

CHOICES

June 20, 2020 | Special Edition - Texas



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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Mike Martinez

Executive Director
San Antonio, Texas

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 California and moved out to El Paso, TX when I was 14 years old. My family is Catholic and giving back to others is one of our family values. I was close to my two cousins that had Down syndrome and would help my aunts out as much as I could. I developed a strong bond with both of my cousins that has carried us through the years. I have character defining memories of my family volunteering at the annual church bazaar by gathering donations from the community and local businesses that would be used to help execute a successful event. It was during this time that I realized that I had the passion and patience to help others. Learning the importance of giving back in my community at an early age has forever impacted my life and prepared me for working with individuals with disabilities to live with dignity and purpose in our communities.

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

Community Options, Inc. is a non-profit that works to find people with significant disabilities housing, day programs and employment. We encourage our individuals to be as independent as possible regardless of their disability. I first learned of Community Options 20 years ago when I applied for a job as a Direct Support Professional in El Paso, TX where I mentored under Executive Director, Mario Sanchez. I am thankful every day to be a part of an organization that advocates for people with disabilities. Community Options has given me the opportunity to make positive changes every day and take one more step towards equality and empowerment for people with disabilities. The services we provide to the community matter. One of my biggest joys comes from hearing from families about the impact we have made with a loved one living in one of our group homes or foster care placements.

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

The stories that have most impacted me during my time working with people with disabilities are those that involve overcoming the many obstacles and prejudices that our individuals live with daily. Sadly, there have been many occasions when residents of a community have opposed the opening of a group home in their neighborhood. The resistance to inclusion for all, supports the continued need to advocate, encourage and educate the public to be better and do better.

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

Although being alone has become our new normal, together we will get through this crisis. We should all appreciate and be thankful for our Direct Support Professionals who are the front-line heroes of COVID-19. The commitment and resilience that our team of staff has shown throughout this crisis makes me proud to be involved in work that brings out the best in all of us. I want to thank each one of them for the selfless acts of compassion and sacrifice they make every day.

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.



Jamie Reynolds

**State Director
Dallas, Texas**

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

“Growing up I had a front row seat to my real-life heroes. Perhaps that’s what guided me to this industry and gives me my purpose. I grew up in a small Southeast Texas town along the Texas/Louisiana border where my dad was a firefighter and my mom a nurse. I saw first-hand what it meant to be a servant leader throughout my entire life. I watched them share their skill set and knowledge to help in any capacity. In fact, they still actively do this in my hometown. Every year my dad visits Dallas over Memorial Day weekend, so he can complete various projects in our homes and day program.”

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 Texas. We also operate in 10 other states and have been in existence for 31 years under the same CEO and founder, Robert Stack. What does that really mean? We have homes throughout the community, just like you and I, where 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.

“I always say there is never a day that I am not greeted with a smile and have at least one person who is happy to see me. A lot of people don’t get that every day. There are certainly difficult days and situations but knowing that we are the only family and support system for some of our individuals gives me the most joy. We share in the successes and challenges of helping them live a meaningful life each day. The relationships with the people we support without a doubt have impacted me the most. Simply knowing we are a voice that gives them a sense of trust, calms them when their world is frustrating, and gives them reassurance that they are important is a privilege that I will never take for granted. What we do at Community Options takes a village and I am honored to be a small part in caring for our most treasured and vivacious folks every day.”

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

“I want to applaud a set of dedicated workers who embody the Golden Rule by helping those in need during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. Our dedicated workers at Community Options are among the thousands of direct support professionals that care for people with disabilities, disabilities that make them increasingly

vulnerable if COVID-19 were to take hold. Our direct support professionals are vital to the happiness of persons with autism, developmental, intellectual, and other disabilities. They are creatively engaging our individuals for hours each day to help distract them from the monotony and confusion sheltering in place causes them. Our caring workers do not have the luxury of working from home, and often work for little more than minimum wage. They are truly the unsung heroes who are inspiring so many through their dedication and bravery in caring for our most vulnerable citizens. So, a Texas-sized thank you to the great nurses, doctors, medical professionals, and first responders who are keeping us safe. But let us also add the direct care workers at nonprofits like Community Options who are committed to caring for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities during these times of fear and uncertainty. I am forever grateful for the sacrifices they make each day by continuing to work in the toughest of times in an industry that receives little recognition or support even before COVID-19. They do it because they are selfless and couldn’t imagine doing anything else. They are my heroes yesterday, today, and every day!”

Mario Saenz

Executive Director

El Paso, Texas



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 El Paso and raised in southeast Texas approximately 50 miles west of Corpus Christi. I lived and worked on a ranch called La Rosita while my father was stationed in Germany during WWII. We had cattle and farmed the land. By the age of six, I was picking cotton and going to a two-room school. It was a simple life. We used oil lamps for electricity and had a wooden stove. I remember fetching water from the well that stood between our home and my aunt’s house.

My grandfather was my role model. He taught me the importance of work and providing for the family, while always respecting and helping others too. I learned at an early age to work hard. At the age of nine, we moved back to El Paso after my father’s return. He was stationed at Ft. Bliss. I always had some sort of work: delivery boy, paper route, or pumping gas at the neighborhood gas station. My mother taught me that we needed to look out for our neighbors and the elderly. I would often take care of their yards, run errands, or just help around their homes.

