



NEWSLETTER

SPRING 2025

IN THE ISSUE:

*Join us June 19 in Cedar Falls
for EPI's Outdoor Live Music
Event: More Than You See*

Exceptional Persons, Inc.



LIVING OUR MISSION

Connecting people, creating opportunities, and
nurturing growth since 1957.

WWW.EPISERVICE.ORG

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ABOUT US

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*Join Us: June 19th for our Annual
More Than You See Event*

Watching "It's a Wonderful Life" has become a cherished holiday tradition for many, including myself. This classic film tells the story of George Bailey, who, with some help, realizes the profound impact his life has had on his community and learns to appreciate his own existence.

As Medicaid faces unprecedented uncertainty at an alarming speed, I can't help but wonder what life would be like for persons with a disability without the person-centered supports assisting with activities of daily living, medication management and employment support, among many other crucial and life-saving services almost exclusively funded through Medicaid.

1. Loss of Independence: Without Medicaid, many would lose access to home and community-based services (HCBS) that enable them to live independently. This could force people into nursing homes or state-run institutions. Imagine an 18-year-old living in a 24/7 locked facility, not because they need to be there, but because they have nowhere else to go. We see this regularly. Recently, we brought an individual into HCBS and watched them flourish and contribute to their community. Not to mention, HCBS is more cost-effective than institutional care and aims to increase independence, potentially reducing reliance on Medicaid over time.

2. Employment Barriers: Many people with disabilities rely on Medicaid to support their ability to work. Without it, they might be unable to maintain employment, further limiting their independence and financial security. We've seen great success in supporting people with disabilities in finding competitive integrated employment. Sixty-six percent of those we serve in employment services work 20-31 hours a week. Imagine if all these individuals were pulled from Iowa's already strained workforce.

3. Consistent Staffing: Rising costs make it difficult for employers to maintain competitive wages and benefits needed to attract talented employees to direct support roles. Without staffing stability, imagine meeting someone new every time you needed intimate support like showering. Our ability to provide high-quality services relies on a stable workforce.¹

4. Access: Cuts to Medicaid will directly impact the services providers can offer. Providers may have to make difficult decisions and cut services they can no longer afford. Needs will go unmet, waitlists will grow, and people will be hurt. Families would experience increased strain as they try to fill the gap left by the loss of Medicaid-funded services, potentially impacting their own financial stability and well-being.

By no means is this an exhaustive list of the ripple effects cuts to Medicaid would have on individuals, families, and communities. Unless more people educate themselves, take a stand, and reach out to their legislators, our story may not have a happy ending as portrayed in the classic movie.

Yet, I have hope because our community is strong. In the movie, George's community rallied around him; many went to great lengths to ensure he weathered the storm. I sure hope we can count on you to rally around the 300 people we serve who receive life-changing services funded almost exclusively through Medicaid.

We've created a page on our website with all the resources and tools you need. Scan the QR code to visit the page found online at www.episervice.org.



Reference:

[1] <https://www.ancor.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/DSP-Workforce-Crisis-1.pdf>

KATIE'S CORNER

CATCH THE LATEST NEWS FROM OUR
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, **KATIE SLADE.**



PEOPLE ARE THE HEART OF EPI



YOUR VOICE IS HELPING US GROW **BY MAGHAN BOWMAN**

At EPI, we believe the best way to grow is by listening. We also believe listening deeply and acting with heart are two of the most important ways we can honor the people we serve and those who support them.

That's why, last fall, we asked for your feedback from a stakeholder survey conducted by a trusted, outside research company. Whether you're someone receiving services, a family member, or a community partner, your experiences shape the future of what we do.

We encouraged feedback through email, mailings and newsletter invitations, we hoped to hear from as many of you as possible. And you showed up!

The results are in and we're excited to share some key takeaways with you.

What We Heard - *There are areas we're doing well in!*

- **Overall satisfaction remains strong.** Our satisfaction scores held steady - a clear sign that our work is making

a meaningful impact. In a constantly evolving world, that kind of consistency is worth celebrating.

