

CHOICES

July 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

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.

Tigest Alemu

Executive Director
Southern Region-Rockville, Maryland



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

Growing up as the daughter of Ethiopian immigrants, I learned from a young age how important it is to have strong community values. My parents left behind their familial support systems in Ethiopia to migrate to the East Coast of the US and build their lives from scratch. This was a challenging transition. They very often had to rely on the support of other members of the Ethiopian immigrant community, many of whom were strangers, to help them navigate. Once they got settled, my parents were determined to pay forward the kindnesses they received and instilled in their children the virtue of finding ways to be of service to others. These values stuck with me and helped drive me towards my current career path focused on supporting community members with intellectual differences.

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

Community Options is a provider of residential care and employment support services for adults with intellectual and developmental differences. Driving our organization's mission is a belief in the dignity of every person, and in the freedom of all people to experience the highest degree of self-determination.

We are a national agency, operating across 10 states, but we take a local approach to cultivating programs that are individually tailored to meet the needs of our clients in their specific environments. Examples of our programs and services include community-based living, employment supports, high school transition programs, and specialized programs for respite and medically fragile people with intellectual differences.

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

For me, the biggest impression that has come from working with our clients is how inspiring and uplifting these individuals are. Having a loved one with a developmental disability in my own family, I am sensitive to how emotionally draining it can be for clients as they manage through their conditions and the associated challenges. However, our clients are so full of seemingly endless joy and optimism that I cannot help but admire and be proud of their resilience.

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

Our direct support professionals face significant exposure risk but are willing to take this on for the sake of our clients, offering to stay with clients as long as needed. They have been selfless, caring and truly inspiring during this difficult time. I want to thank them and all of our essential staff including managers and administrative team members. These individuals have continued to come to work and served a crucial role in ensuring the safety of clients as well as their own colleagues.

Monique DuBois

**Executive Director,
Frederick, Maryland**



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 Pasadena, MD where I attended Archbishop Spalding High School and Johnson C. Smith University in Charlotte, NC. Growing up in a Christian home I learned at an early age the importance of helping others. When my niece Brittany was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy at an early age, I knew that I wanted to be an advocate for individuals with disabilities. I wanted to ensure that these individuals have the same opportunities as everyone else.

My parents taught me to help people who are less fortunate, give what you can, and do what you can. But most importantly, they taught me to do things not for recognition but because it is the right thing to do. I have fond memories of my dad, who recently passed away, and my mother always opening their home for the holidays for my friends whose families lived in other states, and welcoming them into our home as if they were their own children. This taught me the importance of community and welcoming others. My parents would selflessly give to others, and these values have shaped me into the person that I am today. Having values is the true judge of what is important in life.

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

Community Options of Greater Baltimore/Frederick provides residential housing, day habilitation, and supported employment to individuals in the region. Community Options gives individuals with intellectual disabilities the opportunity to develop the necessary skills to gain independence and to become contributing members of their communities. I joined the Community Options family in June of 2019. During my brief time here, I've observed the organization's quality services, and it is obvious that Community Options, Inc truly cares.

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

In 2009, I advocated for the closing of one of the largest institutions in Maryland, The Rosewood Center. At the time, we were told that the individuals there could not succeed in the community. Once these individuals were removed from the institution and placed in homes in the community with caring staff, they flourished. Many of these individuals are now living independently and have jobs in the community. I'm pleased when I'm out and about and one of them approaches me with a smile.

They tell me about a place they have visited for the first time, cooking a meal with staff, celebrating a birthday, or participating in a Sip and Paint. These things that we take for granted bring so much joy to our individuals and I enjoy helping them make lasting memories.

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

Living through the COVID-19 Pandemic has been a learning experience. Our normal way of doing things has changed. Living through this has been challenging for me, so I know that it has been extremely challenging for our individuals. COI has taken strict measures to ensure the safety of our individuals by implementing daily temperature checks and ensuring that each home has adequate PPE. Our DSPs have been our heroes during this time. They give selflessly of themselves to support our individuals and do their best to maintain some sense of normalcy for the individuals we support.

