

**Nothing More,  
Nothing Less  
For All People  
With Disabilities**

**Access to Independence of Cortland County, Inc.**

# ACCESS NEWS

**Fall 2011 NUMBER XXX**

## **ATI Board of Directors Elects New Members / Officers**

The ATI Board of Directors unanimously elected a new slate of officers during its October 18, Board of Directors Meeting. The new and returning officers include: Gail Bundy, Chair; Lisa Perfetti, Vice Chair; Larry Pfister, Treasurer; and Mary Betters, Secretary.

At the same meeting, the Board elected Kelly Colasurdo, an attorney with Riehlman, Shafer & Shafer, as a new Board Member. The Board re-elected Dr. Judy Bentley, Mary Betters, Gail Bundy, Laura Eaton, Garra Lloyd-Lester and Lisa Perfetti, to serve a second, two-year term. Other returning Board Members include: Dan Mullins, Sandy Price, Dr. Dan Pukstas, William Siedenbug, John Suarez and Christina Taranto.

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## **ATI Secures First Niagara Grant**

In early October, the First Niagara Bank Foundation awarded Access to Independence a \$15,000 grant for mentoring programming. ATI was one of nine recipients in the Central New York area to receive funds from First Niagara's *Mentoring Matters* initiative, a program that provides financial and volunteer support for mentoring efforts throughout the Northeast.

ATI will use the grant funds to underwrite certain expenses associated with its Peer Mentoring and Youth Transition programs, as well as to provide stipends to qualified mentors and to fund training for mentors, mentees and staff.

"Mentoring is a strong factor that so often leads to positive changes in the professional, academic, social, emotional and cognitive growth of young adults," said David Kavney, Central New York market executive for First Niagara.

Since 2006, ATI has offered consumers a variety of opportunities through its Peer Mentoring Program (see article on page 6). In addition to meeting regularly with a mentor, participants attend monthly Peer Support Groups on the last Thursday of each month from 3:00 pm - 4:00 pm. If you are looking to secure employment and would benefit from a mentor's guidance and support, this program is for you!

For more information on becoming a mentor, contact Aaron Baier at 607-753-7363.

## **ATI Announces 2012 Priorities**

The ATI Board of Directors approved its 2012 Priorities last month.

1. Achieve systems changes that lead to increased access, opportunity and participation for people with disabilities.
2. Re-develop capacity of Work Readiness / Youth Transition Program to assist more consumers.
3. Expand capacity of Architectural Barrier Program to assist more consumers.
4. Expand capacity of Medicaid Waiver Program to assist more consumers.
5. Implement strategic marketing initiatives that promote increased community awareness of the agency and that lead to increased funding diversification.
6. Complete feasibility study on potential Consumer Directed Personal Assistance Program (CDPAP).



**Above:** ATI sent a delegation of 14 disability advocates to the U. S. Capitol in September to rally for Medicaid reform.

## ATI Launches 2012 *Friends of the Center* Campaign

**Access, Opportunity, and Independence...**that's what you invest in when you make a donation to Access to Independence. Please join me and our Board of Directors in supporting efforts to help make our community a better place to live for everyone!

Access to Independence helps people with disabilities to have the same choices and opportunities in their every-day lives as their family, neighbors and friends. Your donation will help us to that end...to build a ramp, purchase a wheelchair for our loan closet, or pay for essential staff to help someone learn life skills to become more independent.

- **Access** is when a person with a disability can enjoy the same civil rights as everyone else, e.g., to work, play, shop, etc., and be a contributing member of a society where discrimination and physical barriers no longer exist.
- **Opportunity** is when a person with a disability has the same chances as anyone else to receive an education, to work, to buy a home and to raise a family.
- **Independence** is when a person with a disability can live in the community, control their own lives, make their own decisions, and participate in all aspects of society.

Whether you are an old friend or a new acquaintance, please know that your support will help to provide the staff and resources necessary to continue essential programming, including: accessibility modifications to homes and businesses; youth transition services; a loan closet of assistive equipment; service coordination and independent living skills training; awareness efforts to change the systems from within; and many others. Moreover, every dollar you donate will stay right here in Cortland, invested into our community.

