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**NYS Justice Center spotlights 10 winners during annual Code of Conduct & Champion Awards**  
*State agency marks 10 years of service, honors workforce for decades of support*

The Justice Center for the Protection of People with Special Needs is pleased to announce its Code of Conduct and Champion Award winners for 2023. These awards honor individuals and groups who work tirelessly to improve the lives of individuals with special needs in New York State.

This year's program comes on the heels of the Justice Center's 10-year anniversary – a major milestone in the agency's mission to protect vulnerable populations from abuse and neglect. Those honored during the 2023 Code of Conduct and Champion Awards truly embody the Justice Center's founding principles and ethical standards outlined in the [Code of Conduct for Custodians of People with Special Needs](#).

As stated in this code, signed by all staff under Justice Center jurisdiction, these award recipients have upheld their commitment to helping help people “live self-directed meaningful lives in their communities, free from abuse and neglect, and protected from harm.”

The Justice Center received more than 100 nominations for this year's program, selecting four Champion Award winners and six Code of Conduct Award winners. Each submission was accompanied by stories straight from the service industry that uniquely characterized the dedication of our NYS workforce.

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

“This year, the Justice Center celebrated its 10-year anniversary—an achievement that could not have been reached without the support, diligence, and commitment of New York's direct support workers,” said Miranda. “Today, we thank those individuals and groups for their remarkable efforts, especially amid such a challenging workforce crisis. These are the people who make it possible for New York to maintain the highest standards of health, safety, and dignity for individuals with special needs.”

The 2023 Code of Conduct winners include:

**Andrea Ocasio, Cazenovia Recovery Systems, Inc.** – Andrea Ocasio is the Director of Clinical Services for Cazenovia Recovery Systems, leading the charge in implementing ethical and investigative standards for various programs. Her commitment to a thorough, “roll-up-your-sleeves,” approach has created a work environment where staff are more comfortable and open discussing ethics and protections for individuals receiving services. Ultimately, Ocasio's efforts have led to better outcomes and a higher ethical standard for those she serves.

**Christina Nier, The Adirondack Arc** – Christy Nier has worked for the Adirondack Arc for nearly 20 years and currently serves as a Behavior Specialist Assistant. Nier went to college online all while raising three children and maintaining full-time employment at the Arc. Over these years, Nier has been no stranger to hard work, leading numerous efforts to help further the agency’s mission. She facilitated the creation of the Adirondack Advocators Self-Advocacy group, organizes an annual safety forum, and manages the facility’s People Teaching People program. Her guidance, dedication, and leadership has been essential to the Adirondack Arc. According to her nominator, “this is not just a job to her, but a way of life.”

**Jimmy Brown, Pilgrim State Hospital** – Having worked for Pilgrim State Hospital for nearly 40 years, Jimmy Brown has won over hearts and minds with his dedication and overwhelming sense of compassion for those he serves. A firefighter by trade, Brown brings true emergency experience to his craft, helping to create a safer environment for individuals receiving services. He’s so loyal to his clients, he even comes in on his Sundays off to watch sports with those in care. Brown’s coworkers say he’s “kind from within.”

**Robert Venditti, Access: Supports for Living** – Robert Venditti has been with Access: Supports for Living for 6 years, starting as a DSP and working up to Day Services Supervisor. As he transitioned to his role as supervisor from Direct Support Professional, Venditti carried on with the same devotion and person-centered approach that made him such a successful DSP. He now molds staff to the aim for the same of care he expects from himself. Venditti is the first person to arrive at the program every day and is always the last to leave, working long hours to ensure programming for individuals is of the highest quality.

**Sean Switzer, Access: Supports for Living** – A Training Director for Access: Supports for Living, Sean Switzer has been a passionate advocate for people with special needs for more than 20 years. Currently, Switzer manages new training systems to ensure that direct support professionals have comprehensive, experiential training. He was also instrumental in instituting a satisfaction survey that allows leadership to gain a better understanding of what individuals receiving services want and need from care staff.

**Danielle Dassance, Elmira Psychiatric Center** – Danielle Dassance’s nomination says it best, “the only thing that outweighs her expertise is her caring heart.” Currently a nurse on EPC’s Children and Families Unit, Dassance supports young people with mental illness and other special needs. When faced with a difficult task Dassance continues to give her all. On more than one occasion she has worked with especially challenging cases and always rises to the occasion. Dassance continues to show respect and treats her patients in a dignified manner and encourages them to achieve their goals.

Executive Director Miranda also presented four winners 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 recipients include:

- Meg Adams - NYS Office for People with Developmental Disabilities
- Rebecca Cooper - NYS Office of Addiction Services and Supports
- NYS ID/DD Nurses Association (organization winner)
- Southern Adirondack Independent Living Center (organization winner)

A recording of the ceremony as well as more information on this year's awards is available on the [agency’s website](#). The recording is also available on the agency's YouTube channel, [here](#).

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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*