Tompkins County
COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES BOARD

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

Mary Hutchens, Chair

Nicole Zulu, Vice Chair

Jennie Sutcliffe, Commissioner,

Harmony Ayers-Friedlander
Deputy Commissioner/DCS

Larry Roberts, Chair
Mental Health Subcommittee

James Beaumont and Jeff Boles, Co-Chairs
Developmental Disabilities Subcommittee

Jacob Parker Carver, Chair
Substance Use Subcommittee

Developmental Disabilities Subcommittee
July 14, 2026, 10:00 a.m. via Zoom
Meeting Minutes

Minutes Approved
9/8/2026

Present: James Beaumont; Jeffrey Boles; Nancy Saltzman; Walaa Maharem-Horan; and Khaki Wunderlich
Excused: Sheila McEnery, Allison Weiner-Heinemann, and Sally McConnell-Ginet
Unexcused:
Guests Present: Anne Seepersaud, LifePlan; Jamie Kelly, OPWDD; Aaron Bronzon, Racker; Hank Lobb, Springbrook; Rachel Brill; Michelle Gravel, Springbrook; Candi Saxman, Unity House; Andrea, FLIC; Lyndsey Paulin, RACKER; Deb Finn, Mozaic; Doreen Wagner, Unity House.
Staff: Harmony Ayers-Friedlander, DCS; Mary Maruscak, TCWH Planner; and Karan Palazzo, LGU Administrative Assistant

The meeting was called to order at 10:05 a.m. by James. Walaa moved to approve the June 2026 minutes, seconded by Khaki.

Privilege of the Floor

Announcements/Correspondence:
16th anniversary of OPWDD becoming OPWDD

Discussions:

Tompkins County Housing

RACKER - Christopher Kaiser from Racker explained how OPWDD-certified residential housing functions, highlighting issues with filling vacancies and the misconception that families can simply call an agency for a bed. He stressed that access depends on OPWDD eligibility, care management, and the CCO/CRO process, not direct agency contact. A crucial point was that stable housing usually disqualifies someone from the emergency needs list, despite families' wishes.

Chris explained Racker's residential footprint and bed pressure. Racker runs 25 IRAs (14 in Tompkins) plus a respite program. Filling vacancies is lengthy and complex; for example, a Cayuga Heights home with an open bed since November screened 31 people, offered seven placements—all declined—leaving the bed empty months later. This shows how process, fit, and family choices slow placement.

A key theme was the tension between urgency and fit. Kaiser emphasized that "not everyone on the list is a fit for every location." Some individuals have behavioral or medical needs that could destabilize small, independent homes; others are hesitant to move into places with stairs, shared bedrooms, or tighter safety rules. Racker must balance prioritizing those on the emergency list—often in emergency departments or with aging caregivers—with protecting current residents and ensuring new placements are appropriate. He also raised concerns about people who repeatedly decline offers, which complicates fairness and turnover.

Chris noted regional practices vary, but Tompkins County is in OPWDD Region 2 with strong communication and partnership. Racker has vacancies in four IRAs and faces physical-plant issues, including stair-heavy homes, strict fire standards, and family reluctance, limiting options. Racker plans a future, including buying property in Cortland County to build a more accessible six-bed IRA by 2028.

Chris described an internal redesign to improve residential quality. Racker recently adopted a team-based model, dividing programs into four multidisciplinary teams (two in Tompkins County) with shared leadership from nursing, behavioral support, and DSP. Each team chose its own name (e.g., "Rose Team," "Culture Creators"), and early results show increased unity, cohesion, and communication. This structure aims to improve problem-solving for housing issues, coordinate vacancies, and consider individuals' needs, helping Racker maintain or expand residential capacity amid a tough housing market.

Unity House – Doreen Wagener from Unity House outlined a layered residential continuum that includes supportive apartments, a 24-hour supervised apartment program, and more traditional group homes with shared or single bedrooms and common spaces. The model is intentionally designed as a stepping-stone system to build skills—medication management, money management, housekeeping, and community inclusion—so people can move toward the least restrictive environment that is safe and sustainable for them.

She emphasized that Unity House is deeply constrained by the OPWDD emergency/substantial needs structure and the CROW process. Vacancies, especially in supervised apartments, must often be offered to people on the emergency needs list first, and formal permission is required to move to the substantial needs list. By contrast, supportive apartments are harder to fill right now because there are fewer referrals for people who can live more independently with intermittent supports. Unity House is deliberately working to build skills and step people "up" within its own programs to free higher-support beds for emergency placements.

