

CHOICES

June 2020 | Special Edition



Community Options believes in the dignity of every person, and in the freedom of all people to experience the highest degree of self-determination. Embracing this philosophy, Community Options provides housing and employment supports to people with disabilities. #AllItTakes

16 Farber Road, Princeton, NJ 08540
609-951-9900
www.comop.org



Regina Taylor-Tuck
Executive Director, Manhattan, New York

Special Edition:

Meet the Leadership of Community Options

Learn about the Community Options Executive Team and some of their most memorable experiences with the organization. We're thankful for their service and leadership, now more than ever, as they continue to handle the unique problems related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Tell us about where you grew up and how giving back to the community was a part of your family experience.

"Growing up in the Bronx, New York, my siblings and I were always taught to give. If you only had one piece of fruit, we knew to cut it up and share it. I would watch my Mom work all week and then get up early on Saturday mornings to feed the homeless or go to the prison to talk to strangers to give them hope. My siblings and I would tag along sometimes without choice but with each visit I would learn something about the people that we saw and how each of them had something unique about them. At home, I had a sibling that was different. She was six years older than me and required more patience than the rest of us. That sibling, my sister Angela, is my inspiration when I feel a little tired or worn. I think of her asking me during my homework time to teach her. 'Teach me how to write my name' she would say. With practice and perseverance, she learned to do it. With all the obstacles that a person living with a developmental disability faces, I just want to be the person that gives them that positive reinforcement to help them achieve their goals. Community Options gives me that opportunity."

What stories have most impacted you during your time working with marginalized communities?

"Being located in the city of Harlem, we have stories of individuals that move from residential schools with acres of land into houses that are literally on top of one another. There are times when others did not believe that they would be able to thrive in such an environment. Well, I am happy to say we have proved them wrong. Our success stories of gainful employment, independent living, and thriving relationships within the community confirms that it can be done. Yes, it may take extra patience and a different approach, but we are willing to do all it takes."

If you could share one thing with our community during the COVID-19 crisis, what would it be?

"I would say our dedication will pull us through this pandemic. Each day, I am amazed by the dedication of the staff that I oversee. They leave their families and ride public transportation (which is limited) to not only provide a paid service but to comfort the individuals. Just like our city of New York, Community Options (NYC) is strong and we will pull through this together."

Heather Pollack

Executive Director, Bucks County, Pennsylvania



Tell us about where you grew up and how giving back to the community was a part of your family experience.

“I grew up in Bucks County, PA in a small town called Huntingdon Valley. At a very young age, I was taught to care for and treat others exactly the way I’d care for myself and my family. Whether this was at school or within my community, I always made sure that I was the best person I could be to help those around me. From elementary school through high school, I was often tasked with being a peer mediator, helping others with conflicts or struggles they may have been encountering.

I am also proud to say that I was chosen to help two foreign exchange students navigate the intimidating halls of high school. My ‘giving back’ mentality has always resonated with me and those I support.”

Tell us about Community Options, Inc. and how your work impacts the community.

“For the past 6 years, I have been fortunate enough to hold many roles within Community Options. Each of these roles has provided me with exceptional learning and growth experiences. Having the opportunity

to change history on a daily basis is not something everyone can say they do. As employees and advocates, we are constantly striving for respect and acceptance for those we support. Despite the challenges, we ensure our voices are heard. We are living in communities. We are working in competitive employment. We are active members of society. We give back to our community and we see the prosperous relationships between employers, neighbors, and state officials that have grown as a result.”

What stories have most impacted you during your time working with marginalized communities?

“Some of our individuals have experienced tremendous trauma in the past. Learning about their past has been integral in helping us shape their future. Although some of their stories can be difficult to hear, their appreciation for the second chance at life with Community Options is heartwarming. Many of those we support don’t have family. We are their family. That’s what keeps me going all day, every day. These men and women are my family too. Knowing that we share a common bond and rely on one another so much, is really beautiful. We have developed relationships that some may

have thought were impossible to obtain. Community Options makes it possible. Our tight knit family is a support system for everyone; employees and individuals.”

If you could share one thing with our community during the COVID-19 crisis, what would it be?

