

DIRECTIONS

IN INDEPENDENT LIVING

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OPWDD at the Bartlett House pg 4

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Volunteerism That Truly Matters

Threads of Kindness

Community volunteerism is the quiet force that keeps neighborhoods strong, compassionate, and resilient—especially in rural communities like ours. Each act of kindness, whether large or small, helps ensure that no one is left to face hardship alone. A powerful example of this spirit is seen through the continued generosity of Karyn Fox of Olean, whose dedication has made a lasting impact on countless neighbors.

This year, Karyn donated 100 handmade hats to Directions in Independent Living as part of its Annual Warm Drive. Remarkably, this is not a one-time gesture. Over the past five years, Karyn has donated 100 hats each year, bringing her total contribution to 500 handcrafted hats—each one made with care, intention, and warmth.

The Annual Warm Drive exists to help protect members of our community who may be exposed to harsh winter conditions, ensuring that individuals and families have access to essential cold-weather items. Donations like Karyn's go beyond material support; they provide comfort, dignity, and a reminder that someone truly cares.

Karyn, who works as an accountant at DATAbranch in Olean, says she genuinely enjoys helping others by making these hats by hand each year. Her commitment reflects the heart of volunteerism—using one's skills and time to uplift others simply because it matters.

Volunteer efforts like Karyn's strengthen the fabric of our community. They remind us that compassion is contagious, generosity multiplies, and when neighbors step up for one another, everyone is warmer—inside and out.



OPWDD Learns Local Legacy

History Comes Alive

Participants in the Directions in Independent Living OPWDD Program recently enjoyed a meaningful day of learning, connection, and community exploration during a visit to the historic Bartlett House in Olean. The outing began with a relaxing breakfast at Sprague's Maple House, setting a warm and social tone for the day ahead.

Following breakfast, the group toured the Bartlett House, learning about the rich history of the home and the remarkable family who once lived there. Built in 1881, the house was the residence of Frank Bartlett, a railroad investor and president of the Exchange National Bank, and his wife, Fannie. The Bartletts were known not only for their prosperity, but for their deep commitment to philanthropy and community service. Frank Bartlett's passing in 1922 was widely mourned, with local papers noting that he found joy in providing opportunities and support for others.

After Fannie's death in 1927, their daughter, Nancy Bartlett Laughlin, carried on her parents' legacy. In the late 1920s, she made significant charitable contributions, including a donation to Alfred University, and ultimately gifted the family home to the City of Olean. The house became the Bartlett Memorial Community Center, serving for decades as a hub for health, welfare, and youth services.

Today, the Bartlett House continues to serve the community as a museum, research facility, and gathering space. For OPWDD participants, the visit offered more than a history lesson—it was a chance to connect with local heritage, enjoy time together in the community, and reflect on how generosity and service can leave a lasting impact.



Real-World Skills in Action

Forging Future Skills

Directions in Independent Living (DIL) continues to empower individuals through meaningful, hands-on learning experiences—most recently through an educational visit by participants in its Transitions Program to the local CUTCO/KA-BAR facility in Olean.

During the visit, Transitions consumers gained an inside look at what it takes to produce a high-quality American-made product. Staff at the facility walked the group through key steps of the manufacturing process, highlighting precision, quality control, teamwork, and pride in craftsmanship. Participants learned how raw materials are transformed into finished cutlery products and how consistency, attention to detail, and accountability play a critical role in maintaining a trusted brand. For many, seeing these concepts in action helped connect classroom learning to real-world employment expectations.

The Transitions Program specifically focuses on preparing participants for greater independence by building life skills, workplace readiness, social confidence, and decision-making abilities. Community visits like the CUTCO/KA-BAR tour provide valuable exposure to local employers, reinforce the importance of strong work habits, and inspire consumers to envision future career paths.

Experiences such as this not only broaden knowledge but also build confidence and motivation. By connecting learning to real-world environments, DIL's Transitions Program continues to open doors—helping consumers move forward with skills, insight, and a stronger sense of possibility.



Honoring Strength, Service, and Perseverance

Deb Coble Fortitude Award

The Deb Coble Fortitude Award stands as a powerful symbol of resilience, dedication, and unwavering commitment to the mission of Directions in Independent Living. This special honor celebrates individuals who rise above personal adversity and continue to serve others with compassion, courage, and purpose—embodying the very spirit of independence and advocacy that defines our organization.

Inspired by the remarkable strength of Deb Coble, the award was created to recognize those who demonstrate fortitude in the face of hardship. Deb's own journey through recovery, marked by perseverance and an unshakable dedication to her work and the people she serves, set a lasting example for all of us. Her courage showed that even during life's most challenging moments, purpose and service can remain steadfast.

