

CHOICES

June 10, 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

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Shannon Wilkins
Director of Employment Services
Taylorsville, Utah

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 Provo, Utah, a small town that many may know as the home of Brigham Young University. As a young child my father experienced a work-related accident that left him with a Traumatic Brain Injury and paraplegia. Caring for my father and helping him to access his community taught me much about the unique challenges people with disabilities and their families encounter. As such, my first paid employment, at the age of 16 was working with people with disabilities. I have worked with people with disabilities in some fashion ever since. My personal experience taught my family and me the importance of being an advocate and to work for system change that will benefit all members of our community.

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

I began working for Community Options, Inc. three years ago. It was the perfect career move for me because the Community Options, Inc. mission is closely aligned with my own personal mission. Communities are not whole unless they are representative of all members of the community. Opportunities for Employment are so important for all. I have personally witnessed how paid employment has completely changed peoples' lives for the better. Employment gives people a sense of purpose, accomplishment, and the ability to create relationships with others who have shared interests. I have had the honor of helping many people gain and maintain community employment and to help Community Options, Inc. realize our mission in the state of Utah.

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

It is truly amazing to watch people transform with successful employment. So often people are labeled, and that label follows them, creating a situation in which people are underestimated in their abilities. Community Options, Inc mission guides employees to see past the labels and look to the person's ability. I recently worked with a young man who no one in his life believed that he would be able to be employed in the community; leaving him at home all day with little to no opportunity to participate in his community or to be engaged and learning. He was depressed and expressed a very low self-esteem. The Community Options, Inc. Employment Specialist was able to help him find employment at Sam's Club during this COVID-19 pandemic. Within weeks the young man had dramatically changed into a confident and assured person. The joy he expresses is contagious. His coworkers, family, and job coach all agree that employment has had a significant impact in his life and would not have been possible without his Community Options, Inc. Employment Specialist.

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.

John Peck

Regional Director, Utah



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 Payson, Utah. Being the 11th of 14 children I had a lot of opportunities to serve as my siblings worked on church service, school events, and eagle scout projects. We owned a boat business, so when the boat at the playground at the Elementary school was vandalized, we were able to replace it. We also donated a car for a raffle for the high school sports programs and it was cool knowing that it was my family that helped. One of the employees at our boat shop had Down's Syndrome. After digging through the garbage to find tools and boat parts that he had thrown away, I remember asking my dad why we had him work for us. My dad encouraged me to look beyond his physical contribution. I soon discovered that what he did for the company was much more than just clean up trash and tools. He lightened the atmosphere and reduced the stress at the shop as he gave us his daily weather update and taught me a lot about how to treat others.

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

Community Options supports people to have meaning in their lives. We focus on people's strengths and interests and structure their activities and work around their abilities rather than focusing on their disabilities. The people we work with have so much to offer the community; our job is to get them connected with the right people and they do the real work.

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

I have worked with several people that have been told their whole life that they wouldn't be able to walk, talk, get a job, or do a specific activity. Not everyone we worked with learned to walk or talk or got the perfect job, but some did and those who did not still made great progress toward their goals. I have always felt that

it is better to shoot for the stars and reach the moon than to shoot for a cow pie and hit dead on.

One person that I worked with had a goal to make a movie. At first it seemed completely out of reach, however he felt that it was important, so we moved forward. It took several years, but we were able to get help from the local high school and a former employee that worked at the university in the film department and he was able to get his movie made. The movie was a documentary about life in a group home and was used by the Utah Division of Services for People with Disabilities to educate families about supports available to them.

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Shandee Burtis

Associate Executive Director
The Greater Phoenix Area, Arizona



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

I was born and raised in the small, rural town of Sedalia, Missouri. My immediate family only consisted of myself, older sister, our mother, and our father. However, my mother had twelve brothers and sisters and my grandmother on my father's side had 13 brothers and sisters. Most of my aunts and uncles had large families of their own which resulted in being related to the majority of the population of my town!

My mother worked at a factory and my father worked construction. I grew up modestly and was raised knowing that values and ethics were important in life. My mother instilled in me that you should never treat anyone differently, even if they may act or look different than others. Most people within my town knew me or knew someone in my family which made it easier for me to fit in. However, I used to make it a mission of mine in school to always sit with or talk with those that weren't necessarily within my circle of friends. I've always had an interest in people; especially those that seemed to be different than me.

I had family members with intellectual/developmental disabilities, physical disabilities, mental illness, and addiction. Most of the women in my family work as nurses, teachers, and social workers as we were all raised with the knowledge that we should give back to our communities.