“The importance of being kind cannot be overstated. Right now, everyone is going through hard times. No one is more affected than anyone else, but we are all in this together. Be kind to your neighbors. Be kind to people you don’t know. We’re all struggling in some way as our lives change drastically. Those we support are trying their best to keep moving forward. It’s important that we focus on the positives.”

“My ‘giving back’ mentality has always resonated with me and those I support.”

Maria Bowles

Executive Director, Queens, New York



Tell us about where you grew up and how giving back to the community was a part of your family experience.

“I grew in Brooklyn, New York. My mom owned a day care center and my father was a bus driver for Metropolitan Transportation Authority. Watching my mom care for children was the catalyst for my career today. Both my parents were very hard-working people and loved to help others, especially children. They taught me at very early age the importance of serving and being kind to others. I was raised to always treat everyone with dignity and respect in any environment. My parents were community activists and often participated in various fundraisers to help support any cause about which they felt passionate. Often times, my parents required my siblings and I to volunteer at these fundraisers to provide additional help.”

Tell us about Community Options, Inc. and how your work impacts the community.

“Community Options is a nonprofit provider of residential care and job placement for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities throughout New York. We also operate in 10 other states and have been in

existence for 30 years under the same CEO and founder, Robert Stack. What does that really mean? We have homes throughout the community, just like you, where three to four individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities live, have jobs, attend stimulating day programs, and thrive in our community every day.”

What stories have most impacted you during your time working with marginalized communities?

“Simply giving someone in our care a hug, or high-five, or a laugh at a silly joke, or simply asking them how their day is going makes an individual’s day very special. This brings me so much joy every day. There is nothing better than to receive a phone call from a family member or participant expressing their gratitude for the outstanding services we provide to them or their loved one. Moments like that are truly priceless. Some days can be challenging but being a part of a wonderful family within Community Options makes all obstacles seem miniscule. We’re all here to serve a bigger purpose and that is truly exuded throughout the entire organization.”

If you could share one thing with our community during the COVID-19 crisis, what would it be?

“Our Direct Support Professionals are front line employees who are in direct contact with the individuals we support. They must provide care to our individuals 24/7. They have to be their caregiver, confidant, friend, and their emotional support during times like this. Direct Support Professionals’ jobs are never ending and require great strength, patience, love, and understanding. Direct Support Professionals do not have the privilege of working from home because their absence can actually mean life or death for an individual. I would like to give a huge thank you to all of our essential workers, especially our Direct Support Staff who never give up, never complain, and do not hesitate to risk their own lives to make sure our individuals are safe, comfortable, healthy, and happy in their homes during COVID-19. Their dedication and commitment to our mission is very much noticed and appreciated! Thank you again for your service and we could not be who we are without all of you.”

“We’re all here to serve a bigger purpose and that is truly exuded throughout the entire organization.”

Brandon Thornton

Assistant Executive Director, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



Tell us about where you grew up and how giving back to the community was a part of your family experience.

“I grew up in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania where I attended Roman Catholic School, Roxborough High School, and Temple University. Roxborough was a traditional neighborhood where everyone looked out for one another. Soon, longtime friends and neighbors became family and providing for one another became the norm. The neighborhood helped mold me into the person I am today by teaching me the values of bonding and togetherness. As a kid, I can often remember my parents rallying all the neighborhood kids and assisting with the commute to basketball practice when their parents had to work or weren’t available to take them. My family would feed, teach, and simply do their best to look after all the kids in the neighborhood as if they were their own. It showed me the importance of taking care of one another without expecting anything in return. To this day, I carry those examples with me as I support those who have similar challenges.”

Tell us about Community Options, Inc. and how your work impacts the community.

“I began my Career at Community Options in March 2014. During my time here, I’ve witnessed and have been a part of the mission by supporting individuals that need a place to call home. My belief is that they deserve an opportunity to live a normal life within the community whether they come from institutions, other organizations, or family settings. All of our individuals deserve a second chance at life.”

What stories have most impacted you during your time working with marginalized communities?

