



# Champions

*Transforming lives, transforming communities*

## Employment Equity is Good for Business

The census shows **1 in 4 individuals with disabilities in Monroe County live at or below the poverty line**. Lack of job opportunities and fair wages are key barriers to economic mobility.

The Employment Equity Coalition (EEC) is dedicated to increasing equitable job opportunities, removing barriers, and decreasing poverty for people with any disability here in Monroe County. Starbridge serves as the lead agency supporting the EEC's work.

EEC Chair Antwan Williams, Director of Youth System Services at RochesterWorks! says:

"The American dream is the belief that anyone, regardless of where they were born, their economic status, and their abilities, can attain their version of success. In a society where upward mobility is possible, too many individuals with disabilities have been excluded from this path for too long."

While many employers and HR professionals know the value of diverse work teams, hiring staff with disabilities is an area where businesses often are lagging. Research by the Society for Human Resource Management shows:

⇒ Managers are often uncomfortable discussing disabilities for fear of doing or saying something unlawful.



⇒ But nearly all managers (92%) who are aware that one or more of their employees have a disability said those individuals perform the same as or better than their peers who don't have disabilities.

Christina Eisenberg, Director of Employment Equity at Starbridge, shares her insights:

"Too often, disability is not part of diversity conversations, initiatives, or strategic planning. The Employment Equity Coalition will partner with employers of all industries and sizes in Monroe County and the City of Rochester. We are here to be a

resource throughout the employment lifecycle: from recruitment to retention and advancement.

Disability inclusion is not about the 'right thing to do' but it is the smart thing to do. Especially in a tight labor market, **individuals with disabilities are an untapped resource, bringing skills, ideas, and creativity that both improve the workplace and your business' consumer reach.**"

To learn more about ways that the Coalition can support your business or to join the EEC, contact Christina Eisenberg at [eec@starbridgeinc.org](mailto:eec@starbridgeinc.org).

# Message from the President/CEO

Greetings!

Many individuals with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities and their families rely on Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) to provide quality care in a variety of settings. For decades, DSP wages have been set by government funders at minimum wage – which doesn't keep up with the cost of living. Instead it creates a barrier to services and increased burnout.

I started my career as a Direct Support Professional and, while I've always loved the work, due to the low wages, I always had to work multiple jobs. The essential skill set, emotional intelligence and grit required to be an engaging direct support professional doesn't add up to the salary received. This causes many to seek opportunities in other industries in an effort to provide a sustainable living for their family.

The pandemic revealed what many of us already knew. Direct Support Professionals are the foundation of our services. They are the essential workers on the front lines showing up during

inclement weather conditions, when emergencies arise, and when COVID-19 struck.

Like many agencies, we moved our minimum wage to \$15 an hour, but we know that's not enough to allow families to live in comfort. I know from my own experience many DSPs are living paycheck to paycheck. To sustain services for individuals with I/DD, we providers need improved rates for ongoing wages and cost of living adjustments.

Advocates, activists, and providers statewide have been working tirelessly to get the NYS Senate and Assembly to provide a cost-of-living-adjustment (COLA) to DSPs in the I/DD sector. Both the Senate and Assembly have agreed – a huge victory!

As I write this, we are waiting for the 2024 NYS Budget to be announced. By the time you read this, the 8.5% COLA could be approved, which we will celebrate. However, if it is not approved, then we must all continue to make our voices heard.



It is a privilege to partner with you in making a positive difference with and for individuals with disabilities and families throughout our region.

Kind regards,

Nikisha Ridgeway, President/CEO



to our Board members  
for giving your time, wisdom,  
and support to Starbridge  
and the people we serve

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# From Isolation to Connection through Family Fun

People thrive when they feel connected, understood and welcomed. For families of children with disabilities, especially in rural areas, finding connections and inclusive spaces can feel daunting. One Starbridge program in Allegany and Cattaraugus Counties is easing the way.

Funded by a grant through the Western NY region of the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities, Starbridge offers Family Fun Events each month for families of children with developmental disabilities. These events offer a fun activity for all ages, while also giving adults time to connect and talk with each other and with Starbridge Family Education Specialist Kari Cayton.

Kari organizes the events, working with families and businesses to plan events that are entertaining and accommodating. At the Go-Kart Racing event at Sprint Speedway, limiting the number of karts on the track and having two-seat karts eased the anxieties of kids (and parents) driving a go-kart for the first time.