For the third year in a row, Access to Independence (ATI) is offering businesses, agencies and individuals an opportunity to sponsor certain events or programs for the duration of 2012. ATI seeks community sponsors for its 2012 Bowl-a-Thon, ADA Celebration and Employment Conference events. ATI also seeks sponsors to support its Community Room and Consumer Computer Lab, both of which are open to the public at no cost. Lastly, ATI seeks 2012 sponsors of its website. All sponsors are recognized at events and in our newsletter. Please consider a 2012 sponsorship of ATI.

As we give thanks for our blessings at this time of year, let us think about how we can help others. I know that there are many agencies that need your help; I ask only that, if you believe in what we do, you consider sharing your generosity with us. Thank you.

-- Mary E. Ewing, Executive Director

For more information on how you can become a friend to Access to Independence and support our 2012 efforts, please contact Mary E. Ewing, Executive Director, or Chad W. Underwood, Chief Operating Officer, by phone: (607) 753-7363, or by email: [info@aticortland.org](mailto:info@aticortland.org).

## 2011 ATI Board / Staff Retreat

On Saturday, November 5, Access to Independence held its 2011 Annual Board / Staff Retreat. 13 Board Members and 10 Staff convened at the Ramada Cortland Conference Center to build energy for a successful launch of 2012 initiatives.

This year's retreat focused on building the capacity to sustain continued growth. Bob Stezzi, of the Binghamton-based Stezzi Training & Consulting, Inc., started the day off by facilitating an energetic dialogue between staff and Board on the importance and meaning of ATI's Mission, Vision & Values.

Next, Stezzi continued his work by facilitating two additional sessions for staff. The first session focused on the importance of teamwork. By way of several interactive exercises, staff learned the intricacies of effective teamwork, including how to avoid common barriers. The second session facilitated discussion on ways to work smarter. Staff learned useful techniques to be able to better manage multiple projects, to prioritize tasks, and to manage stress.

At the same time, Deborah Fisher, CPA with Port, Kashdin & McSherry, worked with Board Members to help them better understand their fiduciary responsibility and to become more knowledgeable about financial statements and reports.

Many thanks go out to all Board and staff participants, as well as, Bob Stezzi, Deborah Fisher and Mary Spencer of Ramada, for their outstanding contributions in support of this event.



*Above: ATI Board and Staff assembled for its 2011 Annual Retreat at the Ramada Cortland Conference Center on Saturday, November 5.*

## ATI brings fight for Medicaid reform to US Capitol: Protect Our Civil Rights!

Access to Independence sent 14 area disability advocates to Washington, D.C., on September 21, to join more than a thousand people with disabilities, seniors, family members, direct care workers and other allies to fight the Federal attack on Medicaid at the MY MEDICAID MATTERS rally. Members of Congress and national advocacy organizations addressed the federal budget crisis and its potential to create a recipe for disaster for Medicaid recipients. Medicaid recipients also spoke about the impact of potential cuts on their daily lives.

“Medicaid is the national safety net for millions of people,” said Chad W. Underwood, ATI Chief Operating Officer. “The Federal budget debate has largely overlooked the real impact of severe Medicaid cutbacks. This rally was the single major national Medicaid advocacy event this year. Now, at last, we were in the nation’s capital to be heard in force, to let decision makers know that real budget reform means recognizing that Medicaid matters.”

“When certain legislators’ idea of Medicaid ‘reform’ is creating block grants to the states, that demonstrates a real lack of political responsibility to ensure that vital services and supports reach the people who most need it,” said Underwood. “Block grants create a lack of accountability in spending because every state will administer Medicaid differently. We need to make sure that Medicaid dollars go to support the people who need it.”

State coordinators recruited attendees for months from as far as California, where Medicaid in-home services have been threatened annually with severe cuts. Several states, including New York, sent in busloads of advocates.

Bruce Darling of Rochester, New York, said, “People are sick and tired of being used as pawns by politicians with ‘austerity fever’. Our lives are at stake as well as the livelihood of our support workers. The Super Committee and the White House need to listen to what the rest of America needs.”