“I remember early in my career with Community Options I was responsible for a program that supported an individual whose background consisted of violent behaviors, various psychiatric hospital admissions, and family abandonment. I can remember my first year with John (name changed for HIPAA). He struggled getting along with his staff, housemate, and neighbors. After a year, John settled in and I can remember him saying to me that he now realized that Community Options staff are there to help him. He recognized that his house was now HIS home and that he now had people that actually cared for his well-being. John soon went on to get a part time job working at a flooring décor company. I can remember him even receiving an award for most valued employee for going a whole year without any call outs or missed days of work. During a visit to John’s home, I remember taking him to the store to purchase some snacks for his housemates and himself. I watched as he took his wallet out from his pocket, used his debit card, and asked for his receipt. It is moments like that where I can’t help but smile thinking

and remembering how John once was and how selfless he had become. John is still employed with the company to this day, and still supported by Community Options. He is working on various independent skills in order to live alone or semi-independently.”

If you could share one thing with our community during the COVID-19 crisis, what would it be?

“If I could share one thing with the community during the COVID-19 crisis, it would be that progress and success stories regarding individuals happen every day where I work. However, none of it would be possible without the work of the Direct Support Professionals. The staff that directly work with the individuals in the homes are essential. They deal with high levels of physical and emotional stress that we often cannot imagine, as they are ultimately responsible for someone’s life. As individuals move rapidly away from institutional long-term care and towards residential settings, we are relying on direct-care workers to provide needed care daily. It would be great if we as a community could ask our elected officials for additional funding to make sure our Direct Support Professionals get the wages, benefits, and recognition that they deserve.”

“If I could share one thing with the community during the COVID-19 crisis, it would be that progress and success stories regarding individuals happen every day where I work.”

Leslie Healy

Executive Director, King of Prussia, Pennsylvania



Tell us about where you grew up and how giving back to the community was a part of your family experience.

“I grew up in a small town in Central, PA close to Penn State University. It is a tight knit community that takes care of each other. I learned at a very young age to be compassionate and always help those in need. I am the first in my immediate family to have a career in Human Services.”

Tell us about Community Options, Inc. and how your work impacts the community.

“Community Options, Inc. in Montgomery County, PA is a non-profit providing one or two-person housing, employment services, community participation services, and behavioral support services for adults with developmental disabilities. Community Options Inc., gives individuals with developmental disabilities the same opportunity to achieve independence and have a meaningful life. Whether it be through locating and obtaining a job, getting their own apartment, or socializing with peers, individuals have the right to be active participants in their communities.”

What stories have most impacted you during your time working with marginalized communities?

“I always tell new employees you’ll never be bored. Every day is different and some days are harder than others. The best days are right after those hard days. To see someone we support trust us to help them through a hard day and to see them smile when it’s over is what keeps us going. It’s our goal to not only provide services, but to get our individuals to that place where they trust that they’re loved and supported no matter what so they can live a truly fulfilled life.

In the Fall of 2016, while visiting a referral at a children’s facility, I had asked the program director if they had any other individuals who needed adult services. The program director pointed to an individual and stated if he didn’t find some where to go by his birthday, he would have to go to an institution near Scranton. She stated that on paper, he’s very challenging. I met with Stefan that day and I knew that there was no way he was going anywhere else.

The day after his 21st Birthday, Stefan moved into his new home with Community Options where he has thrived. Stefan loves Family Feud, Steve Harvey, dancing and singing, taking

long walks, and drawing. In the 4 years since his move to Community Options, none of the “on paper” challenges have happened. This is a testament to the DSPs who assist him daily with his emotions and keep him active. I feel so blessed to have been in the right place at the right time to be able to support Stefan. He lights up a room. His smile is contagious. Stefan is someone who deserves to be in the community, close to his family, and with the freedoms to have a meaningful life.”

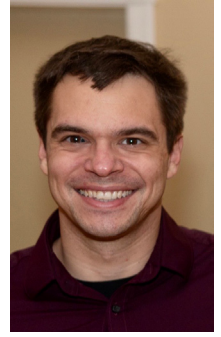
If you could share one thing with our community during the COVID-19 crisis, what would it be?

