



DD News and Updates

Newsletter

Volume 40

March 18, 2026

Inside This Issue

- Division Updates
- Community News
- Community Resources
- Community Events
- Reporting Abuse
- Staff Contact List



You can sign-up to get your own copy of this newsletter for free online.

Website: www.bhddh.ri.gov

Email: BHDDH.AskDD@bhddh.ri.gov

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Division Updates

A Note from the Director, Kevin Savage

Dear I/DD Community Partners,

March is Developmental Disability Awareness Month, and I want to take a moment to recognize the strength, talents, and voices of people with disabilities in our community. This month reminds us that everyone deserves respect, inclusion, and the chance to live the life they choose.

Developmental Disability Awareness Month is not only about learning—it's about listening. It's about making sure people with disabilities are heard, supported, and included in everyday life. You have the right to make choices, speak up for yourself, and be treated with dignity. These rights matter, and they help build a community where everyone belongs.

I encourage all of us—staff, families, and community members—to take time this month to learn more about disability rights and to think about how we can support each other better. Small actions, like using respectful language, being patient, and including people in conversations and activities, make a big difference.

Thank you for being part of a community that values fairness, respect, and inclusion. Together, we can continue to create a place where every person feels welcome and supported.

Warmly,

Kevin,

Kevin W. Savage

Director, Division of Developmental Disabilities

BHDDH



Division Updates

Keeping the Progress Going for People with I/DD



Rhode Island signed an agreement called a **Consent Decree** in 2014. This agreement was made with the U.S. Department of Justice to make sure people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) have more choices, better support, and better job opportunities.

In 2023, everyone involved agreed to an **Addendum**. An addendum is an update that adds new goals and clearer steps for the state to follow.

What has changed

- Many people with I/DD say their lives have improved.
- New programs have helped people find jobs and get better support.
- BHDDH is still working to meet all the rules in the agreement. This is called **full compliance**, which means doing everything the agreement requires.

What happens next

- Rhode Island hopes to finish all remaining requirements and **exit the Consent Decree** this summer. Exiting means the state has met many of the goals.
- The state is creating a long-term plan to **keep the progress going** after the agreement ends.
- The goal is to make sure the improvements continue for people with I/DD in the future.
- More information is available on the BHDDH website under “Consent Decree.”

For more information about the Consent Decree, visit the BHDDH Division of Developmental Disabilities website:

<https://bhddh.ri.gov/developmental-disabilities/initiatives/consent-decree>

Community News

DD and Finley's: Working Together to Create R.I. Jobs



[Finley's](#) Ambassadors came to Rhode Island because Finley's, [Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities & Hospitals \(BHDDH\)](#), [Division of Developmental Disabilities \(DD\)](#), and [local provider agencies](#) decided to work together. The providers are [Agape Homes of Rhode Island](#), [Spurwink | RI](#), and [Community Living of Rhode Island](#). Finley's asked BHDDH about bringing their ambassador jobs to the state.



BHDDH then reached out to these providers, who wanted to help people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) find good work in the community. The providers met with job seekers, talked with families, and helped people decide if the ambassador job was a good fit.

Providers and BHDDH/DD helped find people who wanted jobs. They supported training, helped with rides, and stayed with ambassadors during their first shifts. They also worked with stores to make a schedule that worked for everyone.

Because of this teamwork, **16 people** with I/DD in Rhode Island now have paid jobs as Finley's Ambassadors. They are building confidence, learning new skills, and meeting people in their community. This Rhode Island partnership is part of Finley's larger mission to create jobs for people with disabilities across the country.



Community News

DD and Finley's: Working Together to Create R.I. Jobs

Finley's began in a Minnesota high school, where a teacher and her students baked dog treats and learned simple job skills. Years later, two former students returned as adults looking for work. This inspired the teacher and her husband to rent a small kitchen and invite five former students to bake and sell treats at farmers markets.

The business grew quickly. A news story brought in more orders, and a grocery store chain began selling the treats and inviting the team for in-store demos. Finley's later partnered with [NutriSource Pet Foods](#), which bought the company in 2022. This mission brought Finley's to Rhode Island, where partners built a strong ambassador team and created meaningful jobs.



How Your Support Makes a Difference:

Every time someone buys Finley's treats, they are helping the mission grow. The money supports:

- Paid work for people with disabilities
- Training and coaching
- Supplies for demos
- New job opportunities in more communities



To learn more about job opportunities like Finley's—whether you are a local business that wants to hire people with disabilities or a person with I/DD who wants to work—please contact the Employment Team at the [Rhode Island Department of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities & Hospitals \(BHDDH\), Division of Developmental Disabilities \(DD\)](#).

