

From the Desk of WNYIL CEO **Stephanie Orlando**

Dear Friends,

We are so excited to share the Western New York Independent Living Newsletter with you. This newsletter is a new way for us to stay connected, share what matters, and make sure the people we serve have helpful information at their fingertips.



This newsletter is about staying involved. It is important to have the right information so you can live as independently as possible and take part in your community. In these pages, you will find updates about events, programs, and activities across Western New York. Our goal is to make sure people with disabilities and their peers know what is available and how to take part.

This printed newsletter is one way we share information. We will mail it once a year before our main event season so you can plan ahead. During the rest of the year, we also send a newsletter by email every two months. That newsletter will share updates, reminders, and new opportunities. To receive the email newsletter, you can sign up on our website or ask the WNYIL staff person you work with to help you sign up. We hope these options make it easier for you to stay informed.

We also want this newsletter to share the voices of the people we serve. Independent living is built on shared experiences. We learn from each other. We support each other. We hope to build on this first edition and include stories and ideas from people in our community. Your voice matters, and it can help others.

We want this newsletter to bring people together. You may find events to attend, resources to use, or stories from others like you. Our goal is to make sure everyone feels included and informed.

I hope you enjoy this newsletter and find it helpful. We welcome your ideas and feedback as we continue to grow.

Thank you for being part of Western New York Independent Living.

Our Identity Is Independent Living

by Aaron Baier, Chief Operations Officer

Throughout my life in the disability rights movement, I have come to know many parts of myself. I am an advocate. An activist. A mentor. A peer. A connector. A leader. A learner. I am blind. I am disabled. I am a person who loves technology.

And I am still learning more about who I am.



Identity matters. It helps guide us. It helps us understand where we have been, where we are going, and who we want to become. It can also give us pride, purpose, and community.

That's what Independent Living is all about.

Centers for Independent Living, like ours, are built on choice, self-determination, and peer support. At the center of this work are five core services:

- **Information and Referral:** We listen to what a person wants and needs. Then we help them take the first steps toward independence.
- **Peer Mentoring:** We walk beside people on their journey. We offer support, guidance, and understanding through shared experience.
- **Independent Living Skills Training:** We help people build the skills they need to live, work, speak up, and take part in their communities.
- **Advocacy:** We work with people, and with communities, to create real change.
- **Transition:** We help people move through life changes, understand their options, and face new challenges with support.

These five core services are part of every program at WNY Independent Living (WNYIL) and across our family of agencies. They are part of our Medicaid application support, loan closet equipment, home care, care coordination, mental health life coaching, addiction recovery, employment services, housing support, and more.

No matter what program a person comes through, the goal is the same. We help people with disabilities get the information they need, understand their choices, learn new skills, connect with peers, and take charge of their own lives.

So how does identity connect to Independent Living?

Our identities make us who we are. They also help us find each other. At WNYIL, our family of agencies is made up of many different people with many different experiences. But we are connected by a shared belief: **people with disabilities should have the freedom to choose their own path.**

Our staff brings passion to this work because so many of us have experienced it. We know what it means to face barriers. We know what it means to fight for access, respect, and choice. We know what it means to keep learning who we are. That is what makes WNYIL so important and so unique. We are not separate from the people we serve.

We are the people we serve.

As Chief Operations Officer at WNYIL, I support our programs, services, and agencies as we work with people with disabilities across Western New York and beyond. And I'm committed to making sure our work stays rooted in the five core services of Independent Living and in the shared experience of peers.

If you need support as you work toward your goals, please reach out to us. If you want to use your own lived experience to support others, we invite you to connect with our team. And if you believe, as I do, that our community should be better, freer, and more accessible for all people with disabilities, I would love to hear from you.

Did You Know ...

WNYIL's Taking Control department recently opened a new satellite office in Jamestown, located at 114 W. 3rd Street, Suite 107, in the Chadakoin Building (former YMCA). The site is home to the Self-Directed Home Care and Veteran Directed Care programs, which allow individuals to manage their own home care services, including hiring, training, and supervising their personal assistants, with support from WNYIL. This office can support individuals and families across the Southern Tier of New York and Northwestern Pennsylvania.