“I am so impressed with our DSPs for their continued dedication and support for people with developmental disabilities during this pandemic. DSPs have embraced the status of front-line workers in protecting the health and safety of our individuals. They selflessly recognize they may support someone with COVID-19 and continue to do their job. What they do is essential. DSPs are an inspiration to me as the Executive Director and deserve all the kind words and recognition for their extraordinary efforts and sacrifices they are making on a daily basis.”

“The best days are right after those hard days. To see someone we support trust us to help them through a hard day and to see them smile when it’s over is what keeps us going.”

Nick High

Regional State Director, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



Tell us about where you grew up and how giving back to the community was a part of your family experience.

“I grew up in Fort Washington, Pennsylvania and graduated from Upper Dublin High School in 2007. I earned my bachelor’s degree from Temple University in 2011 and my master’s in Public Administration from the University of Pennsylvania in 2017. From a young age, my activist father taught us about the importance of giving back to the community. He also preached social justice and standing up for those less fortunate. As a kid, one of my younger brother’s best friends was a young man living in an impoverished neighborhood with his single mother. Recognizing the challenges my brother’s friend faced, my dad took him in and treated him like one of his own sons. He took him on our vacations and fishing trips. In doing this, he showed us the importance of helping those that had less than us. Each MLK day, we would also participate in a day of service as a family. To this day, I carry those examples of the importance of giving back to the community and setting an example by standing up for those with less.”

Tell us about Community Options, Inc. and how your work impacts the community.

“Community Options focuses on supporting the less fortunate. Whether it is those that are struggling to be emancipated from an institution, those that other providers have given up on, or those that are stuck in a psychiatric hospital. We believe that everyone deserves the chance to live in the community, and we provide that chance.”

What stories have most impacted you during your time working with marginalized communities?

“Before we agree to support someone, we meet with them in their current living situation and determine if we can provide services. Typically, the current living arrangement is a psychiatric hospital, an institution, or somewhere else where they do not want to be. I remember meeting a young man by the name of Jason (name has been changed due to HIPAA) in a psychiatric hospital. The hospital smelled of urine and body odor that would make any locker room smell like a rose garden. I vividly remember the burnt orange color of the walls and the overall hospital interior that looked like it had not been updated or decorated since the 1970’s. Jason’s room didn’t even have a door aside from a dirty shower curtain. He slept in a twin bed and had nothing on his walls aside from a crumpled-up photo of LeBron James he had cut out of an old magazine. I remember reading about Jason’s history and how he had been at the hospital for over a year after he had attacked his mother with a hammer. I remember reading about all his aggressive behaviors and all the times he needed to be restrained. I also remember Jason telling me ‘I know I’ve been bad. I just don’t want to be here anymore’.

Lastly, I remember a colleague from another agency that had known Jason for years telling me that after 3 months in a new home he would thrive. As we have done with so many others, I agreed to take a chance and accept Jason.

The first 3 months in the new home were as predicted: challenging. Soon enough though Jason realized that he wasn’t going

back to the hospital and that we weren’t going to abandon him. Since then, he has flourished in his home and made a life for himself. I remember taking him to an Eagles-Cowboys game on Sunday night. As the Eagles scored, I remember watching him cheer and high five strangers in the crowd sitting next to us. Here was this young man that was living in the worst environment one could imagine when I met him. A little over a year later, there he was high fiving fellow Eagles’ fans. It is moments like these when you realize someone like Jason isn’t a client or a patient, they are just a human being trying to live their life. The stories that impact me the most are those from people like Jason and so many of his peers. These are people who can say their lives are better and more rewarding now than the day I met them.”

If you could share one thing with our community during the COVID-19 crisis, what would it be?

“Success stories like Jason’s are only possible because of the work of our Direct Support Professionals. These staff wear multiple hats at work every day, have extraordinarily difficult jobs, and are paid far below what they deserve. As most people are keeping themselves safe by sheltering in place or working from home, Direct Support Professionals are coming into work every day. Someone else’s safety and home IS their job and workplace. These staff leave their homes every day and put themselves in harm’s way to help the most vulnerable among us. Like all essential employees, these staff deserve fair wages and hazard pay. I would ask the community to pressure your elected officials for additional funding so we can make sure our Direct Support Professionals get the fair wages and benefits they deserve.”