Phone: (401) 462-3421 **Website:** bhddh.ri.gov

Community News

DD and Finley's: Working Together to Create R.I. Jobs

The photos below show local participants working at several Rumford Pet locations across Rhode Island and nearby Massachusetts:

- Rumford Pet East Providence
- Rumford Pet Barrington
- Rumford Pet Warwick
- Rumford Pet Wakefield
- Rumford Pet North Kingstown
- Rumford Pet Greenville
- Rumford Pet Attleboro
- Rumford Pet Cumberland



Jordan with a Puppy



Audra and Chris at Barrington Rumford Pet store

Community News

Meet Sidney: An Artist, Performer, and Community Member



Carol and Sidney at the end of the interview.

Art is a big part of Sidney's life. He works at The Outsider Collective in Pawtucket, where he paints with acrylics and was a featured artist last year. He also joined an Art Car Derby with a "T-Rex Attack" car that made it to the semifinals.

Sidney has many other interests. He enjoys bowling and once belonged to a league. He also runs a greeting card business, **Card Sensations**, selling his artwork online and at [Coffee Depot](#) in 501 Main St. in Warren. His cards feature flowers, Rhode Island scenes, food themes, and abstract designs.

Each spring, Sidney performs in a musical at his family's synagogue, Temple Emanu-El. He has been part of the show for more than 10 years. Last year's theme was Sesame Street, and Sidney played Mr. Noodle. When asked what he did, he smiled and said, "I danced." The play is his favorite activity because he loves music, dancing, and the welcoming community.

Sidney Skurkovich enjoys being around people and communicates using both speech and sign language. He recently had his first formal interview with BHDDH's Steven Seay, with support from his mom, Carol Dorros, and an interpreter.

For two years, Sidney has helped plan and hold a block party for about 200 people in his neighborhood. He especially enjoys seeing friends and neighbors. Friendships are important to Sidney, who is 30 and self-directs his services through BHDDH's Division of Developmental Disabilities.



Sidney at his neighborhood block party.

Community News

Meet Sidney: An Artist, Performer, and Community Member

Sidney also creates art for his town, including a mosaic sign at the [Barrington Community Garden](#).



If you would like more information about this interview, you can reach Steven Seay, Coordinator of Integrated Community Services with the Division of Developmental Disabilities (DD).

Phone: 401-462-6609

Email: steven.seay@bhddh.ri.gov

Community News

Neighbors Helping Neighbors During the Blizzard



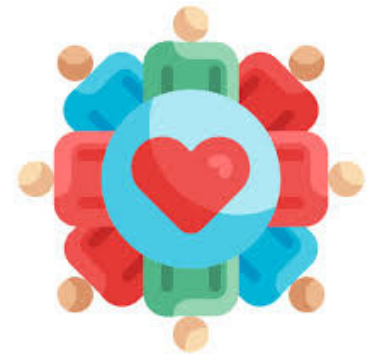
During a recent blizzard in East Greenwich, the power went out on Knollwood Avenue. One of the homes affected was Leif Sebesta's. Leif uses a wheelchair and needs electricity to stay safe and warm. As the house got colder, his caregiver knew he needed to get to his father's home nearby.

Neighbors quickly stepped in to help. People on the street used their group chat to organize support, and several came outside in the snow to help move Leif safely up the road. Their teamwork made sure he stayed warm and cared for during the storm.

This story shows how strong a community can be in an emergency. You can read the [full article at East Greenwich News](#) for more details and photos.

How the Community Helped Red, White & Brew

Warwick showed strong support for [Red, White & Brew](#) after someone stole the shop's tip jar. The coffee shop is known for hiring people with disabilities, and many locals care about its mission. When the theft happened, people in the community stepped up by donating, visiting the shop, and reminding the owners that they are valued. It became a story about kindness and inclusion, not about the crime.



What the story shows

- **People value inclusion.** The shop gives real jobs to people who are often left out, and the community wanted to protect that.
- **A bad moment turned into something positive.** The theft brought people together and reminded everyone why the shop matters.
- **The business is more than a coffee shop.** It represents belonging, respect, and opportunity for people with disabilities.

To read the full story, visit: <https://www.wpri.com/news/street-stories/how-warwick-stepped-up-after-tip-jar-theft-at-inclusive-coffee-shop/>

Community News

Technology Training Opportunity for Provider Agency Staff



BHDDH is offering trainings to help agency staff and plan writers learn simple, practical ways to use iPads, apps, and camera/printer tools with people who have I/DD. These tools can be used at home, in the community, and at work to support learning, communication, and independence.

The trainings are designed to be easy to understand and useful for everyday services.