Although Congressional Democrats have vowed to protect seniors and nursing facilities, these proposals also cut home and community-based services that allow seniors and people with disabilities to stay in their own homes.

Access to Independence fights for policies that support people living in the community, give people more control over their own lives and save taxpayer dollars at the same time. These proposals include:

**Expand the use of home and community-based services.** Studies have demonstrated that by reducing the over-reliance on institutions and nursing facilities and shifting toward more cost-effective community-based services, states can contain Medicaid spending. Despite the growing body of evidence demonstrating that community-based services are more cost effective, the federal government still allows states to continue their wasteful, institutionally-biased practices.

**De-medicalize services.** By reducing the reliance on costly medical personnel to provide assistance and allowing attendants to perform these tasks, states use the same amount of Medicaid funding to support more seniors and people with disabilities living in their own homes. Many of the long term services that are widely perceived as “medical” become a basic part of

daily life to a person with disabilities. States continue to require that medical personnel provide such services, unnecessarily increasing Medicaid’s costs.

**Expand consumer directed service options.** By empowering people to manage their own services and reducing the need for administrative overhead, states can also reduce Medicaid expenditures. Many seniors and people with disabilities can manage their services and supervise the people providing the direct care, reducing the need for agencies to provide supervisory and administrative supports like training and scheduling.

**Reorganize Medicaid services to eliminate wasteful bureaucracy.** The current system wastefully organizes services based on diagnosis and age even though people may have the same needs. By organizing services based on functional needs states can eliminate redundant and needlessly expensive bureaucracies and reduce Medicaid expenditures. A system based on functional needs also eliminates gaps in services and makes services easier to access, reducing the need for professional assistance in navigating the system we currently have in place.

### Join Our Disability Advocacy Network!

- Keep current on federal, state and local disability issues!
- Receive email alerts on policy and budget matters!
- Fight for the civil rights of people with disabilities!
- Join more than 900 statewide advocates to fight for change!

Email Chad W. Underwood at: [cwunderwood@aticortland.org](mailto:cwunderwood@aticortland.org)

## Individualized Education Program (IEP) Diploma on its way out?

For nearly a decade, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has required public schools to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for every student with a disability who is found to meet the federal and state requirements for special education. IEP's aim to give students a chance to participate in "normal" school culture and academics in the least restrictive environment possible, while having access to specialized assistance when needed.

An IEP describes how the student learns, how the student best demonstrates that learning, and what teachers and service providers should do to help the student learn more effectively. When developing an IEP, a student is assessed in all areas related to their known disabilities and their ability to access the general curriculum is considered. As long as a student qualifies for special education, the IEP must be regularly maintained throughout the student's school years

Unfortunately, the IEP concept has not fully lived up to its intended goals here in New York. A substantially higher than expected percentage of students with an IEP have slipped through the cracks and have not secured a Regents Diploma or a Local Diploma (to be phased out by 2012). Instead, they have received an IEP Diploma or have altogether dropped-out of school.

An IEP Diploma is a diploma in name only. It indicates that a student with a disability has met the goals of their IEP, no matter how basic or minimal. Most importantly, the diploma signifies no standard of academic achievement or readiness to move on to post-secondary education or employment. Many students graduating with an IEP diploma are shocked to learn that it is not

recognized as a high school diploma at all. The IEP diploma closes rather than opens doors to colleges, employment, the civil service, vocational programs, and the military.

Re-evaluation of the IEP Diploma began several years ago, with the request that the NYS Education Dept. establish an alternate credential. Finally, on October 5, the Board of Regents issued proposed regulations regarding the elimination of the IEP Diploma and the implementation of an alternate credential for students taking the NYS Alternate Assessment - students with severe cognitive disabilities.

The new Skills and Achievement Commencement Credential would recognize a student's academic achievement and work-related experiences and attainment of the Career Development and Occupational Studies (CDOS) Learning Standards. Districts would be required to keep evidence and documentation of students' achievements to receive this credential.