Tim Hawk

**Executive Director
Northwest, 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 Upper Burrell, a small rural township in Western Pennsylvania. From as far back as I can remember, my family instilled in me the importance of helping others. My parents have always been quick to jump in and help anyone in any way they can. While financially we couldn't often do a lot, time and talent are just as valuable to those in need. There were many times my father and I would go out on a freezing winter's night to fix someone's furnace. On my eighth birthday, I remember my mother picking up an old woman struggling with a walker and driving her to the store and back. I was so angry because we were supposed to be going to the toy store for me, but here I am 30 years later remembering helping someone that day with no recollection of what toy I bought.

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

For over 30 years Community Options has been providing housing and employment supports for individuals with disabilities. Every person, regardless of disability, should have full access to live and work in their community with the same degree of freedom and self-determination as all other citizens. My mantra has always been that every home I oversee would be a home that my family and I would be proud to live in.

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

Early in my career, I had the privilege of working with a man who I'll call Ed. He was born in a rural area of Pennsylvania in the 1930s and was placed in a state institution in 1942. Ed had a hearing impairment and Cerebral Palsy. In the early 80s, after 40 years of being locked away, he was able to move into a community home. It was soon discovered just how smart, funny, and caring he was. Ed had 2 younger siblings that he never really knew due to being institutionalized at such a young age, but once moved out of the institution, Ed asked his staff to help track them down. He began to send them Christmas cards. Since he had hand spasms, he'd dictate to his staff, and they would write out the cards for him. When Ed's sister passed away, his staff took him to her funeral. Ed wheeled his chair up to his brother's side as he paid his last respects at her casket. Ed began making sounds and waving his hands around. Slightly panicked, Ed's brother, Mel, looked to the staff and asked what he was doing. The staff told him that Ed was communicating using sign language. Mel, and the rest of his family never knew Ed could communicate. For all those years, they thought that the staff were sending the cards.

In fact, Ed's family didn't think he could do much of anything. His parents had sent him away, didn't talk about him, and left him without a family for nearly 60 years. If it weren't for that funeral, Ed may have never had a family.

After Ed's conversation with Mel, the family rallied around him. Ed got to know his nieces, nephews and cousins. He discovered a large extended family that remained a major part of his life until the very end. Ed had an amazing life those last 20 years; a life afforded by the opportunity to live in the community.

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

When this pandemic hit, America began to recognize all the overlooked workers that are essential to our way of life. However, for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, the direct support professionals (DSPs) who care for them have always been and will always be essential. There are thousands of DSPs across our country that tirelessly work so that individuals with significant disabilities can lead full and productive lives and be active members of their communities. They don't have the luxury of plastic barriers and social distance markers on the floor. They risk their health and the health of their families because they know that the people that they support matter. It is time that these dedicated professionals have their time in the sun. It's time they are recognized and applauded by America for the work they do. It's time that funding is put in place for them to be paid the wage they deserve.



Patricia Bart

Executive Director
Drums/Poconos, 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 Northeastern Pennsylvania in the city of Wilkes-Barre. My mother was a nurse who always encouraged me to care for other people. She would take my sister and me to provide companionship to the elderly patients for whom she provided home health care services. We also volunteered at the nursing homes where she worked on the weekends. I attended Catholic school throughout my education and giving back and helping others was something instilled in me since Kindergarten. The importance of serving the community was a cornerstone of my Catholic education. I have carried those values with me throughout my life. I could not feel fulfilled in my career if I did not feel I was giving back in some way.

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

Community Options has given me the ability to give back. It is so important for the individuals we support to be a part of their communities and for those communities to accept and include them. Our communities would be missing out on something great if they were excluded from them. They all contribute in their own unique ways to the world around them.

My work at Community Options allows me to help include those individuals and to educate people who are not familiar with what we do. It is not noble, and it isn't altruistic for those we support to be a part of their communities, it's necessary and deserved. It is not our job to change the individuals we support to fit into the world, it is our job to change the world to meet the needs of those individuals. We are improving the lives of those we support every day and in turn, they are improving their communities.

