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COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES BOARD

Tompkins County Whole Health
201 East Green Street
Ithaca, New York 14850-5421

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Developmental Disabilities Subcommittee
February 10, 2026, 10:00 a.m. via Zoom
Meeting Minutes

Minutes Approved
March 10, 2026

Present: James Beaumont; Jeffrey Boles; Sheila McEnery; Nancy Saltzman; Walaa Maharem-Horan; Allison Weiner-Heinemann; and Sally McConnell-Ginet
Excused: Khaki Wunderlich
Unexcused:
Guests Present: Jamie Kelly, OPWDD; Lyndsey Paulin, RACKER; Marlene Tagliavento, RACKER; Andrea Champlain, FLIC; Elspeth Peterson, Unity House; Aaron Brazon, Unity House; Sarah Watson, David's Refuge
Staff: Harmony Ayers-Friedlander, DCS; Shannon Alvord, TCWH; and Karan Palazzo, LGU Administrative Assistant

The meeting was called to order at 10:05 a.m. by James. Sally moved to approve the January 2026 minutes, seconded by Nancy; all were in favor.

Privilege of the Floor: Jamie states that the OPWDD Ombuds program is a statewide (launched in 2025) toll-free service that provides individualized support to people with developmental disabilities and their families to preserve rights, help access OPWDD services, and address complaints about OPWDD service delivery; it operates alongside care managers (does not replace the Justice Center) and offers hotline/website resources and annual program updates.

RACKER - Marlene shared that they are looking for a new Executive Director for residential services and the Racker Racers is a pinewood-derby-style event will be held on (Tioga County) on Saturday, March 21 (Saturday), open to anyone.

Anne shared information about the March 5th full-day virtual summit, which is a statewide event with five clinicians presenting on supporting people with IDD and complex behavioral health; the content is aimed at directors, plan writers, and providers. Attendees may register and attend selected sessions (not required to stay the full day.

Announcements/Correspondence: Jeff announced that March is Developmental Disability Awareness Month. This year's Developmental Disabilities goal is to improve communication and community awareness of developmental disability services in 2026, in collaboration with Tompkins County.

Discussions:

Legislative Day Recap – Andrea Champlin (Finger Lakes Independence Center) summarized Legislative Day advocacy and the disability budget priorities. Keynotes include a roughly $33M cut impacting OPWDD Family Support Services; centers face funding cuts (~$750K) and exclusion from the human-services COLA (advocacy to raise 1.7% to 2.7%); major home-care issues include workforce shortages, low pay, restrictive eligibility, and pushes for Fair Pay for Home Care and the Home Care Savings & Reinvestment Act; calls to fully reimburse durable medical equipment; Access to Home is severely underfunded (Gov. proposed $1M would help only ~40 households) and needs higher funding and admin rates; concerns about paratransit gaps and ensuring autonomous vehicle pilots include accessibility; gaps in early intervention services; she urged constituent advocacy, shared testimonies/resources from budget hearings, and asked attendees to sign up for action alerts.

James and Briggs also attended the Legislative Day in Albany, put on by the New York Alliance, focused on urgent budget advocacy — pushing the governor's 1.7% COLA up to 2.7% with an unexpected $1B federal funding boost: making DD services a visible priority to lawmakers now. Panels warned that 2027 looks fiscally dire for DD funding.

Key topics:

- Housing shortages and need for more supportive/innovative housing
- Modernization of the CROW waitlist (possible matching app)
- OPWDD shifting toward higher-acuity/transitional placements with discussion of reopening/repurposing facilities.
- Concerns about the workforce and rate adequacy
- Encouragement for attendees to lobby at the state and federal levels and submit personal stories/data to influence legislators.
- Deputy Commissioner John Barbuto addressed CROW issues and acuity/rate discussions.

"CAS assessments" were referenced as the acuity/needs assessment OPWDD would use to measure individuals' level of need, with the goal of using those scores for future rate setting (rate rationalization), so that payments reflect client acuity rather than agency historical cost reports.

Family Support Services (FSS)/Respite Presentations

Unity House – Elspeth Peterson, Unity House Program Manager, shared that she manages a 7-person IRA with one dedicated respite room (a second room is under renovation), offering private furnished rooms, shared bath, communal living area, on-site laundry and kitchen, and accessible facilities. Services are waiver-funded (clients must be OPWDD-eligible with a life plan) and are provided for planned or emergency needs, though emergency capacity is limited. They can accommodate some higher medical or behavioral needs if staffed appropriately. They phase people in gradually (starting with hours or days), can coordinate local transportation and day habilitation schedules, and aim to keep the setting home-like and flexible to individual needs. They are focusing on building the program in Tompkins County for Community Hab, making referrals, and establishing connections. It is unclear why they receive so few referrals in Tompkins County. Community Hab services are limited by underfunding, staffing shortages, housing and transportation pressures, complex navigation, and broader racial and economic disparities. This group is working to address these issues through advocacy, workforce data, and improved family outreach.

RACKER – Lyndsey Paulin discussed the FSS program and resources. Racker is a major FSS provider in Tompkins (roster shared), families with an OPWDD-eligible member can access up to $3,000/year per person for disability-related needs (respite, camp, adaptive items, etc.) which can be split across uses; funds require eligibility/life plan and are intended for infrequent/special-circumstance respite (not ongoing childcare). Last year, 580 applications were processed; the state proposed cuts ($33M) that threaten program growth/new programs, but not current operations. Racker promotes using the lending library to trial adaptive items before purchase, offers guidance on allowable expenses, and runs outreach/events (e.g., Money for Movement, Raising Kids Who Include).

David's Refuge – Sarah Watrous described the organization's origin and growth into a statewide respite and caregiver-support nonprofit: started from a family's converted home wing, now provides respite weekends, community events, couples retreats, wellness initiatives (counseling, sibling support, financial/mental-health referrals), and serves families statewide (500–800 applications on opening, 450 respite weekends/year, 2,000+ community members). Operates regional programs (Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo), serves Tompkins County families (30+ caregivers), has a $1.3M budget funded by grants/donors (no state funding), and aims to expand services and partnerships.

Health Disparities in Tompkins County – Time was running out, and this topic will be addressed in another meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:00 a.m.

The next Developmental Disabilities Subcommittee Meeting is
Tuesday, April 14, 2026, at 10:00 a.m.