- **Our Net Promoter Scores (rating on how likely someone is to recommend EPI's services) are the highest they've ever been.** More people than ever say they would recommend EPI's services to others. Stakeholder scores jumped from 30.7 to 61.1, and scores from persons served also increased - from 40.1 to 47.2.
- **We're doing a great job listening.** Many of you said you feel heard when you interact with our team. That affirmation means a great deal to us and reflects one of the values we hold most dear.

Where We Can Do Better - *We also heard that there are areas we need to grow.* Here are those areas we'll be working to improve:

- **Training:** A few of you indicated that some employees need to be more knowledgeable about the service needs of the persons served.

LET'S STAY CONNECTED



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Just by following us, liking, commenting or sharing our posts you help EPI engage with others!



SIGN UP FOR OUR EMAIL NEWSLETTER

Stay up to date on the latest happenings around EPI. Scan the QR code below!



SEND US YOUR EMAIL

If we don't currently have your email, we'd love to! Send an email with your info by scanning the QR code below.

- **Communication:** We've noted there is a need for more timely discussions about significant changes in your loved ones life.
- **Responsiveness:** There was a desire expressed for quicker responses to requests.

Where We're Going From Here - Your feedback is helping guide real change. Here's what we're doing next:

- **Enhancing Training:** We will continue to invest in training and development programs to ensure all employees are well-equipped to meet the service needs of those we serve.
- **Improving Communication:** We will continue to work towards strengthening our communication protocols to ensure significant changes in your loved ones life are discussed within an acceptable time frame.
- **Increasing Responsiveness:** We are working to streamline internal processes so we can respond more quickly and effectively.

- **Periodic Check-ins:** We are setting more regular intervals to review the progress of new actions being implemented and will make adjustments as needed.

Extending a Heartfelt Thank You

To everyone who shared their perspective - thank you. Your voice helps us build an organization where people feel respected, heard, and supported. We are deeply grateful for your continued partnership.

If you missed this last survey - we'll be conducting more! Make sure we have your email address by scanning the QR code found below to visit a contact us page on **www.episervice.org**.

Together, we're creating something truly meaningful. And we're just getting started.



SERVICE EXCELLENCE



AQUAIA'S STORY: EARNING HER CHANCE TO SHINE **BY BETHANY GIACHINO**

When you walk into the local Hampton Inn on any given morning, there's a good chance you'll be greeted by a warm smile and a cheerful, "Good morning!" from Aquaia. She'll probably ask where you're traveling from, and for just a moment, your day will feel a little brighter, because someone saw you, welcomed you, and made you feel at home.

That's just who Aquaia is. And that's exactly why her story matters.

Last May, Aquaia began a new chapter in her life, one filled with purpose, pride, and joy, when she started working as a Public Area Attendant. But this milestone didn't come easily. Like so many people with disabilities, Aquaia faced barriers to meaningful employment - not because of what she couldn't do, but because she hadn't yet found the right support to do what she knew she could.

Before joining the team at Hampton Inn, Aquaia worked in a job that didn't feel right. She shared it just wasn't fulfilling for her and she knew she was meant for

something more. Something that would allow her to connect with people, share her light, and take pride in her work.

That's when she took a bold step. Aquaia began her four-month long job development journey designed to help people with disabilities prepare for and find work they love. She didn't just show up - she committed. She learned, she practiced, and she poured herself into the process with determination and hope.

Her dream became reality when Hampton Inn welcomed her with open arms. Since then, Aquaia has become more than an employee, she's become a vital part of their team. Her coworkers describe her as kind, uplifting, and always ready to lend a hand. Her presence makes the workplace feel warmer. Her attitude makes the hardest days feel a little lighter.

It came as no surprise when earlier this year she was named Employee of the Month, an honor given for her outstanding work ethic, team spirit, and ability to brighten the day of every guest and colleague she meets.

COMMUNITY INCLUSION

CHILD CARE SPOTS AVAILABLE!