By scrapping the IEP diploma and replacing it with a new credential system, we have a unique opportunity to create an umbrella diploma that doesn't lower students' expectations or limit their post-graduate opportunities. Such a diploma would make existing requirements and policy relating to career planning, transition planning and annual guidance meetings more strong. It could motivate students with disabilities to stay in school longer to work toward a regular diploma. Finally, it could enable students' community- and work-based learning and experience to be valued and documented.

For more information on New NY's proposed Diploma changes, visit: <http://www.p12.nysed.gov/special/>.

Access To Independence  
OF CORTLAND COUNTY, INC.

**Christmas Giving  
Wii Social Night**



**When:** Friday, December 9, 2011  
6:00 - 9:00 PM

**Where:** Access to Independence  
26 N. Main Street, Cortland

**Wear your favorite Christmas hat!**  
**Let's help those in need this Christmas -**  
**Bring a non-perishable food item to donate!**



## Eyes on the Future

### **Vision Support Group**

**2<sup>nd</sup> Thursday monthly**

**5:00 - 6:00 pm**

**ATI Community Room**

*Get support from peers with similar vision barriers.*

*Learn about assistive tools and technology.*

**Call 607-753-7363!**



*Above: Board and Staff exchange ideas to prepare for successful 2012 initiatives!*

## Youth In Power!

Get empowered...

Use your abilities...

Advocate for what you want!

2<sup>nd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> Wednesday,  
Monthly 4:00 - 5:00 pm  
CYB - Teen Center  
35 Port Watson Street

For more information,  
contact Aaron Baier at:  
607-753-7363

## COMPUTER CLASSES

Mondays & Wednesdays  
2:00 - 4:45 pm  
Thursdays  
1:00 - 3:00 pm

ATI Computer Lab

For more information,  
please call 607-753-7363.



*Above: In September, nine area youth took their first trip to the nation's Capitol to fight for the civil rights of seniors and people with disabilities.*

## Addressing Unmet Needs for Youth Transition Programming in Cortland County: Life After High School

Access to Independence and SUNY Cortland's Foundations and Social Advocacy Dept. have joined forces to assess the unmet needs in youth transition services in Cortland County. The study aims to encourage the implementation of innovative services to supplement those provided by local public schools, and to maximize the successful transition of youth ages 14-21 who have Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) to life after high school. The study will address evidence-based components of ideal transition planning and implementation.

Nationally, approximately eighty-five percent of high school drop-outs have some kind of disability. Their prospects for meaningful and self-supporting employment are increasingly restricted. Individuals with disabilities are twice as likely to live below the poverty line as individuals without disabilities.

According to the National Council on Disability, individuals with disabilities across all age groups are less likely to be employed. Students with and without disabilities who earn a Bachelor of Arts degree are almost equal in terms of getting jobs after college, and most post-secondary education institutions enrolling students with disabilities provide some level of services, supports, or accommodations. But there are significant gaps in the knowledge of promising practices to maximize the success of students with disabilities in high school, and in post-secondary education.

While the percentage of college freshmen with disabilities has more than tripled over the last 20 years to nearly 10%, many will not graduate; and most students with disabilities will never even get as far as college. Nearly half of students with disabili-

ties who enroll in post-secondary education drop out before acquiring a degree or credential. In college, these students face inconsistent interpretation of accommodation requirements, a mismatch between high school and post-secondary disability documentation, and a lack of awareness among faculty members regarding disability issues and effective teaching strategies.

Preliminary data from the needs assessment indicates that these trends are also represented in Cortland County.

However, more data is needed to validate the Cortland County study. The ATI / SUNY Cortland study requires the support of school districts, administrators, service providers, and most importantly, students, and their parents and teachers, by participating in focus groups and pencil-and-paper surveys. ATI and SUNY Cortland are currently working with Cortland County school districts to facilitate surveys of students age 14-21, who have Individualized Education Plans provided by the schools.

The ATI / SUNY Cortland needs assessment data will be aggregated so that school-specific trends will not be identified. Individual schools, individual students and individual answers will be identified by numerical codes and not by name or location. All aspects of the study have been approved, and principal investigators have been trained and certified in ethical and confidential research practices by the SUNY Cortland Institutional Review Board (IRB).