This year, the Deb Coble Fortitude Award was proudly presented to Tammy VanEtten, Directions in Independent Living's Facilitated Enroller. Tammy exemplifies the core values of this award through her resilience, professionalism, and continued commitment to supporting consumers, even while navigating personal challenges of her own. Her determination to show up, advocate, and serve with integrity reflects the heart of the Fortitude Award.

The Deb Coble Fortitude Award is a project of the Directions Wellness Committee, created to honor those who remind us that strength is not the absence of struggle, but the courage to keep moving forward. Through this award, we celebrate individuals like Tammy VanEtten—whose perseverance inspires our organization and reinforces our shared belief that compassion and purpose endure, even in the face of adversity.



Celebrating Teamwork & Spirit

Holiday Staff Advance

On Wednesday, the Directions in Independent Living team gathered for our annual Holiday Staff Advance, a day filled with laughter, appreciation, and plenty of festive cheer. Staff members came together to celebrate the season and one another, taking a well-deserved pause to reflect on the incredible work accomplished throughout the year.

The day was packed with fun activities. We played games, exchanged thoughtful gifts, and enjoyed delicious food while sharing stories and smiles. A spirited competition for "Most Festive" added extra sparkle to the celebration. While many staff members showed up in their holiday best, Deb Coble took home the top honor—though the competition was delightfully close!

The celebration also gave us an opportunity to recognize outstanding dedication among our team. Jess Burkett was honored as our Winter Employee of the Quarter, a well-earned recognition of her commitment and hard work. Tammy VanEtten received the Wellness Committee's Deb Coble Fortitude Award, celebrating her resilience, strength, and continued dedication to our mission.

It was truly a wonderful day of connection, appreciation, and holiday magic—reminding us that the heart of Directions in Independent Living is the incredible team who makes our work possible every day.



Winter Employee of the Quarter

Jessica Burkett

We are proud to announce Jessica Burkett as Employee of the Quarter. A dedicated Representative Payee, Jessica has been an essential part of the DIL team for nearly two years, skillfully managing Social Security funds for approximately 80 consumers. With humor and heart, Jessica often describes her role as “coordinating chaos,” a phrase that perfectly captures her ability to balance complex responsibilities with compassion and care.

Although she grew up as a military brat and lived all over the country, Jessica Burkett proudly calls Bradford home. Her commitment to community service was especially evident through her work on the Steering Committee for last fall’s RAM Clinic. Seeing firsthand how many individuals were helped through the clinic’s mobile services was both rewarding and inspiring, further reinforcing Jessica’s passion for empowering others.

Jessica Burkett draws motivation from celebrating the “wins,” no matter how small, and from knowing her work makes a meaningful difference in people’s lives. She describes her team as close-knit and supportive, with each member filling in gaps and complementing one another’s strengths. Jessica credits the leadership at Directions in Independent Living for encouraging her growth, including pushing her beyond her comfort zone to represent DIL at a public speaking event alongside Senator Chuck Schumer.

Known for her empathetic approach, Jessica Burkett consistently brings thoughtful, consumer-centered thinking to the team. In addition to her primary role, she serves on multiple committees, acts as a buddy for new hires, and represents DIL on the Community Action Enterprises Board. What Jessica values most about Directions is the family-like atmosphere—one where coworkers genuinely care for one another and the people they serve—making her a truly deserving Employee of the Quarter.



Veterans, Families, Community Together

Skating Toward Connection

The Dwyer Peer to Peer Program recently enjoyed a fun and energizing outing at the William O. Smith Recreation Center, where veterans and their families gathered for an afternoon of ice skating and connection. The event brought together participants from the Directions in Independent Living Dwyer Veteran Program, reinforcing the program’s mission of camaraderie, wellness, and mutual support.

Gliding across the ice were Carlee Sharp and Morgyn Feuchter, daughters of Amanda Feuchter, one of Cattaraugus County’s dedicated Dwyer Veteran Program Coordinators. Their laughter and confidence on the rink reflected the family-centered spirit that makes the Dwyer program so special.

Outings like this offer more than recreation—they create safe spaces where veterans can bond, share experiences, and build lasting friendships. Whether skating confidently or carefully along the boards, everyone supported one another.

The afternoon at the rink was a wonderful reminder that healing, connection, and community can happen anywhere—even on the ice.



Connection, Community, Crisp Air Winter Carnival Magic

On February 10th, Alyshia and Ellen, dedicated staff members from Directions in Independent Living's Transitions Program, bundled up and headed to the Winter Carnival at Holiday Valley in Ellicottville for a day filled with excitement, laughter, and meaningful connection. Despite the chilly temperatures, spirits were warm as individuals and staff embraced everything the winter celebration had to offer.

