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## Message from the CEO



Dear SCFU Community,

Each year, through its gifts of longer days, warmer weather, and the return of flora & fauna, the spring season serves to remind us of life's vibrancy, resilience, and of our always progressing personal and collective growth.

This year especially, spring's positive and hopeful energy seems so much more palpable to me because 2026 marks Special Citizens' 50<sup>th</sup> year of providing critical resources to local men, women, and children within the ID/DD community, as well as delivering vital support to their families upon the transition of their loved ones from high school to adult life and beyond.

Over the last 50 years Special Citizens has been an essential community resource in Westchester, The Bronx, and the greater New York City area. Throughout the last five decades we have grown from a fledgling organization with a small (but mighty) staff overseeing one group home location into a sprawling organization with nearly 300 employees, offering comprehensive services to up to 200 people each year at our (2) day services locations, and our now twelve supportive residences spread throughout the area. Just last month, on March 16<sup>th</sup>, OPWDD's Division of Quality Improvement completed their inspection of our newest group home in Peekskill and officially certified the program, marking the final step we had to complete before welcoming five new residents into their new home. It's a milestone that represents years of planning, collaboration, and dedication. It also couldn't possibly be any more perfectly aligned with the optimism embodied by the spring season, as well as with the celebratory energy that's attached to reaching the auspicious milestone of providing 50 years of service to our local ID/DD community.

**MESSAGE FROM THE CEO (CONT)**

As we reached the final stages of officially opening our new Peekskill supportive residence, I found myself not just reflecting on the immense accomplishment of opening this one new residential location, but also on the collective journey of each home within our now vast network of supportive housing. That's because each home has represented so many improved lives of those we support, scores of jobs (for our many dedicated DSPs, nurses, behavioral staff, maintenance staff, and other agency employees), as well as hundreds of family members and advocates who all have been able to breathe a sigh of relief knowing not just that every one of their loved ones' needs were being met, but that they had at their disposal every possible resource to reach their highest potential and live their best possible lives. While processes and regulations have evolved over time, one thing remains constant, the commitment and vision of the people who came before us. The homes we have maintained and operated for decades now stand as a testament to hard work, persistence, and the belief that every person deserves the opportunity to live a full and independent life.

Over the past two years, our team has gone above and beyond to advance our strategic plan for expansion & growth, and have thereby massively increased our reach and ability to impact even more lives for the better. From traveling to schools all across the state of New York (and even as far as Pennsylvania!), to partaking in numerous virtual meetings, collaborating with families and advocates, and attending countless ISP meetings, our team has worked tirelessly to achieve this impressive milestone. And, that all of it was accomplished while continuing to meet the myriad needs across all our existing programs is just one more testament to our agency's collective strength and unwavering commitment to our mission of providing home, family, care, and love to each and everybody we support.



“ *The homes we have maintained and operated for decades now stand as a testament to hard work, persistence, and the belief that every person deserves the opportunity to live a full and independent life.* ”



In addition to the exciting news about our new Peekskill residence, we also just received word that OPWDD has approved our letter of intent to develop (2) more homes in NYS Region 3 (Westchester) in the next few years. Each of the new homes will be designed around the Peekskill model, each home set to support 4-5 residents who will be graduating from high school between 2028 and 2030. This exciting development clears the path for Special Citizens to extend our vision and mission even further, ensuring continuity of care for local families in the process of planning for their loved ones' futures. Together these initiatives to broaden our reach and thoughtfully expand our footprint in the community, while concurrently strengthening our overall long-term sustainability

To say that I am incredibly proud of our team and deeply grateful for the partnership and support of our families, advocates, and community stakeholders, would be a staggering understatement. Please also know whether you have been a part of this journey for a few months, years, or decades, that this achievement (as well as all our past and future successes) belongs in no small part to each of you. So, while we take a much deserved moment to celebrate, we must remain committed to the work ahead, always continuing to expand, innovate, and create pathways to independence, fulfillment, and acceptance for every person who we have the distinct privilege of serving.

## RHEA SMITH RISES TO LEAD SCFU RESIDENTIAL DEPARTMENT



We are thrilled to share the recent agency news that Rhea Smith will now lead the Residential Department at Special Citizens, assuming the role of Director of Residential Services. Rhea was promoted to the role this past February from her previous role of Assistant Director of Residential Services.