For more information about the collaborative study, contact Chad W. Underwood, by phone at: (607) 753-7363, or by email at: [cwunderwood@aticortland.org](mailto:cwunderwood@aticortland.org).

## “With Help From a Friend, You Can Reach the Stars!”

ATI began its Peer Mentoring Program (PMP) in 2006 using grant resources secured from the NYS Developmental Disabilities Planning Council (DDPC). The PMP aims to provide persons with disabilities (PWD) access to the skills and resources necessary to gain and retain community employment. Furthermore, the PMP seeks to train participants on how to improve their independent living skills, such as problem solving techniques, self-determination, and self-advocacy.

ATI's Peer Mentoring Program offers a variety of workshop styles, ranging from peer support sessions, to interactive assessments on attitude and barriers to employment, to co-sponsored community events. The Program includes weekly workshops and computer classes, a monthly support group, and regular trainings for mentors. Workshops are held every Thursday at ATI from 3:00 - 4:00 pm. The monthly Peer Support Group is held on the last Thursday of each month from 3:00 - 4:00 pm.

The key component of the PMP is the peer mentoring aspect. Each participant is matched with a Mentor, who provides one-on-one feedback opportunities on a regular basis. Mentees and Mentors meet for at least six hours each month to discuss topics relating to each person's life experiences or personal goals. The program also provides insight to overcoming barriers by way of guest speakers who share their own success stories.

The Peer Mentoring Program routinely features representatives of local agencies such as ACCESS-VR, Employment Connection, and Cortland Works Career Center that highlight the various services they can provide to consumers. Since

the start of the program, twelve individuals have gained employment, nine have secured volunteer opportunities and six have completed vocational training.

ATI also facilitates regular job shadowing experiences for interested individuals. Job shadowing gives participants an opportunity to try new career experiences. Participating businesses have included: Edgewart Farms, Tops, Cortland SPCA, Country Inns & Suites, Intertek, and Shaw & Boehler Florist., to name just a few.

ATI is continually seeking qualified mentors to help others gain and maintain employment. If you are an individual with a disability and are successfully employed, you may have what it takes to make a difference. ATI offers a variety of specialized Mentor Training workshops.

If you are looking to secure employment and would benefit from a mentor's guidance and support, then this program is for you! For more information on how you can get involved, or if you are interested in becoming a Mentor, contact Aaron Baier, Youth Transition / Work Readiness Coordinator by phone: 607-753-7363, or by email: [abaier@aticortland.org](mailto:abaier@aticortland.org).



## 2011 Disability Mentoring Day

On Wednesday, October 19, more than 30 students with disabilities (youth) participated in the 2011 Disability Mentoring Day (DMD). Students were matched with workplace mentors according to their expressed career interests. Youth experienced a typical day on the job and learned about the necessary training and expectations of their chosen career. Participants concluded the day with a luncheon that included guest speakers and an awards ceremony.

Access to Independence (ATI) Work Readiness / Youth Transition Coordinator, Aaron Baier, coordinated this year's DMD in collaboration with the Cortland Jr. / Sr. High School and the Cortland Works Career Center.

Mary thanks go out to every one of this year's event sponsors and supporters, including the more than 20 local businesses that facilitated job shadowing experiences, Cosimo's Italian Carry-Out for donating lunch, the Hampton Inn for hosting the event, Tompkins Trust Company for funding event T-Shirts, and the Rotary Breakfast Club for donating funds to cover miscellaneous expenses. DMD would not have been possible without your support!

While DMD takes place only one day each year, our community offers ongoing mentoring and career exploration opportunities for youth throughout the year. This is especially important given the fact that so many youth with disabilities, and their parents, struggle with successfully achieving educational and employment goals.

For more information on ATI's Youth Transition or Work Readiness services, contact Aaron Baier by phone: 607-753-7363, or by email: [abaier@aticortland.org](mailto:abaier@aticortland.org).

## 2011 Employment Conference

Every October, ATI hosts its annual Employment Conference for the community to provide attendees with new and innovative tools to enhance their job search through a variety of guest speakers and interactive workshops. This year's three-session conference, themed "Empowered for Employment," continued this legacy.