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

The stories that have impacted me the most are the stories of individuals who are institutionalized or treated as less than everyone else for simply being who they are. When I see stories of individuals who go from being ignored, marginalized, and shut off from society in places where they are only seen as a number, to homes and communities where they can contribute and be valued, it is inspiring.

When I first began my career at Community Options, I worked with a student in a work-based learning experience who was very hesitant to participate in the program. He had anxiety and low self-esteem because of his disabilities and didn't feel he would

succeed. With encouragement and support, he agreed to give it a try. By the end of the nine-week program, he did not want it to end and he told his mom that he "finally knew what pride felt like." The student went on to be employed by the site where he completed the work experience and his self-esteem improved so much that he decided to enroll in college. I have never forgotten that student and the impact that being included had on him.

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

I would like our community to come out of this COVID-19 crisis with the understanding that our employees, especially our Direct Support Professionals, are essential and not just during times of crisis. The dedication of our DSPs has been incredible during this time. The support they provide makes a real difference in the lives of our individuals and the caring and compassion they show is something that needs to be applauded and rewarded by our legislators. I would like to personally thank our DSPs for their dedication, hard work and most of all for showing up during such uncertain times. They give meaning to the lives of the people they support.



Louis Esola

**Executive Director
York, 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 Greensburg, Pennsylvania, a small suburb about 45 minutes south of Pittsburgh. I was raised to believe that people with difference should be treated with respect. My family always volunteered to help, even if just in small ways. I learned that if you had an opportunity to help, then you should. Staying late after a community event to help clean up, stopping to help someone on the side of the road who needed a battery jump, or asking someone who looked to be having a hard time if they needed a hand is what I grew up around. I learned early on that doing these kinds of things not only helps those in need, but it inspires others to do the same. Pretty soon everyone is pitching in! You get a feeling that every action you take means something, and you feel closer and more connected to not just the person or people you are helping but your whole community.

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

The mission of Community Options is to provide residential and employment services to people with disabilities. We help thousands of people with disabilities across the country to achieve their goals. I started with the company as a Direct Support Professional in September of 2012. I've always felt that Community Options' impact extends beyond the services we provide. We spread awareness that people with disabilities are just as capable of contributing to the greater good as anyone else. One of the most fun parts of working for Community Options is telling people about what we do. I can hear a pin drop in the room and see light bulbs go off in people's heads. Most people don't realize that almost 1 in 4 adults in the US have a disability of some sort, and that the smallest adaption or helping hand can make such a huge difference in their lives. Even something like a small strip of carpet along a wall can give someone that is blind a way to get around their home without assistance. When we help to do this for them, you almost always see this person with a disability turn around and help others in need with their volunteer work and jobs in the community. We emphasize that it is never the person or their disability that we need to try and change, it is the way that we go about accomplishing a task or reaching a goal that can be adapted in order to give everyone a chance to reach that goal.

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

There are many! Every one of the individuals we support, as well as their families and support teams, all have their own personal story that is truly inspirational. The story that has impacted me the most is of a guy named Scott, who was the first person I worked with as a Direct Support Professional. Scott is a guy with severe autism. He had been bounced around to different providers without success due to "behavioral issues," and ultimately ended up at Western Psychiatric Institute and Clinic in Pittsburgh, PA. No other mental health providers would step up to help Scott, and it seemed that his destiny was to end up in yet another large institution, as many people with disabilities still do, with numerous restrictions and impersonal services in place. With the help of a truly multi-disciplinary team, including Scott's family, his doctors and his staff at Community Options, we were able to get Scott into a beautiful home in the community. We then went to work on lowering the vast amount of medications he'd been prescribed in Western Psych meant to control his "behavior." As we did this, we all could see a huge change in Scott as the side effects of these medications started to dissipate. He was smiling more, getting into the community more, and soon enough, he was volunteering in the community, helping others just as we'd helped him. It was life-changing to watch this guy grow into a valued member of the community. Not only did I help him, but he taught me in more ways than I can describe about perseverance and finding joy in the little things in life. When many, many people did not think it could be done, Scott and Community Options proved them all wrong.