Voting Is Your Right and Accessibility Is the Law

By Todd Vaarwerk, WNYIL Chief Policy Officer



For many people, voting is a regular part of life. Some people think of it as a civic duty. But voting is more than that. Voting is a right.

Federal law protects the right to vote. Still, many people with disabilities face barriers when they try to vote. Some barriers happen before a person even gets to the door. Others happen inside the polling place. These barriers can make it hard for someone to vote independently and privately. And when accessibility is limited, participation is limited.

Barriers may include:

- getting to the polling place
- getting into the building
- moving around inside the building
- using the voting machine
- casting a ballot privately and independently

People with disabilities should be able to participate without barriers. When those barriers are removed, more people can have a voice. That makes the whole community stronger and helps make sure decisions include the needs of everyone.

The right to vote for people with disabilities is also protected by federal laws. These laws include:

- **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA):**
The ADA requires equal access to public services. This includes voting.
- **Help America Vote Act (HAVA):**
HAVA requires voting systems that allow people with disabilities to vote privately and independently.

These laws make one thing clear: accessibility is not a favor. It is required by law. Voters with disabilities must be able to take part in every step of voting. This includes registering to vote, entering the polling place, using the voting system, and casting a ballot.

Even with these laws, barriers can still happen. When they do, it is important to know your options. If you face a barrier at your polling place, you can:

- speak with a poll worker
- ask for assistance
- ask for a reasonable accommodation
- bring someone you trust to assist you

If the problem is not fixed, you can report it to:

- U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division
- New York State Board of Elections

In New York State, each polling place must have an accessible ballot marking device. This device helps voters mark their ballot privately and independently. You do not need to give a reason to use it.

The device may allow you to get your marked ballot back so you can submit it yourself. It may also place the ballot into a secure container.

If a poll worker tells you not to use the device, or if the device is not set up and ready to use, please let us know.

Voting access is part of a larger goal: helping people take part in their communities. Voting is one way people help shape decisions about health care, housing, transportation, and services that support independent living.

At WNY Independent Living Inc. Family of Agencies (WNYIL), we believe access should never stand in the way of voting.

If you or someone you know needs support, help is available. WNYIL can assist with:

- finding your polling place
- registering to vote
- navigating a polling location
- understanding your voting rights

For more information, contact WNYIL at (716) 836-0822, ext. 101 or visit www.wnyil.org.

Celebrating 10 Years of Art For All

For 10 years, Independent Living of the Genesee Region (ILGR) and the University Heights Arts Association (UHAA) have worked together on **ARTiculations**.

ARTiculations is an art program for artists with disabilities in Western New York. It gives artists a place to show their work and share their ideas. It also gives artists a chance to be part of local art shows in places that are open and welcoming.

One big goal of ARTiculations is to make art easier to access. Many art galleries charge artists money to submit or show their work. These fees can stop some artists from taking part. ARTiculations removes those fees, giving more artists a fair chance to share their work with the community.

The program has grown over the past 10 years. But its focus has stayed the same. It's still about the artists, their voices, and their lived experiences. At its heart, ARTiculations believes one simple thing: **art should be open to everyone.**

Artists with disabilities deserve to be seen. They deserve to be heard. They deserve to be valued. They also deserve to be part of the larger arts community.

After 10 years of highlighting artists with disabilities, ARTiculations shows what can happen when barriers are removed.

More artists can share their work.

More artists can connect with others.

More artists can take part.

More voices can be heard.

And most importantly, creativity has more room to grow.