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

I began working for Community Options in Arizona beginning August 2017 as the Director for Residential Services. I was excited to learn that I would be working for a company just starting to establish in the Phoenix region and I'd get to experience it from the ground up. We started with one home with three males and grew to five homes within the same year. We opened a day program, employment program, and began in-home supports shortly thereafter. Almost all the individuals we support have moved from home to home, provider to provider, and have experienced a lot of changes and challenges in their lives. We have established beautiful homes that the individuals have taken so much pride in that many get so excited when someone wants to tour their home. We have built relationships with neighbors and the community and have supported individuals with difficult challenges and have watched them become contributing members to their communities through jobs and community involvement. We have also worked with children and their parents in their homes and have had successes with toilet training and behavioral intervention techniques that parents have expressed so much gratitude for.

“I've seen so many of the individuals that I've supported, throughout the years, experience so much personal growth by achieving goals such as weight loss, reduction in medications, reduction in staffing needs, community employment, family reunification, and even vacations they long dreamed for.”

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

Having worked with marginalized communities since 2001, it's difficult to narrow down the most impactful stories. I first started working in a state-run Habilitation Center in Missouri. I developed such a strong relationship with those that I have supported, and it was heartbreaking to transfer to a private provider and leave them. However, the same provider held an integral part in moving the individuals from that facility into community homes. I was able to “check in” on my former friends and was able to hear of their new placements in the communities and take relief in knowing they would soon be living more fulfilled lives with others in their own community homes. I've seen so many of the individuals that I've supported, throughout the years, experience so much personal growth by achieving goals such as weight loss, reduction in medications, reduction in staffing needs, community employment, family reunification, and even vacations they long dreamed for. I love to share some of these stories with friends or acquaintances that ask about “what I do for a living” and take a lot of pride when you can visually see the impact that these stories make on them.

Kathryn Wallace

Executive Director, Tucson, Arizona



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

I was born in the suburbs of Chicago and moved out to Tucson, Arizona when I was ten years old and been here ever since. I grew up with a challenging family life which brought to me to realize my life goal was to help others. At a very young age I knew I wanted to make a difference. I had a friend in high school who had a brother with down syndrome. We developed a very strong bond as he was such an amazing kid with a heart of gold. Even though I had a challenging childhood that didn't always model positive interactions with people who were different from me, but the relationship that I had developed with my friends' brother gave me the insight to make a difference in someone's life by showing compassion and patience. This was my inspiration to give back to the community and provide support to others who need it the most.

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

Community Options, Inc. is a nonprofit organization that supports individuals with developmental disabilities to become as independent as possible. We provide employment, residential, and in-home supports in 10 different states. Our CEO, Robert Stack, started this organization in his home over 30 years ago and it continues to grow. I

started working for Community Options in November of 2019, and I know that we do all it takes to help people to have positive control over their lives and for them to have a life with dignity and respect. The last six months have been challenging as well as a rewarding experience as it is important to me to advocate for those that we support to be a part of the community and give them the opportunity to be heard as they are no different from you or me. We provide an environment for people to be successful in the community, to be employed, to be accepted, and to be heard. We work as a team to get the resources that they need to have the most positive control and to make decisions that would benefit them. We are growing in Tucson to make a positive impact with those who need it the most.

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

I have worked in this field for over 10 years with every story and every individual having impacted me in a different way. I have worked with many individuals that have experienced so many things in life. The one person that continues to be in my thoughts almost every day was

someone who had significant behaviors such as running in to oncoming traffic, hitting staff, engaging in self-injurious behaviors, and accusing staff of doing wrong. She was consistently going back and forth to jail and to the hospital and there was a time that we did not know how support her. It took some time, but we took a different approach to the way we were supporting her. We were able to find what was important to her, for her, and found that balance between the two. It was because of this person-centered approach that we were able to make progress and see a significant reduction in behaviors and hospitalizations. She began to have positive control over her life and made more independent decisions on what she wanted to do, like getting a job, adopting a cat, and even finding a roommate. Two years later she passed away due to health complications but knowing that she was happy and actually having positive control of her life made a huge impact on why I am doing what I am doing today.

“We provide an environment for people to be successful in the community, to be employed, to be accepted, and to be heard.”

Hector Johnson

State Director, New Mexico



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 Las Cruces, New Mexico. As a child, I was faced with difficult challenges, challenges a child should not have to face. However, my childhood has given me a unique experience which I feel fortunate to have acquired.

I grew up very close to family and friends. I was taught at an early age to give back to my community in any form that I could. My parents instilled in me that there is a blessing in every facet of life and that I should share my blessings, especially my faith in God. There were times when my circumstances did not always permit me to give back extrinsically and I often found my community showing support to me. I learned to be responsive to other’s kindness, with my childhood experiences having helped me to realize that regardless of what abilities we might possess, we need each other; and that who we become as adults is shaped by who we encounter in life.