Ida Bormentar

Executive Director, Mercer County, New Jersey



Tell us about where you grew up and how giving back to the community was a part of your family experience.

“A vast majority of my childhood was spent in the heart of Southwest Philadelphia, PA. I went to middle school and high school in the urban city of Philadelphia where I had to take three forms of public transportation to get to high school. I traveled far because my mother wanted me to attend one of the best high schools in the surrounding parts of Philadelphia. The high school I attended was considered one of many high schools in the Philadelphia area that prepared students for the future and college. I didn’t grow up with a silver spoon; instead I worked hard to earn everything I wanted. My mother was my role model. She worked hard and ensured that sentiment and attitude was instilled in me at an early age. My mother was very involved in the community, demonstrating the importance of leadership and service. That sentiment earned me my first job at the age of sixteen where I worked full-time at a local K-Mart. I started as a regular staff but eventually moved my way up to assistant manager by the age of eighteen. Many in the community shopped at the local K-Mart. Due to this experience, I was able to gain a lot of skills early on in my life. Some of these skills included the importance of hard work, customer service, and attentiveness to others.”

“It’s amazing to work for a company where the leadership team strives to build morale and positively recognize staff.”

Tell us about Community Options, Inc. and how your work impacts the community.

“Community Options is a nonprofit organization that provides housing and employment supports for individuals with disabilities. We currently operate in 10 other states and have been in existence for 30 years under the same CEO and founder, Robert Stack. We believe in the dignity of every person, and in the freedom of all people to experience the highest degree of self-determination. Embracing this philosophy, we provide housing and employment opportunities for people with disabilities.”

What stories have most impacted you during your time working with marginalized communities?

“I’ve been employed at Community Options, Inc since 2014. I decided to join the COI family because of the mission, strong leadership, and growth opportunities. I started as a Program Specialist and moved my way up the executive ladder to become the Executive Director. I’ve been working with individuals with disabilities and marginalized communities for sixteen + years. What I tend to notice while working in marginalized communities is a profound sense of resiliency, perseverance and self-identity.”

At Community Options, Inc, there’s been a lot of impactful stories during my time employed but something that I greatly appreciate is the overall stance of the company that our individuals and staff come first. It’s amazing to work for a company where the leadership team strives to build morale and positively recognize staff. I always look forward to attending the annual holiday party. It shows an overall appreciation for staff and individuals.”

If you could share one thing with our community during the COVID-19 crisis, what would it be?

“Although we often deal with emergencies in our line of business, the COVID-19 crisis has been unique and challenging. I tip my hat to Community Options, Inc. in general for their guidance regarding the establishment of various policies and documentation that guided our region during this pandemic.”

I want to thank the essential staff which includes, Direct Support Professionals, Program Managers, Program Specialists, and members of the Mercer Administrative team for coming to work to ensure the safety and well-being of our individuals. Across the country, the media is acknowledging the ramifications many essential workers face as they go out daily to work. It brings me great pride and pleasure to know that we have many staff in our region that know the risks involved but take the heroic route and come to work daily to ensure our individuals are safe. Our staff are heroes too and deserve the recognition! #AllItTakes”

Kathryn Bryant

Executive Director, Middlesex/Monmouth Counties, New Jersey



Tell us about where you grew up and how giving back to the community was a part of your family experience.

“At a young age I always looked for different opportunities to help others. Growing up in Jersey City, NJ, I began volunteering at the age of 10. In school I used to volunteer my lunch time to assist kindergarten classes. I would help them throughout the lunch period and assist them back to their classrooms. I also helped with various events held at the school. Outside of school, I helped different families in my neighborhood by babysitting their younger kids. I always had the urge to help and care for others.”

Tell us about Community Options, Inc. and how your work impacts the community.

“Community Options is a non-profit organization that provides residential and employment services for adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities throughout 10 states. The services we provide are community-based, so our individuals live in beautiful 3 to 4-bedroom homes in local neighborhoods thus allowing them to engage in various activities in the community.”

What stories have most impacted you during your time working with marginalized communities?