The Hawkeye Child Development Center - ALC is a program of EPI offering care to children from infant through preschool age.

Located downtown:
120 Jefferson Street
Waterloo, IA 50701

Open Monday through
Friday: **6:30 AM - 5:30 PM**

Scan the QR code on the right to find more info online at www.episervice.org!



B C
A **HAWKEYE CHILD**
Development Center - ALC
A PROGRAM OF EPI

“I love saying hi to everyone staying here and finding out where they are traveling from,” she says, her face lighting up with pride. It’s simple. It’s genuine. And it’s powerful - the way her joy ripples out and touches the people around her.

Aquaia’s story is not just a personal triumph. It’s a reminder of what’s possible when people with disabilities are given the opportunity to do what they love and the support to succeed.

She is living proof that people with disabilities not only can but should work. Not out of obligation, but because they have talents to share, dreams to pursue, and so much to offer. Employment isn’t just about a paycheck - it’s about purpose, connection, and the dignity of contributing to something bigger than ourselves.

To those who may still wonder whether inclusion in the workplace is possible, we invite you to look at Aquaia. She is doing more than just working a job. She’s building a life. And she’s reminding all of us what’s possible when we lead with belief instead of bias.

We are so proud of Aquaia. And we’re so grateful for the joy she brings to the people around her - here at EPI, at work, in our community, and beyond.

If you believe everyone deserves the chance to shine, contact us by scanning the QR code below to learn more at **www.episervice.org**.

Because when we lift up voices like Aquaia’s, we don’t just change minds - we open doors.



STAFF EXCELLENCE



WILSON OBURRA'S ACHIEVEMENT IN THE CAREER ADVANCEMENT PROGRAM BY SARA DRISH

At EPI, we are committed to fostering professional growth and excellence among all team members. For our direct support professional (DSP) staff, we offer a national apprenticeship opportunity called the Career Advancement Program (CAP).

This program is designed to provide comprehensive education and on-the-job training, enabling DSPs to advance their careers while delivering high-quality support to individuals with disabilities.

A closer look at the program.

The CAP program provides education and practical experience - structured into multiple levels, each requiring specific competencies and certifications:

- **DSP-Apprentice:** New hires start with an 80-day assessment period before progressing.
- **DSP-Registered:** Involves pursuing the first credential with the National Alliance for Direct Support Professionals (NADSP) and receiving on-the-job training.
- **DSP-Certified:** Requires the second credential with NADSP, focusing on evaluation, communication, and professionalism.

- **DSP-Advanced:** The third credential emphasizes empowerment, advocacy, and cultural competence.
- **DSP-Mentor:** The final stage, offering advanced training in organizational partnership and coaching techniques.

Wilson's Remarkable Achievement

We are thrilled to announce that Wilson Oburra, a dedicated DSP at EPI, has successfully completed his DSP-Advanced (level 3) certification in the CAP program. This milestone makes Wilson the first DSP at EPI to achieve this prestigious status. His accomplishment is not only a testament to his hard work and dedication but also a significant milestone for our organization.

Wilson's achievement places him in the top 0.1% of all DSPs nationwide.

With over 1 million DSPs enrolled in the program, fewer than 1,500 have reached the DSP III level. This elite group represents the pinnacle of excellence in direct support, and Wilson's inclusion is a source of immense pride for EPI.

Wilson's success in this program highlights the effectiveness of our training and development initiatives. His journey

WE ARE EPI



EXCEPTIONAL EMPLOYEES

Did you know? EPI

employs close to 300 individuals! Roughly 55% of our workforce are Direct Support Professionals (DSP).



SEVEN-TIME EMPLOYER OF CHOICE

EPI is a seven-time recipient of the Courier's Top 20 Employers of Choice. Our latest award was in 2023!



CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

When you work at EPI you're working to make the world a better place - starting right here in the Cedar Valley. Scan the QR below to apply today!

through the program has equipped him with advanced skills in community living, advocacy, and cultural competence, enabling him to provide exceptional support to those he serves.