Growing up I was drawn to people with disabilities. As a kid and later as a young teenager, I would share most of my time with kids who had various disabilities. I am certain it was their passion and determination to live a full life that inspired me to face my adversities. As I shared with them, I found myself learning from them, one of the most valuable lessons I have learned in my life was to realize how trivial my challenges were. Still to this day, I continue to be inspired and I am proud to finally give back what was given to me.

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

“Prior to working for Community Options, Inc. (COI) I saw how the rights of people with disabilities were violated, the improper treatment they received and so many things they had to endure within my own community. It was quite frustrating, and I tried to change things by speaking up when I could and to whomever would listen, but I was perceived as controversial. This was until I became part of Community Options, Inc with whom my vision is one in the same.

Over the past 14 years, COI has given me the opportunity to put that vision in action for people with disabilities and take one more step towards equality and empowerment for those we serve within my community. I have been able to convey this vision to my colleagues and Direct Support Professionals (DSP) in New Mexico through my passion to advocate for individuals with disabilities.

At the beginning of each day, we take every new opportunity to positively impact our community by actively applying COIs mission. We are zealous about getting the job that best suits our individuals – where they can thrive, accomplish their dreams, and see success crown their efforts. We are enthusiastic about supporting our individuals in having a meaningful, fun, and satisfying day out in the community. Regarding our homes, we are passionate about providing a personalized, cozy, and comfortable environment where our individuals feel happy, safe, and relaxed to come home to. We strive to give our guardians the confidence and reassurance that their loved ones are provided with outstanding services. In New Mexico,

Community Options, Inc. is highly recommended as a organization that goes above and beyond to make a difference in the life of each of our individual.

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

“We avidly help our individuals overcome their traumas, work towards their dreams and achieve their goals. Like cheering Sophia in her Kung Fu training sessions – she wants to be a tournament champ. Encouraging Steve to stay focused – he works at a grocery chain store and wants to be a floor manager. Emboldening Erika who works persistently on her handmade jewelry – she is an entrepreneur selling her jewelry at the Farmers Market. Reassuring Patricia during her dance practices – she is a Mexican folklore dancer. Boosting Billy for his extraordinary orientation and memory – he remembers where his favorite stores are. Their joy, love, eagerness, determination, and perseverance have inspired us, their staff, as we walk with them in this journey of faith.”

“My parents instilled in me that there is a blessing in every facet of life and that I should share my blessings, especially my faith in God.”

Kassy Kitchens, R.N.

Registered Nurse, Santa Fe and Albuquerque, New Mexico
Associate Executive Director for Albuquerque, New Mexico



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

I was born and raised on the Navajo Indian Reservation in New Mexico and Colorado. Both of my parents taught school and worked on the Navajo Reservation to bring education out of the traditional boarding schools and to mimic the education system utilized in the rest of the United States. My parents taught my brother and myself at a young age that accepting different cultures and traditions is important.

My mother was a teacher that specialized in autism and children with disabilities. I was fortunate to work with her as an Assistant in her classroom. It was during that time I realized that these children need someone to advocate for them. It was apparent to me then that the community at large doesn't understand people with disabilities. Right at that moment I decided that advocating for people was my calling.

I became a RN in 2002 and have made it my mission to advocate for my patients/individuals my whole career.

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

Community Options, Inc. is a nonprofit organization that supports individuals with developmental disabilities to become as independent as possible. We provide employment, residential, and in-home supports in 10 different states. Our CEO, Robert Stack, started this organization in his home over 30 years ago and it continues to grow.

When I learned about the organization, and saw an opportunity existed, I became excited. 2 ½ years later I am thankful every day to be part of an organization that advocates for people with disabilities and has a culture of people with the same mindset that every person deserves to live the best life they can. This organization has allowed me to feel as though as I am part of the bigger picture in achieving my goal of advocating for others.

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

Every day is more amazing than the other since working with Community Options. Watching the individuals we support grow and change is the best story ever. As both the RN and Associate Executive Director I feel that my position to see clients succeed is wonderful.

I have a young man who has many aggressive behaviors that would prevent him from fully being able to participate in activities that he loves. I worked with his family and his team to advocate that his Doctor overlook his disabilities and realize that he needs the same understanding and help that anyone would receive. When the recommendations that I advocated for were listened to, and this young man was given the medication and the counseling that he needed, his father thanked me and said "this is the best my son has ever done and the happiest I have ever seen him". That moment made my cry both out of happiness of this person's success and out of frustration that it had taken so long for someone to be his voice. I truly love what I do, and I want everyone to realize no matter what the exterior may look like that they are people and they deserve nothing but the best we can do for each and everyone.