There are 4 key components to each Conference which make it unique. The first is the *Employer's Perspective*, which provides a glimpse of what the job seeker can expect when approaching a prospective employer. This year, ATI featured the perspectives of Bonnie Haines from Greek Peak, Laura Pforter from Cortland Works Career Center, Mary De Souza from Cornell University, Paul Yaman from Yaman Construction, Nick Pizzola and Tessa Foster from Plan First Technologies, Amy Becker-George from CNY Area Health Education Center, and Christine Rossillo from All Metro Health Care.

Second, the *Peer Perspective* component offers participants an opportunity to learn first-hand about the experiences and barriers of people with disabilities who have achieved their employment and life goals. This year, "one person's path to success" featured Phyllis Schriefer, ATI Program Assistant; Joseph Swinford, Deputy Director for the NYS Office of Mental Health's Office of Consumer Affairs; and Chris Xaver, an educator at TC3 and host of her own cook-

ing show "The Sweet Life." Each speaker had an incredible story to tell and ATI thanks each of them for sharing their lives.

Third, an *Interactive Workshop* component offers technical assistance to aid job seekers with their path to employment. This year, ATI featured several innovative and leading-edge workshops, including: *Online Branding for Today's Job Seekers*, by Mickey Gibbons from SUNY Cortland; *Self Employment & Entrepreneurship*, by Ken Homer from the Small Business Development Center, Binghamton University; the *New York State Employment Services System*, by Joseph Swinford from NYS Office of Mental Health; *Advocating for Employment*, by Chad W. Underwood from ATI; and *Marketing Yourself to Get Results*, by Jessica Wylde from Employment Connection.

Finally, the *Community Resources* segment aims to educate attendees on the array of services available in our local area. ATI enlisted representatives from Cortland Works Career Center, Employment Connection, Commission for the Blind and Visually Handicapped, Adult Career and Continuing Education Services (ACCES-VR), OCM BOCES Center for New Careers, and Cortland County Civil Service to talk about their various services.

Many thanks go out to all of the speakers and participants. Thanks also to this year's sponsors: Mark's Pizzeria, OCM BOCES, Wal-Mart, P&C Foods, and Price Chopper.

## Peer Mentoring Program

Every Thursday

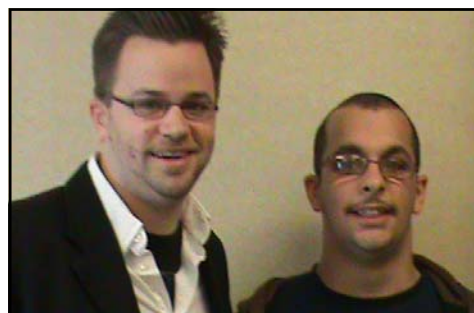
3:00 - 4:00 pm

ATI Community Room

For more information,  
contact Aaron Baier

Phone: 607-753-7363

Email: [abaier@aticortland.org](mailto:abaier@aticortland.org)



*Above: More than 80 youth and adults with disabilities participated in one or more of this year's Disability Employment Awareness Month activities!*



Visit us online at:  
[www.aticortland.org](http://www.aticortland.org)

Find us on Facebook!

## Incentive to Return to Work - Keep Your Benefits!

On October 11, ATI hosted a workshop to educate participants on the variety of work incentives that are available through the Social Security Administration.

Perhaps one of the biggest deterrents for individuals with disabilities to return to work is the fear of losing necessary Social Security Benefits. This workshop aimed to provide participants with information that would help them return to work and not lose those benefits immediately.

Jason Harriott, Community Work Incentives Coordinator, shared his expertise on the subject of work incentives during the workshop. Jason also offered his services to anyone who might have questions about their individual benefits and about how they might be able to return to work.

For more information, contact Jason Harriott by email: [ja-sonh@aboutchallenge.org](mailto:jasonh@aboutchallenge.org), or by phone: 607-272-7570 ext. 105.