At EPI, we believe that investing in our staff's professional growth not only enhances their capabilities but also improves the quality of care we provide. Wilson's achievement is a shining example of what can be accomplished through dedication and the right support.

We invite you to join us in celebrating Wilson Oburra's remarkable achievement. His dedication and excellence inspire all of us at EPI to continue striving for the highest standards in direct support. Congratulations, Wilson, on this outstanding accomplishment!

MILESTONE ANNIVERSARIES

Recently, we have celebrated several milestone anniversaries with staff:

- **Lori DeVries** - 35 years
- **Chu Conrad** - 30 years
- **Dawn Lammers** - 25 years

- **Lisa Steere** - 25 years
- **Lisa Frank** - 20 years
- **Wilson Oburra** - 15 years
- **Maghan Bowman** - 10 years
- **Amber Burns** - 10 years
- **Danielle Knavel** - 10 years
- **Zachary Moye** - 10 years
- **Kristin Snyder** - 10 years
- **Becki Aneweer** - 5 years
- **Vezelibia Banna** - 5 years
- **Phyllis Eastman** - 5 years
- **Cheryl Deahl** - 5 years
- **Stefani Duffy** - 5 years
- **Crystal Lang** - 5 years
- **Rae VanArsdale** - 5 years

Thank you for connecting people, creating opportunity and nurturing growth - through the years!

For more information about having a career with opportunities to grow at EPI, scan the QR code to learn more at **www.episervice.org**.



HEALTH & WELLNESS



ENHANCING COMMUNITY LIVING **BY BONNIE KIPPER**

At EPI, we believe life is meant to be lived out loud - in the community, on your terms, and without limits. That belief has always guided our work in Supported Community Living (SCL). As we continued reflecting on best practices, we asked ourselves: *how can we do even better?*

The answer was clear, we deepen our commitment to person-centered support by helping individuals design their own schedule, in their way. This led to a renewed focus and enhanced approach we now call *My Life, My Way*.

So, what's different?

This isn't a new, standalone service. It's a stronger, more intentional way of delivering what we've always valued - **individualized, community-based living**.

Historically, traditional day habilitation operated Monday through Friday in facility-based settings. While our SCL services always prioritized community involvement, we knew we could do better. That meant stepping away from facility-based, group models and leaning into real-life integration - offering people the freedom to choose.

This renewed approach is built on the idea that more opportunities lead to experience and personal growth.

Here's how that looks:

- **Limitless Choice:** People choose what they want to do, when they want to do it, and with whom they want to be with - whether that's attending a writing class, volunteering at a food pantry, or meeting friends for a Buck's baseball game after the work week. These experiences aren't limited to the business hours, they happen during the day, evening, and weekends, entirely based on each person's routine and preferences.
- **Thousands of Meaningful Moments Each Month:** With hundreds of unique activities offered monthly and thousands of individual experiences happening, people are participating in ways that reflect their own interests, goals, and lifestyles - resulting in a truly customized experience.
- **Person-Centered:** Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) and integration specialists partner with individuals to explore interests, access the community, and build skills for lifelong success - at home, in the community, and at work.

Putting First Things First

Just like anyone else, the adults we support have full lives - jobs to get to, appointments to keep, and personal responsibilities that shape their weeks. *My Life, My Way* puts those priorities first.

INNOVATIVE THINKING

MY25/MAINSTAY

Changing our eating habits gets us closer to sustainable good health. Our experience using My25/Mainstay with our staff and persons

served has resulted in persons moving towards their ideal healthy weight and a reduction in preventable health medications. My25/Mainstay isn't a

diet - rather it provides nutritional resources and tools to enhance weight management, mealtime habits, and independent skills.

In the past, traditional day habilitation programs often limited time in the community and restricted opportunities for engagement or self-directed scheduling. These rigid structures created significant barriers to full participation in life. We saw this firsthand and knew something had to change.

Today, persons served are taking the lead - filling their days with meaningful work, volunteering, health and wellness activities, recreation, and social opportunities. It's not just about being busy - it's about building skills, success, and long-term security through experiences that matter.