To get more information or to sign up, contact Jennifer White, CEO of Able Opportunities, Inc., at jennifer@ableopps.com

Affordable, Accessible Apartments Available in Jamestown

3 Hammett Court, Jamestown, RI

One-bedroom apartments are available for adults with disabilities. The building is on a quiet street and close to stores, activities, and public transportation.

Features

- Bright apartments with large windows
- Open floor plans
- Parking
- Laundry area
- First-floor units with porch access
- Second-floor units available
- Near RIPTA bus and Newport Ferry



Hammett Court is a friendly, welcoming place to live and enjoy the Jamestown community.

For more information, call **401-560-4190**.

Community News

Rolly's Story: Art, Friendship, and a Supportive Home



Rolly joined Cynthia's family when he was eight. He became close with her daughter, Christina, and they grew up sharing many activities. Cynthia's mother, Florence, noticed Rolly's talent for building and art. In high school, he won awards and had his artwork shown in the local newspaper. A house fire in 2017 destroyed many of his early pieces, but not his love for creating.

A New Support Person

In 2015, Rolly began working with Bill from Living Innovations. Bill became a steady, positive role model. They spent time in the community—going to the library, the gym, and local shops. Rolly became more confident, learned new social skills, and enjoyed being recognized by people in the community.

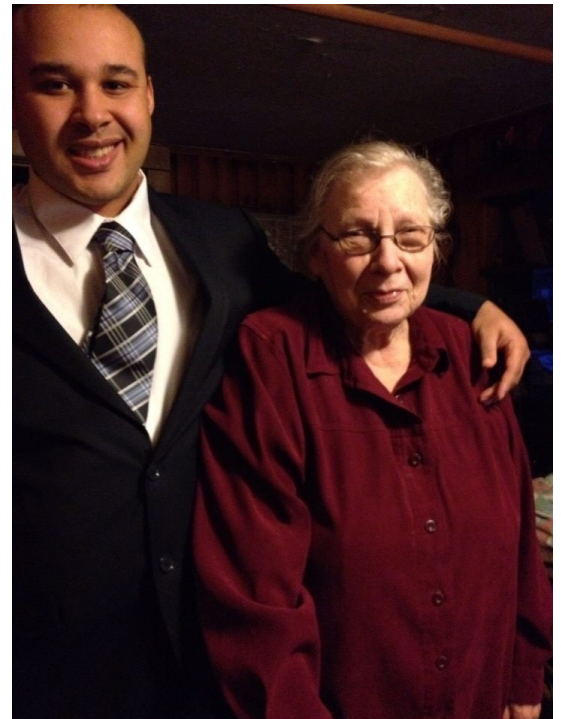
When Rolly moved into a larger home, it became clear he needed a quieter place. Cynthia asked Bill to become his home provider, and this change helped Rolly thrive

Growth in a Calm Home

Living with Bill gave Rolly the peaceful environment he needed. He became an important part of Bill's family and loved helping with Bill's grandchildren. With support from his case manager, Molly, he also reconnected with art after taking a break. His creativity is now strong again.

Rolly is a valued member of his community, and his success shows what can happen when someone has the right support and environment. Cynthia says, "Thank you, Bill, for loving Rolly as part of your family while keeping him part of mine."

"To learn more about shared living, visit www.livinginnovations.com or call 401-732-0304.



Community News

Rights Tip: You Have the Right to Make Choices About Your Life

Everyone has rights, including people with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD). These rights help you stay safe, be respected, and make your own decisions. The Your Life, Your Rights program explains these rights in clear, easy-to-understand ways.

Here is a friendly reminder of some of your Disability Rights:

- **Be treated with dignity and respect at all times**
- **Make your own choices about your life, services, and goals**
- **Get information in a way you understand**
- **Speak up about what you want and don't want**
- **Be included in your community**
- **Have equal access to housing, jobs, healthcare, and voting**
- **Be safe and free from abuse, neglect, or discrimination**



For the full list of Disability Rights, please visit the DD Rights page on the BHDDH website: [Your Life, Your Rights Program | Dept. of Behavioral Healthcare, Developmental Disabilities, and Hospitals](#)



Helpful Resources in Rhode Island

BHDDH – Division of Developmental Disabilities (DD)

For questions about services, rights, or your plan.

Phone: (401) 462-3421

Website: bhddh.ri.gov

The Arc

A national nonprofit that shares easy-to-understand information about disability rights, self-advocacy, and inclusion.

Website: <https://thearc.org>

ADA National Network

Provides clear information about disability rights

Website: <https://adata.org>

Community Resource

Six Easy Ways to Support Disability Awareness Month

Disability Awareness Month is a time to learn, show respect, and make our community more welcoming for everyone. Here are **six simple things** anyone can do:



Learn Something New

Take a few minutes to read or watch a short video about different types of disabilities.