Continued...

Louis Esola

Executive Director

York, Pennsylvania

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

If I could only share one thing, it would be how important direct support professionals are to all of our communities. They are essential. They come to work every day to help the most vulnerable people in our community to live their lives and achieve their goals. They administer medications, teach hygiene, coach healthy living, help people who can't speak to communicate, help people who can't see or move to navigate, and provide love and companionship for a population who has been starved of it for almost their entire history. This work does not pause when a natural disaster, state of emergency, or pandemic such as COVID-19 comes around. It is in times like these when our direct support professionals put the needs of others in front of their own and those of their families. They continue to step in and help those most in need to continue to live their best lives while maintaining their safety.

With all of this said, direct support professionals are vastly underpaid for their work, due to a lack of funding at the state and federal level. It is our collective responsibility to spread awareness to our communities, especially our local governments, of how important this work is and how direct support professionals deserve to have a living wage. If you know a direct support professional, please take the time to thank them for what they do!

Sharon Schwab

Assistant Executive Director
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania



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 a small town in Folkestone, England. I moved to the United States when I was three years old. At that time, the steel industry was very strong internationally and my father relocated our family to Columbia, MD. Columbia, MD was one of the first planned communities in the United States. Columbia, MD was guided by principles that are organized into five characteristics: diversity, stewardship, land use and design, neighborhoods and destinations and community facilities and services. The guiding principles are a set of values that establish expectations for Columbia as it continues to evolve and grow. To highlight a few principles to include: Diversity in population in all respects (age, race, ethnicity, religion, economics, etc.), mix of housing types, civic engagement where Columbia was built as an “open community”, one that would be a new model to overcome racial and economic discrimination and segregation, stewardship, land use and design, neighborhood and destination where the redevelopment of downtown Columbia as mixed use and walkable and have an urban center and neighborhood conservation and revitalization. Growing up in this wonderful community in the 70s and 80s, made me who I am today. It taught me how to treat people with dignity and respect and have a love for all individuals. It showed me what we can have everywhere and how I can help in making changes. Having the

opportunity on a daily basis to grow up in a planned community taught me ethics and honesty. I was very fortunate to live in Columbia as a child and teenager and it is now a part of my core values.

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

After graduating college, I went into the human service field. I never thought at that time that I would be so drawn to helping individuals. Twenty five years later, I am even more passionate about helping and assisting those that we serve. We work with a very vulnerable population and we can make a positive impact every day. Community Options not only provides a residence but a home. Home is where you feel that you can be yourself, feel love and respected and most of all, understood. Community Options, Inc. does all of that and more. I feel blessed every day that I was given the opportunity to make positive changes in the lives of the folks we serve. As leaders, it is our job to ensure that we let the local communities know of the great work we do every day. We lead the charge in education and advocacy. We stand up for those that might not always be able to stand up for themselves. We assist local and regional politicians take notice and create change.

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

I have supported many individuals over the years that had previously lived in institutions. In my first human service

job back in the 90s, I worked with a lady who had lived in Pennhurst for many years. Living in the institution, she had been mistreated and abused for many years. Every night, she would go to bed and sometimes during the night she would take all of her clothes (out of her laundry basket and dresser) and put them in bed with her under the covers. In the morning, we would reassure her that we weren't going to take her clothes and we would assist her in putting them back in the appropriate places. After going through this with her day after day, night after night, I realized that she did this because she never had clothes of her own, or when she did they were repeatedly taken away. I became very fond of her over time and when she was upset, she would scream “don't take me back to Pennhurst”. I reassured her that will never happen again. We take for granted basic essentials like clothes but to her, it was more than just clothes, it was her dignity.

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

Working in residential care and supporting one of our most vulnerable populations during a pandemic, we truly have wonderful, dedicated and exceptional staff. From our front line direct support professionals to our managers, their dedication is unwavering. Most folks that work in this field do it as a calling. They are drawn to it because of the need to help others. I am so proud of our staff. Hats off to you all!