Peter Langen Wildlife Paintings



Oct. 1- Dec. 31, 2023

Independent Living of Genesee
319 West Main Street, Rear, Left
Batavia, New York 14020
(518)815-8501

University Heights Arts Association
uhaa@uhaa.org
fineart@uhaa.org
An ARTpartnering Exhibition

FREE



Disability
Pride
Festival
Buffalo, NY

Disability Pride Festival

“Art of Access”

July 24th, 2026 2-7pm

Buffalo Riverworks

359 Ganson St, Buffalo, NY 14203

Balloon Artist

Artist Alley

Children's
Activities

60+
Resource Tables



Airbrush
Tattoos

Princess & Superhero
Characters

Unity Walk and Roll
5pm

**EvergreenHealth
UNCONDITIONAL.**

M&T Bank

**WNY
INDEPENDENT
LIVING** FAMILY OF
AGENCIES

PeopleInc
Where your world opens up

ICAN
Independent
Consumer Advocacy
Network

Free Shuttle From:

NFTA's MTC

**181 Ellicott Street
Buffalo, NY 14203**

**I ♥
NY**

Supported by:



**Canal
Corporation**



Celebrating 36 Years of the Americans with Disabilities Act

Disability Pride Festival

Don't Buy It... Borrow It from the Loan Closet!

One piece of equipment can make life easier.

A walker, wheelchair, shower chair, or other item can help someone heal after surgery. It can also help someone come home safely from the hospital or stay independent at home.

The Loan Closet program is here to help.

The program is offered through the WNY Independent Living Family of Agencies (WNYIL). It gives free, short-term loans of medical equipment to people with disabilities and their family members.

The Loan Closet may help if you are:

- healing after surgery
- waiting for insurance approval
- helping a loved one come home from the hospital
- trying to find equipment that works for you
- needing equipment for a short time

Items depend on what has been donated. Common items may include:

- wheelchairs
- walkers
- crutches
- shower chairs
- commodes
- other equipment that helps with moving around or daily needs

Borrowing equipment is simple.

Call your nearest Independent Living Center and ask about the Loan Closet. If the item you need is available, staff will help set up a pickup time. They will also talk with you about when to bring it back. There is no cost to borrow equipment.

For more information, contact your nearest location:

Independent Living Center (ILC), 716-836-0822

Independent Living of Niagara County (ILNC), 716-284-4131

Independent Living of the Genesee Region (ILGR), 585-815-8501

Self-Advocacy Begins with Me: Peer Workshop Series Continues Through Summer

WNY Independent Living's Self-Advocacy Begins with Me series is back this summer.

This workshop series gives people a safe and welcoming place to learn more about themselves. It also helps people build confidence when speaking up for what they need.

The workshops are led by peers, which means they are led by people who may have similar life experiences. They are relaxed, supportive, and based on real life. The goal is not to have all the answers. Instead, the goal is to ask questions, learn, and grow over time.

These workshops can help people think about what matters most to them. They can also help people better express their thoughts, feelings, and needs. Each workshop meets people where they are. No one has to share before they are ready. Simply showing up can be an important first step.

People who attend can expect: guided activities; open conversations; time to think and reflect; and support from others.

Upcoming workshops include:

July 22 – Telling Your Story

This workshop will focus on self-acceptance, pride, and sharing personal stories.

August 20 – A Little Bit of Personality

This workshop will explore personality traits, individuality, and what makes each person unique.

The series is part of WNY Independent Living's ongoing work to support people with disabilities. It helps people learn how to speak up for themselves and take part in their communities.

All workshops are free and are offered online and in person at: WNY Independent Living, 3108 Main Street, Buffalo, NY

For more information or to register, contact Julia at 716-848-8053 or scan the QR code.



The Taking Control Speaker Series

The Taking Control Speaker Series will continue through 2026. The series is hosted by Taking Control Self-Directed Home Care, also known as CDPAS.

Each month, there will be a discussion at 2:00 p.m. that will focus on a topic that can help people in daily life. Topics will include safety, health, home care, and living with more choices.

The discussions will share helpful tips and tools. They will also give people time to ask questions and speak with others. If you would like to learn more about living independently with home care you are welcome to join.

