



**Main Story / 03.06.08**

## **Unity House Joins Other NYSACRA Members To Advocate for MRDD Consumers and Direct Support Staff**



Unity House's McMaster (L),  
Lader(C), Leone (R)

**AUBURN** – Unity House of Cayuga County Inc., represented by its Auburn 62 South Street Individual Residential Alternative (IRA) Manager Suzanne McMaster, Residential Counselor Deb Leone, and consumer Beverly Lader, joined forces with about 250 other statewide members of the N.Y. State Association of Community and Residential Agencies (NYSACRA) on March 4, 2008 in Albany, N.Y. to advocate for items that are essential to the quality of care consumers receive from voluntary providers of MRDD services.

The all-day advocacy effort, the featured activity of NYSACRA's annual legislative day, included visits to and discussions with Assemblyman Gary Finch of Auburn, the staff of Senator George Winner of Elmira, Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton of Ithaca, Assemblyman Brian Kolb of Geneva, and Senator Michael Nozzolio of Seneca Falls by the Unity House advocates.

On behalf of NYSACRA, Unity House, and MRDD consumers and direct support staffs, the Unity House team expressed their appreciation to their representatives for the recommended trend factor of 3.52% and direct support staff cost of living adjustment (COLA) of 3.2% in the executive branch's proposed budget. They asked their representatives to help ensure that those commitments to services and supports to individuals with developmental disabilities via NYS CARES III be retained in a final budget, explaining to them that they were absolutely necessary to sustain the mission of Unity House and other NYSACRA members of supporting individuals with developmental disabilities to become respected, contributing members of their communities.

In addition, the three-person entourage emphasized to their elected officials that the executive branch's proposed revenue reductions in the OMRDD budget, summarized as a gubernatorial request to "restructure and rationalize" rates to cut funding to voluntary providers of OMRDD services by \$10 million in the coming fiscal year and \$40 million in FY 2009-2010, were unacceptable. If enacted, they stressed, the proposed cuts would irrevocably impair the capacities of voluntary, nonprofit providers of MRDD services' to continue to administer such necessities as improving their direct support workforces' quality, training, and education. In addition, they explained how the proposed cuts also would threaten providers' abilities to comply with their already overstretched responsibilities under their extensive new requirements on both the federal and state levels regarding compliance, fraud and abuse standards, enhanced financial accountability, and reporting and investigating legislation.

The Unity House advocates also discussed with their Assembly and Senate hosts their need to experience increases in their hourly pay and salaries, something the governor's COLA

does not include. They pointed out that their industry on average suffers through annual turnover rates approaching 40%, much if not all of which can be attributed to the low pay direct support professionals receive. They claimed that, although Unity House's direct support staff turnover rate was substantially below the national average's, the agency and all others whose professional staffs are underpaid face a continuous uphill battle to recruit and retain qualified staff, which is the heart and soul of every good program, they declared.

N.Y. State OMRDD Commissioner Diane Ritter told the 250 advocates prior to their meetings with their elected officials that she and her office wanted exactly what each and every provider of MRDD services the Empire State wanted, and that their participation in the day was key to achieving those goals.

"We want our consumers to have a terrific home, meaningful relationships, and ongoing personal growth," she said. "Today we join together to make that a reality for our thousands of consumers."