I graduated from Bel Air High School, married at a young age, and joined the Army. I served for three years in the 36th Medical Battalion, MASH unit during the Vietnam War. Upon my discharge, I returned to El Paso. For the next fifteen years, I had several jobs before I started working with the Local Authority with Individuals with Mental Health and Intellectual Disabilities.”

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 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.

El Paso has always lacked in services for people with disabilities as well as providing information on how to secure the few services that are available. Our approach is to educate families and empower individuals with disabilities to advocate for their rights and pursue competitive employment, to become part of their community.

Community Options is a family that connects across the nation. Throughout the years I have had the pleasure of helping other offices in several states. I am thankful that I have worked alongside some very dedicated people, which has made my life richer.”

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

“In 1997 Robert Stack and Patricia Moore offered me the opportunity to join the Community Options family. I believe in the mission of the organization and have been working with this great organization for the past twenty-three years. We have made a difference working in El Paso in educating families, business, and individuals on services available to individuals with disabilities. We have empowered individuals in developing skills for self-advocacy and becoming part of their communities.

There are many stories of success in placing our individuals in competitive employment including seeing some of them retire after 15 and 20 years of employment. Seeing the difference in them and how they develop new friendships and touch the lives of others in the workplace is encouraging.

Hilda is one story that I will always remember. She would come to the office with her mother to meet with her manager. She would walk down the hall facing the wall and would not talk to anyone; she would leave the same way. Her mother

thought Hilda could never get a job. We found her a job at Cattle Baron Restaurant where because of her behaviors, she was hired to roll silverware. She unknowingly threw away her first check and we jumped in the dumpster to find it. We helped her open a checking account and she continued to work with her job coach.

Now Hilda oversees the salad bar, has been employee of the month several times, made some close friends, and celebrated her 14th year anniversary. She still lives with her mother but now she goes to buy their groceries and pays the bills. Her mother is forever grateful. Our focus is to help the individuals succeed, no matter how challenging and overwhelming it may seem. It is success stories like this one that keep us going.”

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

“The COVID-19 pandemic has made us stronger and showed us how we can all work as a team to address any emergency that may arise. It has made our community stronger and collectively pull together to survive this pandemic. This too shall pass. I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to all my Direct Support Professionals, Program Managers, and Administrative staff for pulling together, as always, to ensure the safety of all the individuals we serve. They are not only essential personnel but true heroes whose dedication and compassion should be commended. It is a heartwarming experience to see my Direct Support Professionals unselfishly show up to their assigned shifts to ensure that all individuals remain safe and secure during this pandemic.

I would also like to extend a special thank you to all our National staff for their support, dedication, and availability during this difficult time.”

Jennifer Maine

**Executive Director
Lubbock, Texas**



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 Arlington, TX with two siblings. I was a very shy child who didn’t speak much but was always drawn to helping others. Much of our free time as children was spent at church, where we would help with the youth groups and keep the neighborhood clean. We volunteered our time picking up trash to keep yards and alleys tidy. As I got older, my desire to help others didn’t waiver. I left Lubbock for a while, but then quickly found my way back. While volunteering for our church, I started an online Facebook group called Lubbock Helping Lubbock Families, later known as West Texas Blessings. The page was started as a resource for families in need. It enabled these families to receive clothing or food at no cost to them while allowing other local families to help those in need without any judgement. I am proud to say that the group is still up and running 7 years later.”

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

“Community Options is a nationwide nonprofit that serves individuals with disabilities and believes in the dignity of every person and the freedom of all people to experience the highest level of self-determination. Community Options

offers residential and employment programs to assist individuals with disabilities by providing them with opportunities to thrive in their community by living an active and purposeful life. Utilizing person-centered support staff, we strive to promote the physical and emotional well-being of the individuals we serve. Every day it is our goal to offer each individual a chance to be their most independent self, someone who can take care of themselves and feel like they matter. Our staff work with them to understand their individual goals so that we can provide moments throughout their day to add value and intention. Community Options strives to bring awareness to the community about people with disabilities and educate others on their rightful place in our everyday lives.”

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

“The individuals that we care for each have a story to tell. Some can verbally say what they want while others require time to understand their unique way of communicating. Both are equally impactful. They have made the deepest impression because of their strong desire to participate in the community and overcome any challenges that may arise. The resiliency they exemplify offers a life lesson to all they encounter. Being a part of their lives and enabling them to be their best, most independent self makes coming to work worthwhile. Community Options creates a

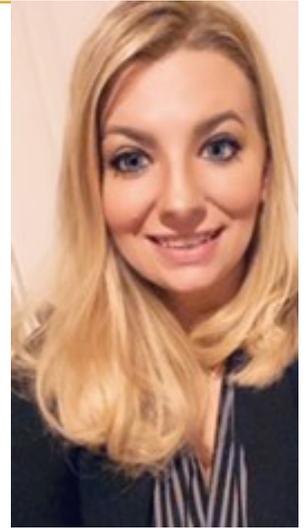
safe and healthy environment focused on maintaining relationships that empower and create a sense of trust for them to flourish and succeed in all that they do.”