Upcoming 2026 topics include:

- **July 8 – Disability Awareness: Who Are “We”?**
- **August 12 – The C’s of Mental Health**
- **September 9 – Emergency Preparedness for People with Disabilities**
- **October 14 – How to Be a Good Employer**
- **November 10 – Veteran-Focused Discussion**
- **December 9 – Self-Care During the Holidays**

The series will continue into 2027 with more discussions. Future topics will focus on tools that can help people live with more independence.

For more information about the Series or Taking Control services, call **1-800-348-8399** or scan the QR code.



Are you in need of in-home support?

Through Taking Control Self-Directed Home Care, **you choose**
Your Personal Assistant and Direct Your Care.

For more information about
WNYIL's Taking Control Self-Directed Home Care Services,
call **800-348-8399** or email wnyil-cdpap@wnyil.org

Celebrating Great Work at WNYIL

Each month, the Western New York Independent Living, Inc. Family of Agencies (WNYIL) gives out the Quality Service Award to staff who go above and beyond in their work.

The award honors staff members for their hard work, care, and support for the people we serve. These staff members show what WNYIL's mission looks like in action. Their work helps people feel supported, respected, and heard.

Do you know a WNYIL employee who makes a difference?

You can nominate them for the Quality Service Award at:
www.wnyil.org/quality-service-award/

Are You Considering Medicaid? We Can Help!

Did you know that Medicaid adds additional coverage to medical expenses and can cover home care services in the community, in addition to providing access to a variety of community-based programs and services?



WNYIL's Aged, Blind & Disabled Facilitated Enrollment Program (FE-ABD) offers **free, personalized assistance** to individuals aged 65 or older, as well as those certified as blind or disabled, who want to apply for Medicaid benefits.

**Contact our FE-ABD Program at
 716-836-0822 ext. 331 | MAAPreferrals@wnyil.org**



2026 Upcoming Event Calendar

WNY Independent Living, Inc. Family of Agencies

July 2026

Friday, July 10, 2026 | 11:00 AM – 2:00 PM

ILNC's Block Party

Independent Living of Niagara County, 746 Portage Rd., Niagara Falls, NY
Free event with food, music, activities, and community resources.

Friday, July 24, 2026 | 2:00 – 7:00 PM

Disability Pride Festival

Buffalo RiverWorks, 359 Ganson St., Buffalo, NY

Celebrate the 36th anniversary of the ADA with entertainment, resources, a children's area, and a unity walk. Free event.

August 2026

Friday, August 21, 2026 | 1:00 – 5:00 PM

Health and Wellness Fair: Bring a Friend or Family Event

Kirsten Vincent Respite and Recovery Center, 111 Maple Street, Buffalo, NY
Hosted by Kirsten Vincent Respite and Recovery Center and Fruit of the City Coalition. Activities include: Health and Wellness screenings; Food and nutrition resources; Survivors of violence information; Harm reduction mobile screenings; Mobility fitness coaching; Access to Confidential health and Human Services; Identification assistance; Free food giveaways; workshops and more.

Monday, August 31, 2026 | 5:00 – 8:00 PM

9th International Overdose Awareness Day Rally

Veterans Memorial Park, 400 East Ave., Lockport, NY

A night to remember and a call to action. Includes testimonials, candlelight vigil, Narcan training, remembrance table, and community resources.

September 2026

Saturday, September 12, 2026 | 11:00 AM

Cornhole for a Cause – Independent Living of Niagara County

Christ Community Church, 140 Genesee St., Lockport, NY

Free to attend; pay-to-play cornhole, plus basket raffle and 50/50.

Saturday, September 19, 2026 | 11:00 AM – 3:00 PM

Kites & Kindness – Mental Health PEER Connection

Cheektowaga Town Park, Shelter 1, 2600 Harlem Rd. Buffalo, NY

Free food, drinks and community fun. Kites provided (or bring your own).