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## Independent Living = Consumer Directed, by Susan Lewis

When I was asked to write an article about the Independent Living Philosophy, I decided to “Google it,” and see what other people were saying. I was happily surprised to find that the first choice was the *Wikipedia* definition. “Independent Living, as seen by its advocates, is a philosophy, a way of looking at disability and society, and a worldwide movement of people with disabilities working for self-determination, self-respect and equal opportunities.” The idea that a person with a disability can and should be in charge of their own lives and their services is the basis for our work here at Access to Independence. All of our programs and services start with the philosophy that people with disabilities are the best experts on their own needs.

The definition goes on to state: “In most countries, proponents of the Independent Living Movement claim that preconceived notions and a predominately medical view of disability contribute to negative attitudes towards people with disabilities, portraying them as sick, defective and deviant persons, as objects of professional intervention, as a burden for themselves and their families.

As a staff person of an Independent Living Center, one of my most important jobs is to advocate to change the negative attitude towards people with disabilities and to promote the fact that people with disabilities are entitled to the same freedom of choice as a person without a disability.

These choices should include everything from where a person lives, what public places a person chooses to visit and what medical professionals they see. Most people without a disability take these freedoms for granted.

One job for the staff here at Access is to educate our community about the positives of being all-inclusive. It may be a business that needs an automatic door to allow a person using a wheelchair or a walker access, or it may be a public office that needs a ramp to allow full access for everyone. These changes are always a positive in a community.

Access to Independence uses the Independent Living Philosophy when working with an individual with a disability. All Independent Living Skills services are optional, and a person chooses what they would like help with. As Independent Living Coordinator, I will not do for someone what they can do for themselves. My ultimate goal is to teach that person to live as independently as possible. This does not mean that a person with a disability will always be able to live without assistance. What it does mean is a person with a disability has the right to be as independent as they can possibly be. They have the right to make decisions in their life and deal with the consequences of those decisions to the best of their ability. This is a freedom that most people take for granted. But, people with disabilities have been fighting for this right for many years.

As an Independent Living Center, at least 51% of our staff and Board has a disability. This means that we have a lot in common with the people we serve and understand many of the issues they are dealing with. Most of our staff has had to overcome the stigma that society places on disability for ourselves, our family members, or friends, and this gives us added incentive to assist others to overcome these roadblocks as well.

For more information, call Susan Lewis at 607-753-7363, or stop by our office at 26 North Main Street, Cortland, NY.

## Will Other Benefits Affect My SSD Benefits?

Do you receive Social Security Disability benefits? Are you eligible for other benefits? If you are getting other government benefits, the amount of your Social Security disability benefits may be affected.

The following additional benefit payments may reduce your monthly SSD benefits: Worker's Compensation, civil service disability benefits, state temporary disability benefits and state or local government retirement benefits that are based on disability.

If you receive any of these benefits plus Social Security disability benefits, the total amount of these benefits cannot exceed 80% of your average current earnings before you became disabled.

The following payments will not affect your monthly Social Security benefit amount: Veteran Administration benefits, State and local government benefits (if Social Security taxes were deducted from your earnings), or SSI income.

Here's how Social Security figures the reduction: Your monthly Social Security disability benefits, including benefits payable to your family members, are added together with your worker's compensation or other public disability payment.

If the total amount of these benefits exceeds 80% of your average current earnings, the excess amount is deducted from your Social Security benefit.

Your Social Security benefit will be reduced until the month you reach age 65 or the month your other benefits stop, whichever comes first.

Be sure to contact Social Security if the amount of your worker's compensation or other public disability payment increase or decreases. Any change in the amount of these benefits is likely to affect the amount of your Social Security benefits.

## SS Disability Claim Approved - Now What?

### *When do my benefits start?*

If your application is approved, your first Social Security disability benefits will be paid for the sixth full month after the date of your disability. For instance, if the SSA (Social Security Administration) decides your disability began on January 15, your first disability benefit would be paid for the month of July. Social Security benefits are paid in the month following the month for which they are due, so you would receive your July benefits in August.