Bridget Haney

**Regional Director
Western, 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 miniscule rural town in Southwestern, PA named, Mapletown. It is located slightly above the West Virginia border. The town is so small it isn't even on the map. My ancestors founded this small town and everyone who lived there was an immediate or close relative. This was a community where everyone looked out for and took care of each other. This strong sense of connection instilled a very deep passion for caring for others and treating everyone with kindness and respect. As the 4th daughter of 5 girls, and having been born on my Father's birthday, I was often found at my Father's side learning things that were, at that time, not considered something girls should do. My parents' strong work ethic and the expectation that I could do anything were learned at a young age and have remained with me. I was the first in my family to go to college and onto graduate school.

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

I began with Community Options in the early 90s when individuals were

beginning to leave Western Center after an investigation resulted in a lawsuit and funding was provided to move people into the community. This was my first job in the residential field and my first visit to a state institution was shocking. I had no idea that anyone could be imprisoned and treated with such disrespect. Although there are many other providers who perform similar work, Community Options is the frontrunner as an agency that implements person centered philosophy. It is impossible to measure the impact our work as an agency has had on the thousands of people we support.

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

I have worked with COI for 26 years and in that time, I have moved many people into their very first home in the community. They have all touched my heart in some way, so it is difficult to pick one that has had the most impact. Many of them come with a history of trauma that is horrific. One young lady had a history of being sexually assaulted by her male relatives. She was only 20 when I helped her move to her new home. At first, she was so traumatized by her past, that she wouldn't make eye contact or want to be touched or hugged. With some time and patience and showing her

that there are good people in her circle, she came out of her shell and now she is one of the most loving people you will ever meet. She is someone who I can always count on to give me a great big smile and a hug and say I hope you have a great day.

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

The beginning weeks of COVID 19 were very stressful especially for a Director. The weight of the lives of so many people with disabilities and their staff and our extended families was on our shoulders. One wrong decision would have impacted the lives of an untold number of people with possible devastating results. The individuals we support were understanding and supportive of the changes we had to drastically make to their lives. The DSPs, administrative and management staff all stepped up, asked how they could help, and without complaint did what they had to do to get us all through this pandemic. I would like to thank them all for their kind words and offers of help and support. I couldn't have made it through these past few weeks with you.



Stephen Hall

Executive Director

Greenburg/Westmoreland, Pennsylvania

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

“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” My parents repetitively preached this ‘Golden Rule’ to my brother and I throughout our childhood. Treating others with respect and teaching us responsibility were cornerstones of our childhood education. Having a brother close in age, we enjoyed and participated in the same activities, and we were highly competitive with one another. Similar personalities and competitive natures usually led to brotherly fights. My parents taught my brother and I responsibly through chores and schedules and taught us respect through our daily interactions. Before my brother and I were teenagers, we each had multiple jobs to teach work ethic, saving money, and commitment. One of my pre-teen jobs was mowing lawns for elderly or disabled people in my area. The appreciation I received from these people that couldn’t do this for themselves was just as satisfying as the money received for the service. My brother and I volunteered for Habitat for Humanity through our church, and I have been involved in multiple community service projects over the last decade. Although it is great to provide a service for the community, the best way someone can give back to their community is to follow the ‘Golden Rule.’ Being kind and respectful to one another, working together rather than fighting, and being able to show empathy for another’s situation is, in my opinion, the best way to give back and unite a community.

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

I started with Community Options Inc. in 2015 as a DSP for the Westmoreland Region. In 2016 I was a program specialist for the Pittsburgh region, and have been back in Westmoreland since late 2016 as a program specialist, residential director, and now the executive director. In both regions, Community Options Inc. is about providing the best life possible for the adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Providing them the best life means providing daily services and assisting them with everyday needs. Services could be a simple task, to most of us, like preparing a meal, planning a daily agenda, driving, or taking proper medications. Simple tasks to most of us aren’t necessarily a simple task to those we support at Community Options Inc. Giving our individuals a lifestyle they can enjoy and providing them opportunities to be successful is the experience I received with Community Options, Inc.