Meet Joe: A Small Step Leading to a Big Transformation

Joe's story is a perfect example of what happens when people are given real choice and connection. Once shy and reserved, Joe discovered a love for writing through a community class at the library. With support from his DSPs, he not only built new skills - he built confidence and friendships.

His proudest moment? Standing in front of an audience at a poetry reading to share his own original work.

Today, Joe now spends his days exploring interests, forming connections, and developing the confidence to build his future. With a flexible schedule,

individualized support, and opportunities grounded in real community involvement, Joe found his voice and a sense of belonging he hadn't experienced before.

Moving Forward Together

Our commitment to enriching the lives of people we serve has never been stronger. We believe people with disabilities don't just visit the community, they belong in it.

My Life, My Way is a reflection of that belief. It's the way we support people to shape their days, pursue passions, build independence, and live life fully on their own terms.

Whether you're a family member, referral partner, or someone looking for the right fit, we invite you to discover what is possible at EPI where all people live their life, their way.

Scan the QR code or visit us online at www.episervice.org to follow along with our community integrated stories.



VISION. MISSION. VALUES.



We're thrilled to share exciting news - Exceptional Persons, Inc. (EPI) has officially earned Quality Assurances Accreditation from CQL | The Council on Quality and Leadership, a nationally recognized organization dedicated to promoting quality in human services.

This accreditation is more than just a seal of approval, it's a reflection of our long-standing commitment to putting people first, providing person-centered support, and continuously improving the way we serve individuals with disabilities and their families.

"We are incredibly proud of the impact EPI has had on our community over the years. Our commitment to the people we serve remains unwavering. This accreditation is a testament to the hard work and dedication of our staff, and it reinforces our mission. It's a proud moment for our entire organization and a meaningful step forward in strengthening the services we provide daily," shared Katie Slade, EPI's Executive Director.

EPI EARNS NATIONAL ACCREDITATION FOR QUALITY SERVICES **BY MAGHAN BOWMAN**

Why This Matters

CQL's Quality Assurances Accreditation isn't easy to earn. It's a rigorous, three-year process that involves everything from staff training and system reviews to focus groups and continuous consultation. At the heart of it all is a commitment to person-centered practices - the belief that those we serve should be at the center of every decision, every goal, and every solution.

By achieving this accreditation, EPI is aligning with internationally respected standards that hold us accountable to the highest quality of care and service. And most importantly, it means the people we serve are receiving support that truly honors their strengths, needs, and goals.

"Through this accreditation, EPI is showing the people they support, employees, families, and others that they genuinely care about enhancing the quality of their services," said Mary Kay Rizzolo, President and CEO of CQL.

LIVING OUT OUR VISION, MISSION, AND VALUES

OUR MISSION

Connecting people, creating opportunities, and nurturing growth since 1957.

OUR VISION

Working together we will realize a future where all people are recognized and valued – encouraged and supported to live, work, and grow – in their communities.

OUR VALUES

- People
- Stewardship
- Creative Cooperation
- Integrity

Who We Are

Since 1957, EPI has served as a cornerstone of support for people with disabilities in the Cedar Valley and beyond. Our mission is to connect people, create opportunities, and nurture growth. Whether it's through supported living, employment services, family support programs, or tech-enabled solutions, we're here to help people live meaningful, independent lives in the communities they choose.

Earning this accreditation is a natural next step in that journey - and we couldn't have done it without the incredible individuals we serve, their families, and our dedicated team.

“The level of commitment that EPI has for quality services is truly admirable, and it's an honor to partner with them,” shared Katherine Dunbar, Vice President of Services and Systems Excellence at CQL.

Looking Ahead

We're proud of this milestone, but we know our work is never done. This accreditation is a foundation we'll continue to build on, always striving to be better, listen more deeply, and grow alongside the people we serve.

Thank you for being part of our journey. Together, we're building a community where every person is seen, heard, supported, and empowered to live the life they choose.



