



Westchester Independent Living Center As Seen On Westfair Business Journals

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SUITE TALK

Suite Talk: Margaret Nunziato, executive director of Westchester Independent Living Center

Last month, Margaret Nunziato became the second executive director of the Westchester Independent Living Center (WILC), succeeding Joe Bravo who retired after founding the organization four decades ago.

WILC is part of a national association of independent living centers that provide a wide spectrum of nonresidential and non-medical services for people with disabilities. The organization is headquartered in White Plains and operates an outreach office in Yonkers and a satellite office in Brewster for the Putnam Independent Living Services.

Nunziato joined the organization in 1999 to oversee the New York state Department of Health's traumatic brain injury waiver program for the lower Hudson Valley region. She was previously deputy executive director prior to taking the leadership reins.

In this edition of Suite Talk, Business Journal Senior Enterprise Editor Phil Hall speaks with Nunziato on the organization's operations during the pandemic and her goals for 2021.

Congratulations on becoming the new executive director at the organization. How did you feel when you were asked to take over from Mr. Bravo?

"I was extremely honored. Mr. Bravo has been there for 40 years – he created the agency and the fact that I was asked made me just very proud."

What has the last 12 months been like for the organization?

"It has been very busy. We have been supporting our participants through various means: We have been doing wellness calls on a daily basis, we began a food insecurity program where we sent out and continue to send gift cards in increments of \$150 to individuals who need food. Unfortunately, food deliveries cannot be done under food stamps, so with these cards, individuals can call up grocery stores and have food delivered to them.

"We have offered people other Covid-essential equipment such as masks and have provided individuals with phones or tablets so that they could communicate to prevent isolation. We have conducted groups with our peer advocacy and mental health programs, and we've done cooking groups and done luncheon groups where everybody has joined during a lunch on



Margaret Nunziato, executive director of Westchester Independent Living Center.

Zoom so that you can eat and talk together. We definitely have been trying to identify the needs of our participants and those that we serve, and fill those needs as best as we can."

Where does the funding from your organization come from and how has the pandemic impacted the funding channels?

"Our agency has various grants and funding sources. We get funding through the state and through the federal government and we do have some fees for services.

"Through this pandemic, because of how the state was under financial need, there was some withholding of funds in order to support the state as a whole. However, we have been just told that withholding is going to be coming back to us. Luckily, our grants have been coming through and we applied for the emergency loans.

"So, we did okay. There were some scary periods. But we brainstormed on how we could keep our staff up and running and support the needs of our participants."

Last year was the 30th anniversary of the passage of the American with Disabilities Act. In the three decades

since that became law, how has life improved for people with disabilities? And are there still challenges that they face in the job market or housing or transportation?

"People with disabilities have definitely come a long way over the past 30 years, absolutely. However, they have been faced with barriers. There are still inequities in the job market, in finding accessible and affordable housing, in having access to health care, getting into some stores, getting into some hotels and restaurants, having menus that are accessible for everybody. There are things that able-bodied people take for granted and don't realize how difficult it is for someone that may not be able to see as well or not be able to get on a sidewalk. So, yes, there are things that still need to be addressed. And we are addressing them."

What are your priorities going forward as executive director for the organization?

"Our mission for Westchester Independent Living Center is to empower people with disabilities to lead self-directing lives and to be as independent as possible in the community. Joe Bravo created the agency based on that mission and we plan

to continue with that mission and expand his dream."

What are you doing in terms of working with the business community to bring more people with disabilities into the workforce?

"We have multiple programs that assist people with work readiness. We participate in many county task forces and we network on various committees to let people know what we do and what support we could provide.

"When we say 'job readiness,' it's not just about a job skill. It's also about helping and supporting people with issues that might be occurring at home and may be preventing them from getting a full-time job, whether it's a health-related issue, childcare issue, or a transportation issue. When we work with individuals, we do an assessment as a whole and we work on the job readiness – the actual job skill – as well as any other issue that might be a barrier from that for them getting a position."