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

Over the past five years, I have seen the openings of 13 residential homes. Some of the individuals that moved into these homes came from hospitals or other care facilities where they did not have access available to the community or even to be outside their residence if there wasn’t a scheduled event. For a few of these individuals, transition was difficult into a community-based home because they didn’t understand this way of life.

Specifically, two individuals from the Westmoreland region and their transition into community-based homes had the strongest impact on me during my time thus far at Community Options Inc. Months of consistency with their routine, being a consistent support in their lives, and above all patience led to the eventual successful transitions of these adults into their new homes. The impact that the direct support professionals and management teams had on the lives of these adults is heartwarming and rewarding; this sense of accomplishment is one of the reasons why I chose this field for my career.

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 my community during the COVID-19 crisis, I would acknowledge the efforts of the direct care workers. Many of the individuals we support are classified as “high risk” for COVID-19 due to age, immune system deficiencies, or other medical factors. Direct care workers have to take care of themselves to ensure the safety of the clients that they continued to support. The additional protocols that direct care workers were required to follow while others were working from home or temporarily laid off speaks volumes to the commitment they have for their employer and the clients they serve. I am truly appreciative for all the efforts taken to protect our staff and individuals supported from the Westmoreland Region during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Joseph Milharcic

Executive Director
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania



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 Midwest, I learned early on that in order to thrive, communities need to look after each other. My father taught me early on that if you could help someone, you should. Whether it be with moving something, helping them paint a wall or fix something. Many people don't have the luxury to be completely self-sufficient. My sister was born with cerebral palsy and to me and my brother, she was just a sister. I look back and see the struggles my mother and father had with raising a daughter with a physical disability in the late 70s and early 80s. My mother had to fight the school district to provide an education for my sister, fight the insurance company to provide the needed supports for her and fight the community who just wanted her to be "put away" in an institution. She showed me that to make a change, you had to sometimes join that organization and fight from within. She became a school board member to help show them how to support a child with disabilities.

In high school, my sophomore class service project was to build a playground at a school in an economically challenged neighborhood. We designed, planned, and built a playground for the local community with money we raised. It was my first real experience seeing a project from the beginning to the end with so many moving parts and bringing so many people together. It was amazing to me to see how so many hands truly make light work.

In college, a group of classmates and I began a program where we would provide tutoring to children in exchange for food to take home to their families. To see the pride these kids had to be able to help their families through a difficult time was outstanding. We often don't realize how much kids and other dependents want to help, but never seem to be given the opportunity.

My experiences have made me realize that working for the betterment of someone else is my true calling. I feel confident that every day I am making someone's quality of life better. I can't imagine doing anything different.

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

I consider myself honored to be part of the Community Options family. We strive to support individuals living in the community as independently as possible. We help them learn how to cook and clean, we support them in looking for meaningful work, and we work with their families and entire support teams to assure a quality of life we all want. No longer do we hide those with intellectual disabilities, we bring them into our communities. We engage our individuals with community organizations to volunteer time, helping those who need it most.

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

We all just want to be heard. People with disabilities are no different, they want to be heard. One of the most impactful stories of my time working with individuals with disabilities was when, during a fun exercise, I asked the folks in the room what their dreams were. I spoke about dreams and shared an example. Each person, in the manner in which they communicated, shared their own dreams. These dreams came quick – one person wanted a job to make some spending money, one wanted to have a home all to their own, one wanted not to be bullied, and yet another wanted people not to stare at them. Some of the dreams that this group wanted were things we all take for granted each and every day. It hit me hard and made me look at my own life and realize what gifts I had been given and take stock in how I was sharing those with the world.

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

Our staff are amazing. The news liked to talk about all the people working from home, there were an abundance of Internet memes about working remotely. Our staff couldn't do that. We couldn't have our DSPs work from home. They had to be there, they had to leave their families and go to work. They had to work without knowing if they were coming into contact with the virus or not. They exhibited true heroic work ethic. They are amazing and amaze me more and more each day.



