

Tompkins County
COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES BOARD

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

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

Jacob Parker Carver, Chair
Substance Use Subcommittee

Developmental Disabilities Subcommittee
June 9, 2026, 10:00 a.m. via Zoom
Meeting Minutes

Minutes Approved
July 14, 2026

Present: James Beaumont; Jeffrey Boles; Sheila McEnery; Nancy Saltzman; Walaa Maharem-Horan and Khaki Wunderlich

Excused: Allison Weiner-Heinemann and Sally McConnell-Ginet

Unexcused:

Guests Present: Briggs Seekins, Challenge; Anne Seepersaud, LifePlan; Jamie Kelly, OPWDD; Aaron Bronzon, Racker; Danielle Fish, Unity House; Irene Fiesinger, JM Murray; Hank Lobb, Springbrook; Rachel Brill; Gayle Pado, Racker.

Staff: Harmony Ayers-Friedlander, DCS; Mary Maruscak, TCWH Planner; Shannon Alvord, TCWH; and Karan Palazzo, LGU Administrative Assistant

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

Privilege of the Floor
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Announcements/Correspondence: Mary Maruscak, the new Whole Health Planner who will work with Harmony on project management and metric tracking, introduces herself.

Discussions:

2027 LGU Plan Goals – The 2027 local services plan discussion frames this as the final year of the current four-year plan and as a bridge to the 2028–2031 cycle.

Harmony explains that the statutory role of the Community Services Board (CSB) and its subcommittees is to develop and implement the Local Services Plan (LSP) with robust community input, then submit it to **OMH, OASAS, and OPWDD**, whose own strategic plans both inform and are informed by the county's LSP. The 2026 work is largely on track, and the current Tompkins County plan has been recognized by the state as a model, underscoring that the subcommittees' consistent alignment with the LSP has been a real strength. Looking ahead to 2027, the plan frames priorities around key goal areas rather than overloading the final year with new objectives.

- **Workforce and housing:** workforce efforts may include adding a specific objective to strengthen the Direct Support Professional workforce, using OPWDD workforce strategies and local data (e.g., house closures) as a foundation. Housing work will continue by tracking new and lost programs, understanding emergency shelter capacity and accommodations for people with I/DD, and monitoring the rollout of new shelter options. Crisis services are shifting from heavy objective work in 2026 to a monitoring stance in 2027, particularly for IDD crisis services (CIS-DD) and the Intensive Crisis Stabilization Center, to ensure adequate access, utilization, and integration with county systems.

- **Crisis services:** monitor, integrate, not rebuild: Shift from building to monitoring access and integration for CIS DD and the Intensive Crisis Stabilization Center, asking whether Tompkins County residents are using these regional resources and how well they connect to local county services.
- **Cross-system services:** a major 2027 focus, especially for the Developmental Disabilities Subcommittee. Priorities include: (1) finalizing and submitting a communication plan to the CSB and considering a structured anti-stigma campaign, and (2) launching a “roadmap of services” to reduce eligibility barriers and clarify access across OPWDD, OMH, OASAS, OCFS, and related systems. The roadmap is envisioned to align with, and potentially plug into, a broader children’s system-of-care (modeled after Cortland’s), so families can see cross-system services in one place. Parent testimony highlighted how fragmented case management, waiver rules, and deadlines are, and how a more user-friendly, consolidated platform could significantly improve care coordination and decision-making for both children and adults with IDD.
- **Care coordination:** Reframe “improve care coordination” into operational steps—e.g., better information sharing, tools that help families manage multiple waivers/renewals, and clearer cross-system pathways so families are not forced to give up long-term OPWDD supports during OMH crises.
- **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs):** Elevate ACEs from a mental health-only focus to a cross-subcommittee priority, explicitly including children and adults with I/DD, with attention to school/provider training, parent resources (especially for nonverbal youth), and trauma-informed practice. A major thematic shift in the 2027 plan is elevating Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) and abuse/neglect of children and adults with disabilities as a central county priority, not just a mental health issue. Parents and providers reported extremely high abuse risk, low awareness among families, and gaps in school and provider training—especially for nonverbal and more significantly disabled children. There was clear support for broadening the ACEs goal beyond the mental health subcommittee, explicitly incorporating the IDD population, and developing resources, training, and messaging tailored to families and providers in this space. This intersects with improved care coordination and trauma-informed practice, and with advocacy for better clinical capacity to address trauma in people with IDD so “behavior” is not misinterpreted while trauma goes untreated.
- **Peer roles and plan evaluation:** Finally, the plan anticipates 2027 as the year to **evaluate the first four-year LSP** and prepare for the 2028–2031 plan. The group acknowledges the need to carve out deliberate time to define an evaluation process, identify realistic measures of progress on key goals (e.g., housing, crisis, ACEs, workforce, care coordination), and decide which unresolved or emerging issues should be carried into the next plan. Alongside this, there is growing interest in strengthening **peer roles within the OPWDD system**—including exploring how to transform existing peer training into billable, credentialed roles as seen in OMH and OASAS—to ensure lived experience informs policy and practice; and build in time during 2027 to evaluate the four-year LSP, measure progress, and decide which unresolved issues (e.g., housing, ACEs, crisis, workforce) roll into the 2028–2031 plan.

All subcommittee work in 2027 must both advance these targeted priorities and preserve the capacity to look back, measure outcomes, and reset the strategic agenda for the next four-year cycle, 2028-2031.

Self-Direction Provider Presentations:

Unity House – Danielle Fisk, Program Manager, shares that Unity House operates as a Fiscal Intermediary (FI) serving people in Cayuga, Oswego, Tompkins, and Onondaga counties within the OPWDD Region. The program supports about 122 individuals who use self-direction to design individualized service plans. There is an active waitlist of at least 12 people, with new referrals continuing to come in. Unity House serves as the fiscal backbone for these self-directed budgets, handling reimbursements, payroll for self-hired staff, and related administrative tasks, enabling people and families to use OPWDD funds flexibly.