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

“The COVID-19 pandemic has further highlighted the incredibly important role of our Direct Support Professionals during this unprecedented time. These essential employees are often overlooked in their classification as front-line workers. Much of the public are unaware of the selfless acts our staff make each day to care for our individuals with disabilities. The time away from their families and safety concerns they feel during COVID-19 are set aside so that they can continue providing support and creative engagement to all our individuals. They are true heroes in my eyes and the hearts of our individuals. I would like to acknowledge their bravery, hard work, and dedication and say, ‘Thank you. We appreciate you.’”

Amber Romero

**Executive Director
Amarillo, Texas**



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 Amarillo, TX but raised in the small town of Clovis, New Mexico. My parents have been business owners since 1992 and for as long as I can remember have always sought out opportunities to serve the community. I grew up learning how to manage a business and put others first at a very young age. My parents worked hard to instill good values into all 6 of their children, to include helping others without expecting anything in return.

I have been in the healthcare field for 14 years in a variety of settings. Every setting is different, and I was able to learn a variety of skills along the way. I have always had a servant heart, even at a young age. I enjoy being a part of helping others to create success in their own lives. Having a child with Autism has allowed me a unique perspective, both as the caregiver and parent. That has helped me empathize with parents and family members that question if a group home setting is the right setting for their loved one. The combined values that started during my childhood and now with my own family, have prepared me for my role in working with individuals with disabilities.”

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

“Community Options, Inc. is a non-profit organization founded by Robert Stack in 1989 with the sole purpose of helping individuals with disabilities thrive in a non-restrictive environment in their community. In Amarillo, TX we provide residential care, host home and day habilitation services. The individuals we support are out in the community teaching others how to be unique, caring and accepting. They take part in the everyday lives of others and continue to make a profound difference in helping others appreciate differences. The Direct Support Professionals provide care in the home and help to bring an enhanced quality of life to those who need extra supports. The foundation of our organization is to assist individuals by giving them the tools and skills necessary to live a meaningful life with purpose and dignity.”

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

“There are so many stories that come to mind. I think what has most impacted me is when an individual comes to Community Options that has never known affection or positive care. It is always a rough start, gaining that trust. There is usually a lot of push back, but when they see that we are consistent and remain steadfast, they begin to realize we are here to help, not hurt.

Seeing individuals learn new skills and share in their excitement is a priceless gift that I am blessed to be able to witness. I stand firm in saying that every individual I have worked with has taught me more than I could ever teach them. The individuals teach us how to love, be patient, and see the world from a different viewpoint. I have grown as a person and that is a feeling that is irreplaceable.”

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 this crisis, it would be that we are in this together. This is a scary time for everyone especially our individuals and Direct Support Professionals. The Direct Support Professionals risk their health and safety to provide care to the individuals and are invaluable and should not go unnoticed. Our Service Coordinators, Program Managers, Nurses and Program Directors are working together to ensure that all necessary services continue for the individuals we support while observing COVID-19 precautions. The Direct Support Professionals have been phenomenal in maintaining the safety of the individuals. They continue to dedicate themselves as essential workers during this crisis with bravery, compassion, and endurance to our most vulnerable population.



Samantha Cutler

Executive Director
Corpus Christi, Texas

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 San Antonio, TX. My family has always been involved in our church, Mission San Francisco De La Espada. Growing up, many hours were spent volunteering and helping others. So, giving back to the community was instilled in me at a young age. I attended St. Mary’s University where I received my bachelor’s degree in Business. At St. Mary’s I learned about servant leadership and upon graduation I knew I wanted a career that was focused on this.”

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

“Community Options’ mission is to provide housing and employment for people with developmental disabilities. In Corpus Christi, our employment program has placed many people in jobs in the community. We provide employers with reliable hardworking staff and provide people with disabilities, who yearn for a meaningful daily activity, the opportunity to earn minimum wage or better. Our focus remains on supporting our individuals to be active members in their communities.”

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

“We recently had a young man with Autism move into one of our homes. He had been living with his family his entire life with his mom serving as his sole care provider. She passed away and his sisters who are in their twenties stepped up and took responsibility for their brother. These sisters stopped their lives to take care of him. When they found Community Options, they were apprehensive but wanted their brother to have his own life and home. They knew he needed full time supports that we could provide. Moving day was very emotional for everyone but our staff were attentive to the family and gave them comfort and praise for stepping up and supporting their brother. Knowing that I had a part in helping a young man find a forever home in the community with the supports he needs and knowing that his sisters are now able to return to work and school gives me great pride in my daily work.”

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

“Direct Support Professionals are heroes! When our community came to a halt and people went into quarantine, direct support professionals did not. Their work did not stop. Our staff have continued to put themselves at risk in coming to work every day supporting people with disabilities in their homes. As Texas begins to reopen, the virus has not disappeared. Everyone still needs to take precautions to protect those most vulnerable like the people we serve, and our Direct Support Professionals are prepared and ready!”