EXCEPTIONAL PERSONS FOUNDATION



Get ready to celebrate inclusion, advocacy, and community at *More Than You See (MTYS)*, EPI's signature benefit event, on Thursday, June 19, 2025, from 6:00 – 9:30 PM at River Place Plaza in downtown Cedar Falls.

This unforgettable night open to the public, is packed with great food, live music, and a powerful mission you won't want to miss.

One Inviting Location

Located on 200 State Street in Cedar Falls, the River Place Plaza is the perfect setting for an outdoor summer evening of celebration and connection. Here are a few reasons why we love it:

- **Accessible:** The venue is designed to be inclusive for everyone with a fully accessible layout.
- **Parking:** Free public parking is available in nearby lots and along adjacent streets.
- **Room to Gather:** Bring your chairs, blankets, family, friends and dogs!
- **Open-Air:** Dress for the weather and

JOIN US: JUNE 19TH FOR MORE THAN YOU SEE BY NICOLE ERICSON

wear comfortable shoes - this event takes place outdoors under the stars. In the case of inclement weather, our rain date is scheduled for July 10, 2025.

Entertainment That Moves You

Feel the beat with the Schmidt Brothers, Iowa's premier rock, pop, and country trio. Their high-energy performance will have you dancing, singing, and celebrating.

Food Trucks You'll Love

Satisfy your cravings with favorites like:

- **Taco Life Food Truck**
- **Boyd's Food Trailer**
- **Totally Rolled Ice Cream**
- **Gibby's Concessions**

Pair your bites with a variety of refreshing beverages as you soak in the atmosphere with friends, family, and fellow community members.

Bid for a Cause: Live & Silent Auctions

Looking to take home something special? You're in luck! This year's event will feature both live and silent auction items - perfect for scoring unique finds while supporting a great cause.

YOU CAN HELP



PLANNED GIVING

Please include the Exceptional Persons Foundation in your will and estate planning to ensure EPI services live on forever.



QUALIFIED CHARITABLE DISTRIBUTIONS

Consult with your financial advisor on how to make a tax free donation to EPI as part of your IRA required minimum distribution!



WANT TO MAKE A DONATION?

Your generosity means so much - thank you! Donations allow us to fulfill our mission when other funding runs short. We accept donations anytime. Visit us online at www.episervice.org.

From unforgettable getaways and exclusive experiences to rare bottles of wine and other must-have items, there's something for everyone.

You can place silent auction bids right from your phone, making it easier than ever to get in on the action!

This Year's Theme: Advocacy + Activism

This year's theme reflects on our deep commitment to championing the rights and inclusion of individuals of *all* abilities and backgrounds. With the event taking place on Juneteenth, we are especially reminded the importance of ongoing advocacy - and together, we can make a difference.

More Than a Celebration

For 11 years, *More Than You See* has been more than just a night out. It's a movement to raise awareness, lift voices, and support people with disabilities in living, working, and growing as independently as possible, starting right here in the Cedar Valley.

Funds raised during this event go directly toward vital services that

promote independence, inclusion, and empowerment.

Stay tuned for more details on our website at www.episervice.org, scan the QR code and follow us on social media.

Let's come together to make this the best *More Than You See* event yet!

Thank You to Our Event Sponsors

Extending a heartfelt thank you to our amazing 2025 event sponsors:

Presenting Sponsor:

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ELECTRONIC SERVICE REQUESTED



OUR MISSION

Connecting people, **creating** opportunities, and **nurturing** growth since 1957.



OUR VISION FOR TOMORROW

Working together we will realize a future where all people are recognized and valued – encouraged and supported to live, work, and grow – in their communities.



QUESTIONS?

Contact our Senior Communications Specialist, Bethany Giachino, with any questions about our newsletter at bethany.giachino@episervice.org.

STAY UP TO DATE

Our goal is to stay in close contact with you by sending out bi-weekly email communications to help keep you informed.

Scan the QR code below to visit <https://bit.ly/43cayBk> and sign up online to receive our latest news faster than twice a year!