Doreen outlined efforts to improve screening and matching at Unity House, moving from paperwork and CROW packets—often incomplete—to virtual screenings, in-person visits, and dinner visits. This helps better understand individuals and fits them into home dynamics. They've seen cases with five strong candidates for one vacancy, where the best fit is based on current milieu. She also mentioned ongoing accessibility upgrades (like Green Street) that will prompt internal moves, open non-accessible beds, and better align vacancies with OPWDD's referral profiles.

Overall, Unity House is restructuring operations—skills-building, internal moves, more thorough screening—to balance honoring individual choice, emergency referrals, and maintaining stability within a tight regional housing and workforce environment.

Housing Navigators

RACKER – Lyndsey Paulin, Housing Navigator, supports the Founders Way integrated supportive housing project in Ithaca (nine OPWDD-linked apartments in a larger building). Helps eligible tenants use OPWDD housing subsidies to keep rents extremely low (in some cases around $100 per month), and provides flexible, "on-call" style support while tenants otherwise live independently. Admission is chronological from a waitlist rather than driven by the emergency needs list, because the setting is non-certified and not staffed 24/7. Tenants must have sufficient independent living skills and cannot have certain restrictions (e.g., sex offender limits near a school, specific drug manufacturing convictions), making Founders Way a key step-down or step-up option for people transitioning from family homes or more intensive residential settings toward fully independent community living.

She described the Founders Way project as an integrated supportive housing model that offers some of the least restrictive OPWDD-linked housing in Tompkins County. Located in a 70+ unit apartment building on Buffalo Street in Ithaca, Founders Way reserves nine units for tenants with developmental disabilities. These tenants hold the same leases and rights as any other renter. Staff does not have keys, and neighbors generally do not know who is in the project.

Springbrook – Hank Lobb, Director of Community Innovation at Springbrook, described a broad portfolio of non-certified housing built largely around self-direction and housing subsidies. Springbrook supports about 250 people living in non-certified settings, 140 of whom use self-direction to fund housing costs (rent subsidies, utilities, internet, maintenance) and flexible supports such as paid neighbors and live-in caregivers. He emphasized that, despite fears about finding live-in caregivers, families have generally been successful at recruiting and replacing them when needed.

Hank highlighted several innovative models. A key example is "A Home of My Own" in Binghamton, a self-directed, shared home for three people, supported by a dedicated nonprofit that handles management functions like scheduling and bill submission—allowing residents to control their home while offloading the administrative burden. Springbrook also supports integrated supportive housing projects such as Century Sunrise in Johnson City (105 units, 26 OPWDD set-asides) and Ford Block on Main in Oneonta (24 units, 4 set-asides), where Springbrook provides on-site brokerage and support for tenants who choose self-direction. Finally, he noted the upcoming Cortlandville Commons project in Cortlandville (68 affordable units with 11 OPWDD set-asides, anticipated opening late 2027), which will mirror this model. Across these initiatives, Lobb framed non-certified, self-directed housing as a scalable way to expand options and independence while keeping people in community-based settings, including those within commuting distance of Tompkins County.

NYS Budget Review

Andrea Hansen is a state-level disability advocate. Andrea's role focuses on state-level disability advocacy and on how local stakeholders can engage with ongoing systems-change work. With only a few minutes left in the meeting, she did not present all the content. She explained that she monitors state policy activity (e.g., legislative votes, budget decisions) and sends targeted action alerts to her volunteer list—such as when the Senate is about to vote on a bill affecting housing, the DSP workforce, or related disability issues. She emphasized that she does not "spam" the list, but rather sends communications keyed to specific, time-sensitive advocacy moments.

Andrea highlighted that her advocacy work strongly overlaps with the group's concerns, especially regarding housing access, OPWDD systems, and workforce (DSP) issues. She invited participants to sign up for her volunteer email list so they can quickly contact legislators when needed. She committed to sending a volunteer sign-up link to the meeting host (for distribution through the DD group), positioning this as a way to strengthen collective advocacy beyond what Tompkins County can address locally, since most OPWDD levers (rates, capital, CROW rules) are controlled at the state level rather than by the county.

There is no meeting in August, and the next meeting is on Tuesday, September 8, 2026.

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

The next Developmental Disabilities Subcommittee Meeting is
Tuesday, September 8, 2026, at 10:00 a.m.