“Every single story has impacted me during my time with Community Options. Everyone has their own unique story and I am lucky enough to be a part of our individuals’ stories. Each of them has grown in their own way and continue to build on their independence with assistance from our wonderful staff. Despite their ups and downs, they continue to persevere. It is beautiful to witness.”

If you could share one thing with our community during the COVID-19 crisis, what would it be?

“It is amazing to see all essential employees and frontline workers stepping up as they have during this trying time. I am especially proud of all Direct Support Professionals, as they continue to support individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.”

The lives of our individuals have been impacted in major ways with the closure of their day programs and being confined within their homes. Our Direct Support Professionals, along with our Program Managers, have been working hard to ensure each day is meaningful and continuing to engage them in various activities within the homes. Their extreme creativity has yielded wonderful responses from our individuals.

I’d like to personally thank all the Direct Support Professionals, Program Managers, Program Specialists, Regional Nurse, and Behaviorist that work throughout my region in Middlesex and Monmouth County. Their commitment and dedication to the individuals we serve does not go unnoticed. They continue to show up and make a difference every day and I am truly grateful for all of them.”

“It is amazing to see all essential employees and frontline workers stepping up as they have during this trying time. I am especially proud of all Direct Support Professionals, as they continue to support individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.”

Jessica Pahountis

Executive Director, Allentown (Lehigh Valley), Pennsylvania



Tell us about where you grew up and how giving back to the community was a part of your family experience.

“I grew up in the Lehigh Valley area of Pennsylvania, where I continue to live and work. I was heavily involved in Girl Scouts throughout my lifetime. My mother was my leader and heavily focused our troop’s efforts on community service projects. We volunteered with the elderly, at a local animal shelter, cleaned community parks, and assisted with food drives for the local food bank. In my college years, I volunteered in the kitchen at Allentown Rescue Mission. After having children, I began volunteering with the Northampton Athletic Association as a team mom for cheerleading. Today, my children and I remain active in both Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, volunteering through a variety of community service projects. I serve as Assistant Scout Master for BSA Troop 540 and am a parent committee member for Cub Pack 40.”

Tell us about Community Options, Inc. and how your work impacts the community.

“Community Options, Inc. is a nonprofit organization that provides residential and employment services to individuals with disabilities. We do all it takes to assist individuals in achieving a life of self-direction. This life of dignity and respect affords individuals that same experience as you or me. We currently operate in 10 states across the nation supporting individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, as well as co-occurring medical and mental

health conditions. Throughout our 30 years of operation under the guidance of Robert Stack, President and CEO, we have facilitated institutional closure and worked closely with government and community leaders to ensure that legislature positively impacts individuals with disabilities and those who support them.”

What stories have most impacted you during your time working with marginalized communities?

“I have worked with a variety of individuals facing multiple challenges and traumas ranging from abuse, neglect, homelessness, drug addiction, and sexual trauma. Each story impacts me. Every individual I have encountered in my work has a different story to share that has served as a valuable learning experience for myself. Most of the stories that have been shared with me have a common theme-overcoming adversity. The individuals with whom we work everyday face daily challenges due to their different abilities, yet they are persevering, achieving their goals, and living out their dreams. I am truly inspired every single day to face challenges with an open, solution-focused mind.”

If you could share one thing with our community during the COVID-19 crisis, what would it be?

“I would like to commend the dedication of the unsung heroes of the COVID-19 pandemic, our Direct Support Professionals. Direct Support Professionals across the United States care for thousands of people with disabilities. These people make up one of the most vulnerable populations for contracting

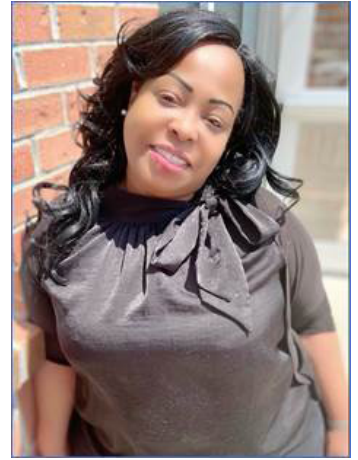
COVID-19. Our direct care staff are vital to the fabric of the lives of many individuals with disabilities, who may not have the luxury of support from a network of family and friends. Staff and individuals alike are experiencing the day to day challenges of living through a pandemic. Our Direct Support Professionals have been there to support and assist individuals through these trying times, providing comfort and care.