Karima Boyd

Executive Director
Union County, New Jersey

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

Growing up in a two-parent home, my parents instilled that education and helping others were of great importance. My first real experience of giving back was at Woodbridge Developmental Center. While attending a company picnic with my aunt, although my aunt wasn't working, she started to assist with serving the individuals. I jumped in and started to help; they really touched my heart. All the staff were amazed by my interaction with the individuals. While my friends decided to go on vacation, I applied for and accepted a summer position at Woodbridge Developmental Center.

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

Community Options is a non-profit organization that continues to serve individuals nationally during the pandemic. Community Options continues to provide residential services, day habilitation services, along with supportive employment throughout communities. Community Options continues to develop programs so that all individuals with intellectual disabilities can live in the community and be afforded the same opportunities as others.

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

Working at the developmental center changed my life. I would not wish that form of living on anyone. But at the time that was all the world knew and it was considered normalcy. Imagine that!

Throughout the years, I have been able to navigate and gain experience in understanding the meaning of quality of care throughout the human and social service field and learned first-hand that community living provides excellent integrated services for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. It gives them a chance to live in their community of choice and live life to the fullest. I will continue dedicating myself to providing opportunities for individuals to exercise their voice and be an important part of their communities.

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

Working during this pandemic has given me a great deal of humility with realizing that at any time we can face times of hardship. I have been able to go into the homes and assist with helping the direct support professionals with cleaning and reassuring the individuals that we will get through this crisis. I dedicate these words to all the direct support professionals – we are so thankful for all your devotion and continued support.

You have shown commitment in caring for the individuals we support who were directly affected with the virus. You never wavered. You continue to maintain dedication, transparency, and resilience in this national crisis. Our direct support professionals are pillars of strength!

I am proud to be a member of a team that continues to strive for excellence.

I would like to also acknowledge Robert Stack, Svetlana Repic-Qira, and Ayesha S. Patrick, for their continued support through COVID-19.



Patrick Charles

Executive Director

Cumberland/Camden/Atlantic & Gloucester, 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 Port-au-Prince, Haiti from a very loving and dedicated family. My father was a school principal and later a city mayor, and my mother a schoolteacher. I was taught as a young kid to always lead by example. My parents have dedicated their lives to making a difference in the community and empowering others. Throughout my career I have always invested my gifts and time in helping people. I started very early on tutoring students from different cultures in many subjects at the Union County College Academic Learning Center in Cranford, New Jersey. I also worked alongside community college leaders and public officials to organize fundraising and ensure all students have programs available that guarantee their success. Afterwards, I was and still attracted to the mental health field and to this day I continue to strongly support people with special needs.

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

Community Options currently operates in 10 states within the United States, and it has been very successful in carrying

the mission of providing housing and employment for people with disabilities for 31 years under the strong leadership of our President and Founder, Robert Stack. I feel strongly that I can help someone with special needs within my community either to find a home to live in or find jobs where they can be paid competitive wages. People with special needs are just like all of us, and the more I can help them towards inclusion in the community the more impactful my role will be.

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

Will Smith said: *"If you're not making someone else's life better, then you're wasting your time. Your life will become better by making other lives better."*

Every day I find it rewarding to know that I'm making a difference in the lives of others. Through their non-verbal expressions, and seeing great accomplishments either at social skills, or personal development I can tell I'm doing the right thing. One of our residents in Sicklerville, NJ, Linda Dredden, is a reminder of why my role is critical and important. Linda was struggling in a home far from her mother. After moving closer to her mom, Linda has started making better decisions in her life.

She now goes to the gym and has developed short term goals for her life. In other words, her consistent progress continues to remind me how important and critical my role is to advocate for people with special needs and influence others in different capacities to do the same.

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

I have seen staff show a strong level of creativity and dedication toward our individuals. We have direct support professionals and managers who leave their own house and their loved ones to care for individuals during this pandemic. Our direct support professionals are front line workers who are doing an amazing job at providing the care needed for the individuals we support. They are true heroes.

So, I'd like to give a great thank you to all essential employees who never stop being available to those in our care across the nation. I am very grateful and honored for their hard work and all the sacrifices they have made to ensure a safe environment.