### *How much will my benefit be?*

The amount of your monthly disability benefit is based on your average lifetime earnings. The Social Security statement you receive each year displays your lifetime earnings and provides an estimate of your disability benefit. It also includes estimates of retirement and survivors benefits that you or your family may be eligible to receive in the future. If you do not have your Social Security Statement and would like an estimate of your disability benefit, you can request one at [www.socialsecurity.gov](http://www.socialsecurity.gov) or call Social Security at 1-800-772-1213.

### *Can my family get benefits?*

Certain members of your family may qualify for benefits based on your work record. They include:

- Your spouse, if he / she is 62 or older;
- Your spouse, at any age, if he / she is caring for a child of yours who is younger than 16 or disabled;
- Your unmarried child, including an adopted child, or sometimes a stepchild or grandchild. The child must be younger than age 18 or younger than 19 if in elementary or secondary school full time; and
- Your unmarried child, age 18 or older, if he / she has a disability that started before age 22.

In some situations, a divorced spouse may qualify for benefits based on your earnings if he / she was married to you for at least 10 years, is not currently married, and is at least age 62. The money paid to a divorced spouse does not reduce your benefit or any benefits due to your current spouse or children.

For more information, please call Susan Lewis, Certified Benefits Counselor and Independent Living Coordinator, at 607-753-7363.

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## Questions about transportation?



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## Helping People Remain in the Community – One Home at a Time

Are you, or someone you know, stuck in the house because you can't get up or down the steps? Are you, or someone you know in a nursing facility and can't leave until you have an accessible place to live. ATI might be able to help!

When you think of accessibility, what does it mean to you? Most people immediately think of a ramp, or maybe an elevator. However, there is much more to accessibility; the projects that ATI has facilitated include everything from ramps of all kinds (wooden, aluminum, temporary, movable), to outdoor lifts (where a ramp isn't feasible), to roll-in showers/walk-in tubs/whirlpool tubs (for massage), to all sorts of kitchen and bathroom modifications, to flashing alarms for a person with hearing impairments, etc.

ATI currently has five different funding streams to facilitate home accessibility modifications. While ATI primarily serves individuals in Cortland County, our service area has grown over the years to include most of Central NY. In general, the funding we work with has specific criteria, such as income eligibility or the ability to serve only certain disabilities. The five sources of funding we have for accessibility modifications include:

- *Access to Home* - aims to help low income and frail elderly individuals in the City of Cortland, the County of Cortland, and certain towns in Chenango County, remain in their home by facilitating home modifications.
- *DDSO* - aims to provide assistive technology and environmental modifications for individuals with developmental disabilities and their families.
- *Department of Health (DOH)* - provides funding through Medicaid for the Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Nursing Home Transition & Diversion (NHTD) Waiver programs. Funding under these programs is limited to individuals who have Medicaid and who are approved to participate in one of the Waivers.
- *J.M. McDonald Foundation* - aims to help individuals in emergency situations to install ramps or minor accessibility modifications.
- *Accessibility Construction Services* - helps those individuals who don't qualify for the above-listed programs, and who have the resources to make needed modifications on their own. ATI can plan, design and manage the project for you from start to finish.

There are other potential funding sources as well. The Veteran's Administration may provide some funding towards a ramp, if the individual has served in the armed services. Worker's Compensation claims sometimes include an accessibility component if it will help an individual return to work. ACCESS-VR may also provide some funding for accessibility if it relates to increasing a person's ability to work.

If you, a friend or family member is in need of accessibility modifications to make your home more functional, contact Audrey Jones ([ajones@aticortland.org](mailto:ajones@aticortland.org)) or Richard Platt ([rplatt@aticortland.org](mailto:rplatt@aticortland.org)), Architectural Barrier Specialists! You may also call 607-753-7363.



**Accessibility Construction Services**

26 North Main Street  
Cortland, New York 13045  
Phone: (607) 753-7363

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**The Cortland Housing Authority has a rental assistance program that may be able to help you!!**


*The Section 8 Housing Program helps qualified people meet their monthly rent bills by paying a portion of their rent directly to their landlord.*

**Interested persons may pick up applications at the Housing Authority offices located at 42 Church Street or 51 Port Watson Street Monday through Friday from 8:30 am to 4:30 pm or**

**Call 607-753-9364 or 607-753-1771 to request to have an application sent by mail**




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