Structurally, Unity House offers three agency brokers and four independent brokers, giving families options for planning and budget support. A core theme of the program’s approach is strong communication and rapid responsiveness: Danielle underscored that Unity House prioritizes quick replies and “help in the moment,” so families are not left waiting for decisions or guidance on their self-direction plans. While the meeting did not go into technical detail on every allowable service type, the clear differentiators Unity House emphasized are: (1) regional reach across four counties, (2) a mixed model of agency and independent brokers, and (3) a deliberate focus on being accessible and responsive to families and self-directing individuals.

Springbrook – Hank Lobb, Director of Innovation, shares that Springbrook’s self-direction program is a large, multi-region Fiscal Intermediary (FI) that emphasizes housing, higher-education pathways, and employment within self-direction. Springbrook provides both FI and broker services across Central New York and the Southern Tier, and now into OPWDD Regions 3, 4, and 5, serving about 1,000 individuals in self-direction. They work with both internal brokers and independent brokers, structuring budgets that can include housing, college supports, and employment services.

A key differentiator is Springbrook’s investment in integrated housing tied to self-direction. Hank highlighted several projects: Century Sunrise Apartments (Johnson City, 105 units with 26 set-asides), Four Blodgett on Main (Owego area, 24 units with 4 set-asides), and a newly approved Cortlandville housing project (68 units with 11 set-asides) funded in part through OPWDD’s IDD housing (ISH) capital and HCR. These developments create stable, accessible housing options where self-direction budgets can be used for supports, allowing people with I/DD to live more independently within mixed-income communities.

Springbrook also has distinctive experience linking self-direction to college programs and employment. They support students in inclusive higher-education initiatives—Inclusive at Syracuse University and EmpowerU at Hartwick College—using self-direction budgets alongside direct service staff on campus. In employment, Springbrook’s supported employment team helps families navigate the rules and compliance requirements for self-hired supported employment, so people can use self-direction to fund individualized job supports.

Operationally, Springbrook has built specialized internal teams to improve timeliness and reliability: a startup team that gets new budgets fully up and running in about 117 days on average, an approval team focused on quick reimbursements for participants and staff, and a planned housing team to help with housing recertifications and navigation. Taken together, Springbrook presents itself as a high-capacity FI that leverages self-direction to support housing stability, college inclusion, and competitive employment, backed by internal systems designed to enable faster budget implementation and payment processing.

Racker – Gayle Pado, Director of Community Support Services, shares that Racker’s self-direction program is a regional Fiscal Intermediary (FI) with a strong footprint across much of OPWDD Region 2. Racker anchors its work out of offices in Cortland, Tompkins, and Tioga Counties, and currently serves about 240 people in self-direction across roughly 14 counties within about a 30-minute radius of those offices (including Elmira). Unlike some FIs, Racker does not have a waitlist at present, which positions it as an immediately available option for new referrals.

Programmatically, Racker offers a full array of self-direction services: FI services, agency and self-hired staffing, IDGS, OTPS, housing supports, community habilitation (agency-supported and self-hired), SEMP, and self-hired respite. They work with several internal agency brokers (three) and multiple independent brokers, and are currently accepting new independent brokers, which gives families flexibility in selecting their planning partner. Referrals typically come through a care manager-supported referral packet, aligning with standard OPWDD pathways.

A notable operational strategy at Racker is the focus on staff stability and braided schedules. Racker actively coordinates its traditional OPWDD services and self-direction, “marrying” schedules so that a single staff person can hold both traditional and self-directed hours, thereby achieving full-time employment and reducing turnover. This structure is designed to create more consistent, reliable staff for participants while supporting workforce sustainability.

Gayle also highlighted Racker’s deep lived-experience orientation: she spoke both as a program director and as a parent of an adult son who has used self-direction for 11 years. She credited self-direction with enabling her son to live semi-independently in an apartment attached to their home and to pursue a life that exceeded their expectations. Her message to the group was that self-direction is one of the most effective tools for maximizing quality of life, regardless of which FI a family ultimately chooses—framing Racker as both technically capable and philosophically committed to person-centered, family-informed practice.

JM Murray – Irene Fiesinger, Executive Services Director, shares that JM Murray is a large Fiscal Intermediary (FI) that primarily provides the FI function and self-hire supports, rather than broker services. The agency currently supports about 540 people in self-direction, with roughly 80 individuals using self-hired services within their budgets. Unlike some of the other FIs, JM Murray operates over a very wide geography, serving people in about 30 counties across regions 2 and 3—covering Central New York, the Southern Tier, the Capital Region, Hudson Valley, and some downstate areas.

At the meeting, JM Murray reported a small waitlist and expected to make progress on it in the fall and into 2027. They do not have internal brokers; instead, they primarily serve as the FI, supporting self-hired services, IDGS, OTPS, housing, family respite reimbursement, and related budget elements. To support planning, they partner with about 40–45 independent brokers and remain open to working with new independent brokers when they are able to onboard additional participants.

An operational differentiator JM Murray highlighted is how they support independent brokers’ sustainability. They split broker billing into two monthly periods, allowing brokers to bill and be reimbursed twice per month instead of once. This cash-flow structure is especially important for brokers who treat this work as a primary or full-time role, and it helps JM Murray retain experienced brokers in their network. Additionally, the agency has experience supporting people in InclusiveU at Syracuse University, similar to some other FIs, demonstrating capacity to align self-direction budgets with inclusive college programs and community-based supports.

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

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