Direct Support Professionals do not have the benefit of working from home and put themselves at risk daily to care for others, often being paid little above minimum wage. Their dedication, commitment, and fortitude all deserve recognition. I am eternally grateful for the sacrifices our staff make to continue to foster our mission even amidst the fear and uncertainty of the pandemic. I send the sincerest and resounding thank you to all Direct Support Professionals for all that they do, each and every day! You are the unsung heroes for people who often do not have a voice for themselves.”

“...we have facilitated institutional closure and worked closely with government and community leaders to ensure that legislature positively impacts individuals with disabilities and those who support them.”

Ayesha Patrick

**State Director Central New Jersey and
Executive Director Red Ribbon Academy I & II**



Tell us about where you grew up and how giving back to the community was a part of your family experience.

“I grew up in Essex County, New Jersey. I was influenced by the generation before me and was raised by strong women. I lost my father when I was young, so my mom and I moved back into our family’s home in Essex County, NJ. My aunt helped my mother raise me. My aunt worked 44 years as a supervisor at Beth Israel Hospital in New Jersey.

My aunt was a remarkable woman. I wish she could see me now. My mother is a retired healthcare professional. Both of my grandfathers were in my life. My maternal grandfather, now in his late 90’s, is still an active bishop. The Sears Roebuck building across the street from the church is where we would have all of our food drives to give out food to the homeless and the community. I had to volunteer for the food drives. In my household, giving back was instilled in me. My paternal grandpa, who is in his mid-90’s, is a retired administrator for the Veteran’s Hospital, in Lyons, New Jersey. He also volunteered as the treasurer for the Presbyterian church where many family and friends, like myself, are now paving the way for change on a political, governmental, and a humanitarian level.”

Tell us about Community Options, Inc. and how your work impacts the community.

“Community Options Enterprises is a non-profit organization that provides services to children, adults, and medically fragile individuals with intellectual disabilities. Community Options Enterprises has stepped out of the norm and created residential, supportive programs, and habilitation programs like none other. When you describe Community Options you have to define it as “Innovative and willing to go the extra mile” to provide quality services for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Over 10 years ago, I had the opportunity to work on the initiative that focused on the closure of institutions and transition of children and adults into community living, somewhere where they can truly call home. For over 30 years, Community Options has developed housing and employment programs for people with disabilities – serving thousands of people nationally.

Community Options provides advocacy assistance to empower people with disabilities because all people – regardless of ability level – should live and work in the community with dignity, choice, and self-determination. Community Options, Inc., is like no other non-profit.

I said this over 20 years ago when I first walked into one of their group homes in Bergen County. I was truly amazed and impressed by how it looked nothing like traditional group homes with a congregated environment where five and six individuals lived in one home. Community Options, Inc. really showed me that all individuals, no matter their disability, can live in the community. During my journey of making a difference, I have evolved into a leader that leads with stewardship. A leader holds themselves to a higher level of accountability, while providing support, coaching, and teaching to new leaders to build a stronger team that will thrive and collaborate to achieve our mission. Our current and future leaders understand the bigger picture and will continue the mission for many more decades to come.

Community Options Enterprises, Red Ribbon Academy Medical Day Program I & II gave hope to families and individuals that are medically fragile. Red Ribbon Academy Medical Day Program was needed in the State of New Jersey. Red Ribbon Medical Day Programs are quality, state-of-the-art programs that continue to make a difference in the lives of medically fragile individuals. Community Options came together with families and with one united vision, created these medical day programs that many previously believed to be impossible.

Ayesha Patrick

State Director Central New Jersey and Executive Director Red Ribbon Academy I & II

The programs are filled with quality, care, and love, with medical services wrapped up in a bow for everyone across the world to see. We have proved that person-centered services, individuality, and quality services still exist for people with intellectual disabilities. These two programs are nationally recognized and sought after in many states.

