolved in minutes.

In addition to improving accuracy and timeliness, we incorporated data analysis tools that help us better understand therapist workload and documentation challenges. This has given us new insight into where bottlenecks occur and how to better support staff in completing notes efficiently.

The impact has been remarkable. The backlog is gone, reimbursement is timely, and our data has improved significantly. Most importantly, automation has allowed our therapists and administrative staff to spend less time managing paperwork—and more time doing what matters most: supporting the people we serve and providing them with the important tools they need to thrive.

These efficiencies and opportunities opened our eyes to even more ways to make our systems work better. Using our new knowledge helped inspire the redesign of how Committee on Preschool Special Education (CPSE) teams refer children to

1950



1960



1970



1980



1990

2000



Apple releases the iPad

2010

2020



Preschool student uses multiple forms of AAC to help during meal time.

2025

Racker's preschool and evaluations. These changes help Racker connect children to early childhood services quickly and make a profound difference for families – another outdated system we've streamlined to make a difference.

For years, referrals trickled in through individual emails, phone calls, and handwritten notes. Staff often found themselves piecing together information from multiple places just to understand where a child was in the process. Tracking updates, keeping families informed, and ensuring nothing slipped through the cracks required constant vigilance and staff time, often guaranteeing mistakes. Recognizing the strain this placed on everyone involved, the team set out to build something better.

The result is a new referral process built around a simple online form. Now, CPSE teams can submit a child's information in minutes. The referral flows automatically into our waitlist system, where children can be matched quickly with openings at their preferred location. When a spot becomes available, their information moves seamlessly into our active enrollment system. This gives teachers and providers immediate access to the details they need to begin supporting that child without delay.

Throughout every step, automated email notifications keep families, school districts, and Racker staff in the loop. With automation, the focus shifts back to what matters most: preparing to support children and their families.

This streamlined process is already in place for preschool classroom placements and evaluations, with plans to extend it to our daycare program next. By reducing administrative barriers and simplifying communication, we're helping families access Racker's services faster at the exact moment their children need them most.

COMMUNICATION IS A HUMAN RIGHT

Augmentative & Alternative Communication (AAC)

At Racker, technology is doing something truly life-changing—it's helping children who cannot speak find their voices. Through Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), kids and adults are learning to communicate in ways that fit their unique needs.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) refers to all forms of communication, other than speech, that help people express thoughts, needs, and ideas.

AAC systems range from "no tech" options, such as gestures or picture boards, to "high tech" tools like computers and tablets that generate speech. No matter the form, the goal is the same—to make communication accessible to everyone.

Communication isn't just a skill; it's a human right. The U.S. Bill of Rights and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights both recognize the freedom to express opinions as a basic right. At Racker, we believe that freedom of speech must include those who communicate without spoken words.

In the early years, Racker's speech therapists used tools like sign language and picture boards. Then came the 1980s, bringing computers and the first speech-generating devices. These early machines were slow, costly, and sounded robotic, but they were revolutionary.

Everything changed in 2010 with the release of the iPad. Suddenly, high-quality speech apps became affordable and widely available. Today, an iPad can become a child's voice—one they can take anywhere.

To keep up with this fast-changing world, Racker has built strong partnerships. Working with companies like AbleNet, our team can get devices to children in just a day or two, instead of waiting weeks. And through collaboration with SUNY Cortland, speech therapy students bring the latest research and technology directly into our classrooms.

Walk into a Racker preschool today, and you'll see kids using AAC devices to talk with teachers and friends—sometimes even to playfully shout, "Move now!" on the playground.

Technology gives our children more than words—it gives them connection, independence, and joy. One little girl used her AAC device to say something for the very first time to her mom: "I love Mama."

Racker takes pride in helping every person find their voice. Our clinicians and staff are changing lives and providing opportunities every day.



**Adapted from a presentation by Racker Speech Language Pathologist, Alison Bryan*



Racker
3226 Wilkins Road
Ithaca, NY 14850

OUTLOOK

WWW.RACKER.ORG

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