Use respectful language

Choose words that focus on the person, not the disability. For example, say “a person who uses a wheelchair” instead of “wheelchair-bound.”



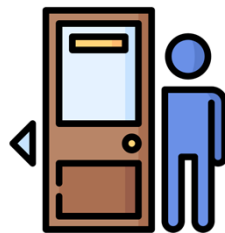
Be patient and kind

Some people may need extra time to speak, move, or complete tasks. Patience shows that you care.



Ask before helping.

It’s kind to offer help but always ask first. People know what works best for them.



Make space for everyone

Hold doors, keep walkways clear, and leave accessible seating open. Small actions make a big difference.



Include everyone

Invite people with disabilities to join activities, conversations, and events. Inclusion helps everyone feel valued.

To explore more information, stories, and resources created for and with people who have I/DD, visit The Arc at: <https://thearc.org>

Community Events

Calendar of Events

Explore upcoming events in your community. Unless noted, these events are free and open to the public. You may have to sign-up a few days before the event to go.

Event	Date & Time	Location	Sign-up
SDS Online Community Platform	Wednesday, March 18, 2026, 7:00 – 8:00 PM	Online (virtual meeting)	Register Online
Self-Directed Support Conference (RIPIN)	Friday, Mar 20, 2026, 10:00 AM – 2:00 PM	DoubleTree by Hilton, Warwick, RI	Register Online
Family Employment Awareness Training for Youth (FEAT-Y) — Session 1	Tuesday, March 24, 2026, 4:30 – 6:30 PM	Zoom	Register Online
Transportation Advocacy Updates	Thursday, March 26, 2026, 1:00 PM	Zoom	Register Online
Family Employment Awareness Training for Youth (FEAT-Y) — Session 2	Tuesday, March 31, 2026, 4:30 – 6:30 PM	Zoom	Register Online
Strategies for Teaching Autistic Youth and Adults with the Most Extensive Support Needs	Wednesday, April 1, 2026	Rhode Island College	Join Here
Self-Direction Connection	Tuesday, April 28, 2026	Zoom	Register Online

Report Suspected Abuse

QA Hotline 401-462-2629

Mandated Reporting

Reporting suspected occurrences of abuse, neglect, and mistreatment of individuals with developmental disabilities

To report abuse and serious incidents call the BHDDH Quality Assurance (QA) Unit **hotline at (401) 462-2629**. The hotline is open 24-hour hotline, seven days per week, 365 days per year. Staff respond to reported incidents of abuse, neglect, mistreatment, and financial exploitation.

BH Link is Here for You

BH Link's mission is to ensure all Rhode Islanders experiencing mental health and substance use crises receive the appropriate services they need as quickly as possible in an environment that supports their recovery. Visit the BH Link website at www.bhlink.org.

If under 18 CALL: (855) KID (543)-LINK(5465)

VISIT the 24-HOUR/7-DAY Triage Center at:

975 Waterman Avenue, East Providence, RI

Call 911 if there is a risk of immediate danger.

If you or someone you know needs support now, call or text **988** or chat 988lifeline.org



For More about the Division

Want to find out more about the Division? Visit the [Division's webpage](#). You will find information on services, resources, and more.

To contact Division staff, review the Contact List attached to this newsletter. You can also find a full list of staff on the [Division's Contact Us webpage](#).

You are always welcome to send general questions to BHDDH.AskDD@bhddh.ri.gov. Please do not email critical issues.

The Division is open Monday to Friday from 8:30 AM - 4:00 PM.

Division of Developmental Disabilities Staff Contacts

Main Phone: (401) 462-3421	Website: https://bhddh.ri.gov/
Fax Phone: (401) 462-2775	Behavioral Health Link (BH Link): 988
Spanish Phone: (401) 462-3014	Report Abuse: (401) 462-2629
TDD: (401) 462-3226	

Administrative Team

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Melissa Greenlief	Administrator, Comm Services	462-2459	Melissa.Greenlief@bhddh.ri.gov
Susan Hayward	Administrator, Transition	462-2519	Susan.Hayward@bhddh.ri.gov
Vacant	Associate Director, Prgm Perf		
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Transition Unit

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Transition Unit Team A

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Kaitlin Sarkees	Social Caseworker II	462-4075	Kaitlin.Sarkees@bhddh.ri.gov
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Name	Job Title	Phone	Email
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Elvys Ruiz	Admin III, Business and Comm Eng	462-3857	Elvys.Ruiz@bhddh.ri.gov
Steven Seay	Coordinator, Integrated Comm Svcs	462-6609	Steven.Seay@bhddh.ri.gov

Residential

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Peter Joly	Principal Comm Dev Training Spec.	462-6638	Peter.Joly@bhddh.ri.gov