The outing had individuals from many different organizations from our area participating in the activities. From the moment they arrived, smiles were everywhere. The group enjoyed the crisp mountain air, festive activities, and the lively atmosphere that makes Holiday Valley's Winter Carnival such a special community event. Whether taking in snowy views, exploring the festivities, or simply sharing laughs together, the outing provided opportunities for individuals to build friendships, strengthen social skills, and experience new adventures in a supportive environment.

Community outings like this are an important part of the OPWDD Program's mission. They encourage independence, foster inclusion, and create lasting memories. Events such as the Winter Carnival allow individuals to engage with the broader community while enjoying safe, structured, and fun experiences alongside trusted staff.

Alyshia and Ellen didn't just supervise the fun—they jumped right in, embracing the day side by side with the individuals we support. Their enthusiasm and commitment helped make the outing truly unforgettable.

Thank you to Alyshia and Ellen for going above and beyond to create moments of joy, connection, and winter magic for our OPWDD participants. It was a wonderful day that will be remembered long after the snow melts!



Featured Consumer for January

Jennifer Bello



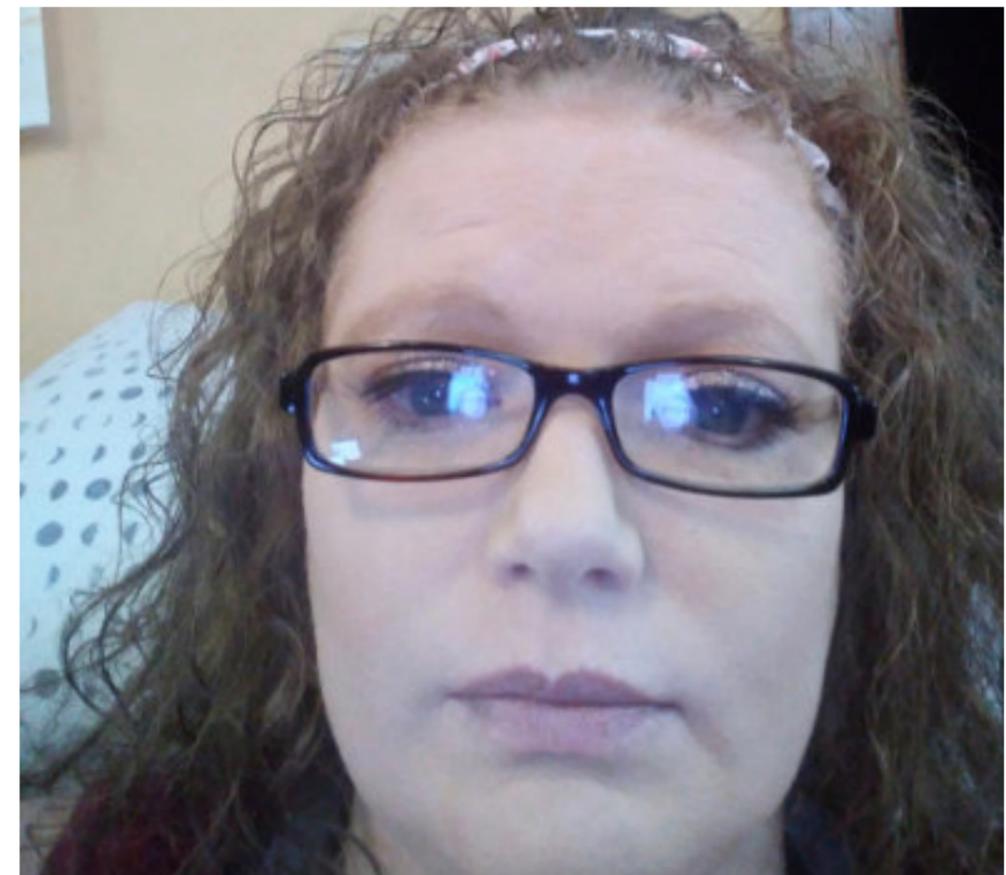
Directions in Independent Living is proud to recognize Jennifer Bello as our January Consumer of the Month, representing the meaningful impact of our Mental Health Advocacy Program. Jennifer, who goes by Jenny, lives in Portville, NY with her son, Tyler, who she describes as the most influential person in her life.

Family is everything to Jennifer. She shares a close bond with her aunt and uncle next door and her sister, Lisa. After losing her parents at the age of 27, Jennifer has faced significant challenges, but becoming a mother changed her life in profound ways. She says when Tyler was born, he taught her that she could be loved and did not have to live in sadness. Today, she treasures every moment she can spend with him before he heads off to college.