September 20, 2026 | 11:00 AM – 3:00 PM

ILGR's 2nd Annual Parking Lot Party

ILGR Parking Lot, 319 West Main St., Batavia, NY 14020 (Crickler Building)

Chicken BBQ, raffles, games, vendors, and more!

October 2026

Meet the Candidates - WNYIL's three Independent Living Centers will host Meet the Candidate forums to help you prepare for the November 2026 elections.

- **Wednesday, October 14, 2026 (2 to 4 pm)** - ILC Meet the Candidates, Job Club, 3108 Main
- **Tuesday, October 20, 2026 (tentative)** - ILNC Meet the Candidates
- **Thursday, October 22, 2026 (tentative)** - ILGR Meet the Candidates

November 2026

Friday, November 6, 2026 | 6:00 PM

Meat Raffle – Niagara Frontier Radio Reading Service

Knights of Columbus, 2735 Union Rd., Cheektowaga, NY

Ticketed event. Bring your own snacks. Basket raffle and 50/50.

Visit nfradioreading.org or call Marian Hetherly at (716) 821-5555, Ext. 3

For more information on upcoming events, contact Christine Hulton at (716) 836-0822, Ext. 146, or visit www.wnyil.org

WNY Independent Living, Inc. Resource Guide

WNY Independent Living, Inc. and its agencies help people with disabilities live on their own and be part of the community. These agencies include the Erie County Independent Living Center (ILC), Independent Living of the Genesee Region (ILGR), Independent Living of Niagara County (ILNC), and Mental Health PEER Connection.

Medicaid Help

Get help to apply for Medicaid, keep your coverage, and learn about your choices.

- Help with Medicaid applications and renewals
- Help understanding Managed Care and Long-Term Care choices
- Help learning if you qualify, what you may need to pay, and what benefits you can get
- Help getting services at home and in the community

Consumer Directed Personal Assistance Services (CDPAS)

Choose the care that works best for you.

- You can hire, train, and guide your own helpers
- WNYIL also gives support along the way

Independence Express Transportation Services

Accessible rides can help you stay active and independent.

- Rides for people with disabilities in Erie, Niagara, Genesee, Orleans, and Wyoming counties
- Rides to the doctor, work, school, the store, and community events

Loan Closets

Borrow medical equipment for free for a short time or a long time.

- Wheelchairs and walkers
- Shower chairs and commodes
- Canes and other mobility aids

Housing Help

- Get help finding and keeping a home that works for you.
- Help finding housing you can afford and use safely
- Help with housing forms and programs
- Help moving from a facility to a home in the community
- Help speaking up for your rights as a renter and for accessibility

Employment Support

WNYIL staff can help with your job search. Staff can help with:

- Using a computer and filling out online job forms
- Writing resumes and cover letters
- Interview tips, references, and more

Advocacy

WNYIL helps people speak up for changes that make life better. Advocacy services include:

- Educational advocacy
- ICAN
- Systems advocacy
- Individual advocacy
- Youth Peer Advocacy Program

Health Homes Care Coordination Services

A Health Home is not a building. It is a team of health care and service workers who help people get the care and support they need.

You may qualify if you:

- Are enrolled in Medicaid
- Have two or more chronic conditions; or
- Have HIV/AIDS; or
- Have a serious mental illness (SMI)

After you sign up, you will get a care manager who:

- Works with you to make a care plan
- Helps connect your medical, mental health, and daily living services
- Helps you understand the health care system and get the support you need

Need Help Getting Started?

Staff can help you see if you qualify, connect you to services, and explain the next steps. Call the WNYIL office closest to you to learn more.

WNY Independent Living Center (ILC), 716-836-0822

Independent Living of Niagara County (ILNC), 716-284-4131

Independent Living of the Genesee Region (ILGR), 585-815-8501

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Buffalo, NY 14203

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“Art of Access”

July 24th, 2026 | 2-7pm

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**Celebrating 36 Years
of the Americans
with Disabilities Act!**



Information:



Disabilitypridewny.org

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