"I truly love what I do, and I want everyone to realize no matter what the exterior may look like that they are people and they deserve nothing but the best we can do for each and everyone."

Kathryn Conticelli

Executive Director, Santa Fe, New Mexico



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

I was raised in the South Valley of Albuquerque New Mexico where I was living close to a variety of family members. While I was growing up my Grandmother fostered children with disabilities, I was taught how to g-tube feed and communicate via ASL by the time I was six years old. As I hit middle school, I began to assist my developmentally disabled mother who needed assistance with everyday tasks at home and in the community. Growing up helping take care of people with disabilities has given me an incredible desire to make their lives more fulfilling which has carried on throughout my life.

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

Community Options, Inc. has helped open the nation's eyes to the needs of those with developmental and intellectual disabilities and has helped people with developmental disabilities integrate into society via jobs and activities. Our work has made it possible for a variety of people to be as independent as possible including those in rural areas who normally would have to move into a city to receive support.

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

A company I worked for prior to Community Options, Inc. shared an investigation that Geraldo Rivera did about Willowbrook in 1972. It was demoralizing and heartbreaking to see people treated in such a manner. They would share this video with new employees along with other videos to express how much their company and companies like Community Options, Inc. are nothing like Willowbrook and never will be.

Every story of success, good will, and independence, are the reasons why I do the work I have chosen to do. I have multiple stories, multiple experiences, in the many years I have worked with the developmentally disabled. Every single one of these successes has helped me grow, not only in my career but in my personal life as well.

“Every story of success, good will, and independence, are the reasons why I do the work I have chosen to do.”

Greg Thoennes

Regional Vice President

Austin, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico and Utah



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

With my Father having been in the Airforce, I was fortunate to be able to experience living in various cultures, communities, and countries from an early age, with most of my teenage years being spent in Summerville, South Carolina. My brothers and I were taught the importance of honesty, respect, and acceptance from a young age. With my parents encouraging active participation in team and community activities. They understood the importance of learning and contributing to societal values, which I believe helped guide me to where I am today. At the age of nineteen I made one of the most influential decisions of my life and chose to serve a two-year mission to Germany with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. It was during this time that I truly experienced and witnessed how both hard and wonderful life can be. I learned to be selfless and support my community regardless of race, religion, nationality, cultural background, or disability.

After my two years in Germany, I came back and pursued my degree in Emergency Services Administration at Utah Valley University. It was during this time that I became employed with a company that provided community based residential supports to individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. I started out as a part time Direct Support Professional, supporting three of the best people I have ever had the pleasure of knowing. Since then, I have continued my career in the Human Services field advocating for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

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

Community Options, Inc. strives to provide the most humanistic approach to caring and advocating for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. We provide a safe and nurturing environment, that allows people with disabilities to live and actively participate within their community. Community Options believes in smaller more attentive residential settings as we believe this allows our residents to receive more personalized and compassionate care that might not be found in large facilities. I believe that Community Options is providing a valuable service by not only helping members of the community live their lives as independently and successfully as possible but by also advocating for the rights of people who may not be able to do so for themselves.

I believe as stated so eloquently in the Declaration of Independence...."that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness..." We believe that the people we support deserve a life of happiness and dignity, who have the right to be treated as equal members of their communities, which is why we continuously strive as an organization to educate and advocate on the rights and liberties of people living with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

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

I remember a time when I first moved to Texas. I received a call from a leader and neighbor of an informal neighborhood association where one of our homes was. The neighbor was very upset regarding an incident that happened with one of our residents a few days before, and she wanted answers. She said that she was having a gathering of all the neighbors on her street to discuss the issues and whether to take any legal action to force eviction. She invited me to the meeting to introduce myself and the agency I worked for at the time, which I really appreciated. I attended the meeting and was given the opportunity to explain what it is we do. While I couldn't get into many details, as my discussions needed to remain HIPPA compliant, I was able to get the majority of the group to adopt a more compassionate and understanding mind for what it was we were doing. After the meeting, many neighbors in attendance started going out of their way to bring over food, say hello, and invite our residents to community activities.

Being able to educate people about what it is we do and what we stand for is something I will always remember. That meeting is a clear example of the education and advocacy that is still needed within our communities and it is something that I take great care and pride in doing. While working at Community Options, I have been able to educate a U.S. House Representative, Fire Marshals, Homeowners Associations, Educators, and the Neighbors of our residential homes, all through various different situations but with mostly the same outcome of more understanding and acceptance for people with disabilities living in the community.