For some kids, the sensory stimulation of being around lots of people or standing

in line can get overwhelming. Kari worked with Sprint Speedway to provide a quiet space and yard games for a time out when needed.

For Odin Green, his trip to Sprint Speedway was a dream come true. His mom Elida shared:

“He kept screaming that he was Lightning McQueen and wanted to drive himself... He did it. He has asked to please go back and race some more!”

For business owners, partnering with Starbridge is having a positive impact in how they make customers like Odin and his family feel welcome. Kari said:

“One owner is expanding his services as he has seen the benefits of having separate spaces that provide less sensory stimuli. He has purchased oversized board games (checkers, Sorry, and others) to make his space and business more accessible.”

After an event at Good Times, one family told Kari that it was the “best birthday ever! We went out as a family, had fun and laughed!” Kari feels honored to be part of providing families



with a safe space, free of stress and self-consciousness.

Now that families know they will be welcome, they are more comfortable utilizing local businesses. More importantly, families are building their own relationships outside of the events.

*For families in Allegany & Cattaraugus Counties, look for Family Fun events on our website calendar and Facebook page.*



## Allison Schraf, Board Member:

“I was looking for ways to give back to the community, and my friend Cheri Riley connected me to Starbridge.

The work that Starbridge does in providing resources to individuals with disabilities and their families is so important. I've really enjoyed getting to know more about the organization and about the services that Starbridge provides.

It is so important for our community to help people with disabilities have access to resources to ensure greater independence and happiness.”

*If you are the parent of a child with a disability under the age of 26 and are interested in serving on the Board of Directors, please call 585-224-7248 or email [jsciacchitano@starbridgeinc.org](mailto:jsciacchitano@starbridgeinc.org).*



## BURKE GROUP

is proud to support Starbridge and the work they do to improve the lives of individuals and families within the Rochester Community. We value our relationship and find it extremely rewarding to give back, to help those with disabilities lead meaningful and healthy lives.

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## Special Thanks

to our friends at



for hosting Drag Bingo Night  
and raising \$1,675 to support  
children and adults who have disabilities

As a member of the New York State Industries for the Disabled, Inc., we provide jobs to individuals and Veterans with disabilities who experience barriers to employment. We are proud to sponsor Starbridge and their work in partnering with people to achieve employment goals.



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# Coaching Families after a New Diagnosis

When your child is diagnosed with a disability, it is normal to have questions about what that means and what supports are out there for your family.

Disability service systems are complex and can be difficult to access, whether those barriers are due to language, transportation, time, money, or trust. On top of that, families are working to manage everything else in their lives: work, school, raising children, and more. It can take time to get connected to what is right for you. So what can help until then?

Mind The Gap may be the answer! This innovative program offers comprehensive coaching for families. Developed by the University of Rochester and other universities nationwide, Mind The Gap seeks to close the time gap between diagnosis and services by connecting families to supports quickly.

Starbridge is one of the local partner agencies providing Mind The Gap support to families.



## How does Mind The Gap work?

Families participate in up to 12 sessions with a coach, called a “peer navigator” over 4 to 6 months. The curriculum is flexible and family/caregiver-focused, so goals, session timing, and topics are individualized to meet families’ needs.

Starbridge’s Peer Navigators are parents of children with disabilities and, when possible, culturally and linguistically matched to the family.

Any families who have a child with a developmental disability are welcome to participate. The information in Mind the Gap is mostly geared toward families of younger children (below age 8), but some parts of the program may be helpful for families of older children.

To connect with Starbridge’s Mind The Gap team, call our Intake number at (585) 224-7359 or contact us online at [www.starbridgeinc.org/contact-us](http://www.starbridgeinc.org/contact-us)



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I am proud to sponsor Starbridge events in honor of individuals with disabilities and their right to full equity and inclusion in all aspects of community, and in honor of the essential workers who serve alongside them.

*Nikisha Ridgeway*

The successes of Starbridge and the people we serve are made possible, in part, by the support and partnership of people like you.

If you'd like to make a donation—of any size—you can give through PayPal (account not required).



Thank you!



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Contact [events@starbridgeinc.org](mailto:events@starbridgeinc.org) or call 585-224-7247.