In her extensive experience within the human services field, Rhea has held prior positions as a Registered Behavior Technician, Assistant Residential Manager, Residential Manager, and in 2023 she was a SCIP-R Trainer & Instructor with OPWDD.

Asked what she’s found to be the most rewarding part of working in the human services field, Rhea recalled experiences of helping people she’s supported to learn a new skill, gain confidence, or seeing a supported individual simply enjoy their day as the most meaningful aspects within any of the roles she’s held. She continued stating that “as a Residential Manager or Director, that impact grows even more, because you’re not only supporting people with I/DD, but also guiding staff and shaping the overall environment of the home.”

Through her many roles held over her expansive career, Rhea contends that in each position she has been guided by being “a teacher and nurturer by heart” adding that as an OPWDD Trainer she “developed meaningful relationships with supported persons, staff, and colleagues” by always maintaining her commitment to teaching and learning from others.

Rhea is a lifelong Bronx resident, and has been working in the field of human services since the age of 17, when she first became a DSP at a day services program with a fellow I/DD organization. When she’s not tending to residential matters at Special Citizens, Rhea spends weekends providing respite services with self-direction, and is also currently completing work on her Masters in Health Administration degree.

**SAVE THE DATE**

Thurs., Oct. 22, 2026  
Zuppa Restaurant & Lounge

*Please save the date for our annual agency fundraising event*

**Celebrating Our 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

*-More details to follow-*

*For any inquiries or questions, please contact us at:*  
[development@specialcitizens.org](mailto:development@specialcitizens.org)

**CELEBRATING 50 YEARS 1976 - 2026**

**SPECIAL CITIZENS FUTURES UNLIMITED**

**Zuppa**  
RESTAURANT & LOUNGE

**Special Citizens Futures Unlimited  
50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration & Fundraiser**

**CELEBRATING 50 YEARS 1976 - 2026**

**SPECIAL CITIZENS FUTURES UNLIMITED**

*Autism Acceptance*

*Join us at Yankee Stadium in celebration of Autism Acceptance!*



**TB AT NY**

*Sunday - May 24th - 1:35pm*

**Every ticket purchase includes discounted admission, FREE limited edition Autism Acceptance Yankees Hat AND a \$15 food & drink voucher!**  
*(Scan QR Code above for tickets!)*




## SPECIAL CITIZENS OPENS 12<sup>TH</sup> SUPPORTIVE RESIDENCE & WELCOMES NEWEST RESIDENTS



On March 16<sup>th</sup>, following years of strategic planning, unwavering commitment, and an abundance of hard work by SCFU leadership, OPWDD completed their final inspection of our newly opened Peekskill Residence, making it official for us to welcome five new residents to the Special Citizens family.

Here at Special Citizens, the excitement and sense of accomplishment has been palpable in the recent weeks, as this monumental achievement marks a pivotal shift forward in our efforts to expand our reach, further our mission, and most importantly make a meaningful difference in the lives of local men and women in the I/DD community, while supporting their families as they navigate one of the most important decisions and chapters of their lives.

Please join us in extending a big heartfelt Special Citizens welcome the newest members of the SCFU family of supported residents!

## ELMSFORD DAY PROGRAM VISITS THE BRONX ZOO



On Tuesday, April 14<sup>th</sup>, Elmsford Day Program attendees journeyed to The Bronx Zoo for a day of fun, learning, and seeing the many members of the animal kingdom that call the zoo home. The excursion was planned as part of welcoming SCFU's newest residents of our newly opened Peekskill house. This was also the first time visiting the Bronx Zoo for all the new Peekskill residents! A very big thank you to the Elmsford staff for curating a really special afternoon for everyone who went, and for creating a truly memorable day.

## CAPTURED MOMENTS, SCENES, & THEMES OF THE SEASON

Below, check out some great moments captured by SCFU staff from recent holiday celebrations, day program activities, as well as from different educational and recreational excursions!



Have Questions? Email us at [info@specialcitizens.org](mailto:info@specialcitizens.org) - or call us at 212-643-2663, ext. 706  
Want to Help? scan the QR code below, to rush a donation in support of all our vital work.

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