I Matter is something that Community Options advocates for on behalf of the individuals we support. This speaks volumes because it allows an individual to know that their life matters. Community Options, Inc. is on a mission and no mission is impossible when it comes to continuing to improve the lives of those we support. The journey continues!"

If you could share one thing with our community during the COVID-19 crisis, what would it be?

"COVID-19 has brought our country closer together and has identified people who are willing to make the sacrifice to ensure the health and safety of others. I would like to say thank you to my team and our Direct Support Professionals. They are our wonderful secret that stands in the front line with invisibility. When you look in the mirror, you should smile because you are an essential worker. You are changing, saving, and improving lives every day. The 'strong walk in the shadow in silence.' You do not have to be seen or heard all the time, just when the time is right! During this pandemic, you have continued to provide outstanding care to

the individuals we support. Today and every day, I salute you!

When you look in the mirror tonight you should state, 'I made a difference.' Many minds with one purpose come together to make a difference. I believe it. I say it. I model it! We stand together. This is how you define teamwork. One can't change the past, but they can make a positive and unforgettable impact in their future. This is what you have exhibited during this pandemic. To all the families, advocates, caregivers, Direct Support Professionals, and leaders, we will get through this difficult time.

Thank you for believing and not giving up! This day too shall pass!"

"When you describe Community Options you have to define it as "Innovative and willing to go the extra mile" to provide quality services for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Over 10 years ago, I had the opportunity to work on the initiative that focused on the closure of institutions and transition of children and adults into community living, somewhere where they can truly call home. For over 30 years, Community Options has developed housing and employment programs for people with disabilities - serving thousands of people nationally."

Matilda Lobban

Executive Director, Burlington County, New Jersey



Tell us about where you grew up and how giving back to the community was a part of your family experience.

I grew up in Northeastern Pennsylvania during a time when all neighbors knew each other & watched out for each other. I knew from a young age that I would pursue a career that allowed me to give back to those most in need. I grew up with a terminally ill sister and observed the impact her illness had on those who loved her. Due to her illness, we often had to seek out help from friends and family. I also credit my experience for giving me the acceptance and compassion to follow my path. I grew up with a neighbor with Down syndrome who was older than us. We knew she was different but that didn't matter to us. She played the same games and was fun to be around. I also had a neighbor with significant disabilities who lived in an institution, the White Haven Center. His mom would bring him home every other weekend and on holidays. We all knew when Bobby would be home and did our best to include him in the fun. He would sit on the porch in his wheelchair and smile and laugh. He enjoyed his time with friends and family. I look back on my childhood and am grateful that my family & our neighborhood helped us embrace and learn and grow from each other. We always had each other's back and never hesitated to help each other when needed.

Tell us about Communities Options, Inc. and how your work impacts the community.

Through my work with Community Options I continue to advocate for those we support. A lot of effort goes into introducing them to their community. Through my affiliation with the Moorestown Rotary I have had the chance to show some of those we support what giving back to the community means. The individuals we support in Burlington County often attend Rotary events with me while some volunteer at fundraisers or the local food bank. We are known in the community. And, because of this we are lucky recipients of regular sponsors for our Cupids Chase. We were also recipients of donated cloth masks from individuals who we were introduced to through fellow Rotarians. I wake up every day with the intention to continue our mission enhancing the lives of those we support.

What stories have most impacted you during your time working with marginalized communities?

What I have learned from my experience is we all have abilities and the opportunity to learn from each other. It really does take a village or a community to come

together during both good times and bad. Acceptance is a wonderful thing and everyone despite their circumstances have the right to feel included and cared about. Treat others as you would like to be treated; respect each other's differences; and embrace human compassion.

If you could share one thing with our community during the COVID-19 crisis, what would it be?

During this time, many, some we know and some we do not, came together to help support our front line heroes, our DSPs. I received several phone calls asking how people could help as well as donations of much needed PPE. This is a testimony to the work we do every day and the realization that knowledge and acceptance can help precipitate growth and inclusion of us all regardless of our various abilities.

“The individuals we support in Burlington County often attend Rotary events with me while some volunteer at fundraisers or the local food bank. We are known in the community.”