



Justice Center for the Protection of People With Special Needs

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Essential Workers Honored by NYS Justice Center for Exceptional Service During Pandemic

The Justice Center for the Protection of People with Special Needs is pleased to announce its Code of Conduct and Champion Award winners for 2021. These awards honor individuals and organizations who have tirelessly worked not only to improve the lives of individuals under the Justice Center's jurisdiction, but who have also risen to the enormous challenges experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The agency honored seven essential, direct care workers for their exceptional work with the Code of Conduct awards. This award honors staff members who embody the ethical standards outlined in the [Code of Conduct for Custodians of People with Special Needs](#). Employees who assist people with special needs are required to sign the Code, which ensures that people "live self-directed meaningful lives in their communities, free from abuse and neglect, and protected from harm."

This year's winners include:

Ihuoma Chukwu, HeartShare Human Services of New York- Ihuoma Chukwu spends her days advocating for the 14 individuals who reside in the home where she works. Colleagues say she has provided exceptional care through the Covid-19 pandemic, including providing individuals receiving services with her own cell phone so they can Facetime family members and calling parents of individuals who are non-verbal so they can hear familiar voices on the other end of the line. In recent months, Ihuoma and her team welcomed a man into the residence who had been hospitalized with Covid and whose father had passed away from the disease, leaving the man orphaned. On the day he arrived, Ihuoma made sure that a framed picture of the man's father was hanging on the wall in his bedroom and his personal possessions there as well. The man was welcomed with a cake Ihuoma got that read "welcome home". When speaking about the individuals she supports, Ihuoma tells people to look into the eyes of those who may appear different and see who they truly are.

Marie Johnson, Autism Services, Inc.- Marie Johnson has spent the past 21 years building relationships with the individuals she serves. Marie has connected with a core group and works each day to ensure they live self-directed lives by providing opportunities for them to connect with the community around them. Marie researches events that she feels the group would enjoy, allows them to pick and choose what each would like to attend, and then works tirelessly to make these excursions a success. Her supervisor says she was convinced when interviewing Marie 21 years ago that "she saw no difference between herself and those she

would be supporting” and says hiring Marie was one of the best decisions she made in her time at Autism Services.

Jeremy Mabee, HOME Incorporated- Jeremy Mabee not only performs his job above expectations, but he consistently lends support to his colleagues as they learn to assist individuals with special needs. Colleagues say Jeremy makes it his duty to get to know each and every one of the individuals at the facility where he works so he can advocate effectively on their behalf. As an example, Jeremy not only uses sign language to help facilitate conversations with one individual receiving services as a way to de-escalate situations, but he has also taught his colleagues ASL so they can more effectively communicate with this individual which helps avoid escalation. Jeremy also attends life planning or team meetings for which he is not required so he can get a better handle on each individual’s needs as a way to serve as their most effective advocate.

Jenna Pullis-Sayles, Northern Rivers- When the Neil Hellman School went remote because of the pandemic, more than 75 children lost their only reliable source of daily nutrition. Jenna Pullis-Sayles, who was already in charge of a program feeding 15 families, threw herself into action. She launched a program that provided weekly food deliveries to more than 75 children and their entire families. Jenna’s team handled the organization, logistics, and delivery of all of the meals. In all, the program provided more than 20,000 pounds of food to vulnerable families. But Jenna didn’t stop there. The team was also able to connect the families with clothing, holiday gifts, hats, mittens, winter coats. In all they distributed more than 250 holiday gifts and 1,000 articles of clothing. Jenna did all this in addition to her regular responsibilities as a vocational coordinator, where she works with students with emotional and behavioral disabilities to help them learn workplace employability skills, get their first jobs, and take steps toward independence.

Raechelle Valenti, Liberty ARC- Raechelle Valenti has service as a direct support professional at Liberty ARC for three decades. In that time, she has become a strong advocate for the people she supports. Shelli, as she is known by colleagues, taught herself sign language so she could better communicate with individuals in the deaf community. Her co-workers call on her frequently to help communicate with people who are deaf to ensure their needs are met. In addition, Shelli voluntarily offered to mentor new direct support professionals coming into her department as a way to keep them engaged and encourage professional development. Recently Shelli advocated for a woman who wanted to get married but whose family was not accepting of her decision. Shelli spoke extensively with the woman’s family, facilitating communication on the topic. In the end, the woman got married and the families on both sides worked together to support the newlyweds.

Jennifer Whitmire, Empower- Jennifer Whitmire is described by her supervisor as “outstanding” but it was her work during the Covid-19 pandemic that really made her a stand-out employee. Jennifer reported to work every day, even at the height of the crisis, without one sick call. During a period when many of her colleagues were afraid of contracting the virus, Jennifer became a role model, especially to new staff members. Jennifer took them under her wing to teach and mentor them while also taking on extra responsibilities at a new facility that was short staffed.

Evelyn Wilson, OMH- Evelyn Wilson has dedicated more than three decades of her life to serving people with special needs at Pilgrim Psychiatric Center. She has worked in the residential program and in the long-term units. Most recently, Evelyn became one of the founding members of the Connections Team, a program that helps people as they get ready to

be discharged and supports them once they leave the facility. Evelyn has made herself available to families of individuals receiving services literally around the clock to make the transition back into the community as successful as possible. Evelyn visits patients in their home to assess if they need any assistive devices and has helped them get clothing and other items to boost their self-esteem. Evelyn also sends a birthday card to each discharged individual to remind them that someone cares for them.

Justice Center Executive Director Denise M. Miranda joined Advisory Council Chair Bill Gettman in congratulating this year's award recipients.

"The Justice Center has always recognized the essential role the direct care workforce plays in the lives of individuals with special needs. The COVID-19 pandemic has only highlighted their tireless efforts. These award recipients put the lives of the individuals they serve above their own health and safety at a time of true crisis. We thank them and thousands of others in the direct care workforce for all they do each and every day," said Miranda.

Executive Director Miranda also presented four individuals with the agency's Champion Award. Nominees can include individual staff members, community members, people receiving services or organizations that support the mission of the Justice Center. This year's winners include: Willie Mae Goodman (Willowbrook parent/Parents Association of Gouverneur), Sue Lanigan (Surrogate Decision-Making Committee member), Todd Paul (advocate), Shelia Shea (Mental Health Legal Services).

In addition to today's award presentation, the Justice Center released a slideshow honoring the direct care workforce and highlighting September as Direct Care Workforce Recognition Month.

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The Justice Center operates a toll-free hotline for people to report allegations of abuse, neglect, and significant incidents 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Anyone who witnesses or suspects an act of abuse or neglect has been committed can make a report. Because the Justice Center is not a first responder, callers are directed to call 9-1-1 if there is an emergency that requires an immediate medical or police response.

The Justice Center has authority to investigate all reports of abuse and neglect in covered facilities and programs, pursue administrative sanctions against staff found responsible for misconduct, and its Special Prosecutor/Inspector General works with local District Attorneys to prosecute criminal offenses involving allegations of abuse or neglect. The Justice Center notifies local district attorneys of all cases of abuse and neglect that occur in their jurisdiction.

Justice Center advocates provide guidance and information to victims, their families, personal representatives, and guardians about the reporting and investigation process, offer support during criminal court proceedings, and are available to accompany victims during interviews and court appearances.