As a child, Jennifer dreamed of becoming a model and even attended school to pursue that goal, modeling for a short time. She enjoys following the Indiana Fever and Caitlin Clark, and hopes one day to visit California. At home, she keeps busy with her two cats, Batman and Baby.

Jennifer came to Directions after encouragement from her uncle and has been working toward obtaining SSI. She shares that knowing she can call her advocate, Theresa Klice, for understanding, patience, and support makes her feel truly seen and heard.

Looking ahead, Jennifer hopes for greater peace from her anxieties, financial stability, and one day becoming a grandmother. Her strength and resilience are an inspiration to us all.



Featured Consumer for December

Steve Adams

This December, Directions in Independent Living is proud to recognize Steve Adams as our Consumer of the Month, representing the impactful work of our Benefits Advisement program. Steve lives in Bolivar, New York, with his wife, who he describes as the most influential person in his life and someone he deeply cherishes.

Family has always played an important role in Steve's life. He fondly recalls his mother's dedication to caring for children with special needs and her strong faith, while his father worked hands-on trades such as excavating, water well drilling, and welding. Those influences helped shape Steve's grounded, practical outlook on life.

Although Steve never settled on a specific career path, his goals have always been simple and meaningful: to live a long life and, most importantly, to be happy. He enjoys spending time at home, where he feels most comfortable, and looks forward to springtime when he can dig leeks—something he still enjoys, even though his physical abilities are more limited than they once were. Steve also enjoys playing Euchre and cornhole, hobbies he's quite good at, and keeps busy volunteering with the Bolivar Trail Blazers Snowmobile Club.

Steve came to Directions during a difficult financial time and decided to try Benefits Advisement after hearing positive outcomes. Through the program, he received critical assistance with securing Social Security Disability (SSD) benefits and will soon have health insurance—support that has brought significant peace of mind.

Steve appreciates the genuine effort and dedication of his Directions Specialists and looks forward to enjoying retirement alongside his wife. His story is a powerful reminder of how Benefits Advisement helps individuals gain stability, confidence, and hope for the future.

Featured Consumer for February

Clare Manion

Directions in Independent Living is proud to recognize Clare Manion as our February Consumer of the Month. Known affectionately by her nickname “Clare-Bear,” Clare lives in Allegany with her mom, brother, and her beloved fur-baby, Zoey—a GoldenDoodle who is never far from her side.

Clare comes from a close, outgoing family that enjoys spending time together, especially when it involves fun and laughter. As a child, she dreamed of becoming a police officer, a goal that reflected her strong sense of helping others. Today, Clare continues to show that same passion through her love of hands-on activities and her dedication to causes that matter to her—particularly helping animals in need. She proudly volunteers with the SPCA and enjoys giving back to her community whenever possible.

A lifelong Buffalo Bills fan, Clare also loves adventure and has a special interest in four-wheeling. When it comes to travel, her favorite destination is Las Vegas, where she enjoys visiting family. Clare credits her cousin Bryan as one of the most influential people in her life, offering support and encouragement along the way.

Clare chose to work with Directions in Independent Living because of the fun, engaging activities offered, and through that experience, she has gained increased confidence and focus—both in school and in everyday life. She especially enjoys being out in the community with her Directions Specialists, learning and growing through real-world experiences.



About our Agency

Directions in Independent Living is a non profit organization with locations in Olean and Wellsville New York. Directions helps people with disabilities live more independent lives. We have over 17 individual programs that specialize in many different areas or needs that these individuals may struggle with in their daily lives. The Directions organization has been described by its consumers as “understanding, supportive, accommodating, and family oriented.”

Every year, more than 1 in 5 New Yorkers has symptoms of a mental disorder, are stricken with poverty, or on the verge of homelessness. Moreover, in any year, 1 in 10 adults and children experience mental health challenges serious enough to affect functioning in work, family and school life. Also, nearly a quarter of veterans (22 percent) in New York state, were found to have a probable diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder and/or major depression. Compared to similar individuals in the general population, the veterans studied were at an eight-fold greater risk of probable PTSD and a two- to four-fold greater risk of major depression.

While many services are available to those in need, more than 40 percent of those in need of services or help report being unaware of what help is available or uncertain about how to navigate the systems that provide assistance. Outreach to connect these individuals with services and better coordination among government and community agencies is needed. We need a more combined effort put into connecting consumers with care coordinators who can provide personalized assistance across a range of service sectors. The existing system often misses those people most in need of outreach or those who have not yet connected with any assistance organizations.

That is why Directions in Independent Living was founded over 30 years ago. It is only through the generosity of people like you, that we are able to continue to serve, assist, and help our friends, neighbors, and veterans that are in need.

If you would, please consider making a donation, referring someone that might be in need of our services, or even volunteer yourself as a helper for one of our programs.

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