

AveNEWS

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Avenues to Independence empowers adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities to live the lives they choose through personalized support, advocacy, and community engagement.



A Letter from Stephen Kray

Dear friends,

The past year has been one of meaningful momentum for Avenues to Independence.

Thanks to the generosity of our community and the dedication of our team, we have accomplished things that once felt only aspirational.

In 2025, we welcomed five new residents into our homes. For families who had been waiting years for the right opportunity, those moments were life-changing. Each new admission represents careful planning, partnership, and a commitment to creating environments where individuals can thrive with dignity and independence.

We also launched our Clinical Services Department, expanding the depth and quality of care available within our programs. By strengthening the professional support surrounding the individuals we serve, we are building a more comprehensive model that responds thoughtfully to evolving needs and helps our clients live healthier lives.

We are also expanding opportunities beyond essential services. Last year, the Hornbrook Adventure Program allowed us to send twelve clients on vacations to Lake Geneva, the Wisconsin Dells, and St. Augustine, Florida. These trips provide

more than enjoyment; they build independence, confidence, and lasting memories. They remind us that quality of life is not defined solely by safety and stability, but also by new experiences and joy.

These accomplishments are not isolated milestones. They reflect a broader commitment to thoughtful growth based on the needs of people we serve. As we expand, we remain grounded in our mission: to support our clients in living the lives they choose.

Momentum matters, not because growth is the goal, but because growth expands access. It means fewer people waiting to move into our homes, more comprehensive support, and new opportunities for individuals to live fuller, more independent lives.

To our staff, whose daily hard work turns ideas into reality, thank you. To our families, donors, and community partners, your trust and support make this progress possible.

Together, we are building an organization that is stronger, more responsive, and better equipped to meet the needs of our community — today and for many years to come.

With gratitude,

Stephen Kray
President & CEO

Community Partners

Avenues is thankful for the generous grants we have received since our last publication.

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HVAC, future renovations, gliding chairs



Welcome Home: Avenues Adds 5 New Residents in 2025

"I was ecstatic," Linda LaPorte recalls. This was the immediate reaction from new Avenues residential services client Anthony (Tony) LaPorte's mother when the call from Avenues finally came. After nearly 9 years on the waitlist to secure a spot in one of Avenues' residences, and nearly two decades of hoping for the right opportunity, Linda was overcome with joy and relief.

For loved ones who have waited years, when that phone call finally comes, that conversation is life-changing in the best way possible. But behind it is months of coordination, preparation, and collaboration from the Avenues team to ensure new residents feel at home from the first time they walk in the door, and hopefully, for the long term.

The goal: 15 new residents in 3 years

Historically, Avenues welcomed an average of one new residential client per year, and in some years, none at all. In 2025, we achieved an important goal in our recently developed strategic plan as we added five new residents: Tony, Annie, Kim, Paul, and Zach. Five new residents, five new lives changed.

So what made this year different?

In recent years, state funding regulations limited how some of our residential apartments could be

used, which meant that despite significant need, not all available space could be filled. After sustained advocacy and collaboration with state partners, those barriers were resolved, allowing additional apartments to qualify for funding. This change reopened capacity in homes like Sasser and Herbst House, making it possible for us to welcome more residents in 2025.

With 2025 in the rearview mirror, our goal is to welcome 10 more new residents in the next two years, to make a total of 15 over three years. We're so grateful and proud to have reached our first-year goal, but it's not without its challenges. Adding five new residents in one year was a tremendous lift for our team, which required careful consideration and coordination to get it right.

What it takes

That joyful phone call is only the beginning. Behind it is a steady, thoughtful process focused on making sure each new resident truly feels at home.

Staff proactively reach out to families on our waitlist each year, to make sure we are aware of their changing needs, timelines, and hopes for the future. While some are ready to make a move quickly, other families are planning ahead for retirement or shifting health circumstances.

“Families are often so excited! They think, ‘it’s finally happening,’” said Amy Landreth, Director of Admissions and Program Supports at Avenues to Independence. “Our job is to make sure the timing and the fit feel right for everyone involved.”

When a spot opens, the process unfolds thoughtfully. First, families tour the home, meet members of the residential and clinical teams, and participate in a “pre-trial” meeting. This helps get everyone more comfortable with the upcoming move, and ensures alignment among Avenues team members. A short trial period follows, giving prospective residents the chance to sleep in their own room, participate in day services at the Center for Independence if they choose, and experience daily life at Avenues.

Behind the scenes, there is constant team coordination, including conversations, paperwork and planning. It’s all designed to make the transition as smooth as possible. From that first phone call to move-in day, the journey typically takes two to three months, guided every step of the way by a team of up to 10 staff members focused on making the welcome feel right.

“It’s exciting to welcome someone new,” said Elaina Kray, Community Liaison at Avenues. “There’s a lot of work behind the scenes, but seeing someone walk into their new home makes it all worth it.”

7 PROPERTIES





8-10 STAFF
(ON AVERAGE)



LONGEVITY AT AVENUES
LONGEST RESIDENT: 46 YEARS
AVERAGE: 25 YEARS

INVOLVED FROM WAITLIST TO WELCOME

Adjusting to a new home and lifestyle

The first few weeks for our new residents are often a blend of excitement and adjustment, and it’s where Avenues’ experienced residential teams really make a difference.

“There’s excitement, but also nerves,” said Mary Francis, Avenues’ Residential Director. “Everyone is hoping this will be a long-term home, and it takes a little time for that comfort to settle in.”

Our Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) and residential managers pay close attention during

those early days, offering reassurance, patience, and consistency. We work diligently to make sure independence and personal choice are the priority, even though it takes time for new residents to feel fully comfortable.

After about one month, our team gathers again with the family and new resident for a check-in meeting to talk through what’s working and what needs adjusting. For many families, trust builds in those early weeks. Little by little, they begin to take a step back, knowing their loved one is supported, safe, and beginning to feel at home.





More than four walls

For residents like Tony, the move to an Avenues residence meant moving from another residential facility farther away to be closer to family and joining a community

that better matched his needs. For others, like Annie and Kim, who were previously renting an apartment from Avenues without full services, changes in funding allowed them to become more fully integrated into residential life and services.

For loved ones who have provided care for decades, we often hear from them how the pressure of daily responsibility eases. They can travel, retire, step back from a physically and mentally demanding role.

Most importantly, the future feels more secure.

Longevity underscores that sense of security. Avenues' longest-standing resident has called Avenues home for 46 years, and many residents remain for 25 years or more. The goal is not temporary placement, but long-term independence.

What home really means

Welcoming five new residents in 2025 brought both opportunity and challenge. Growth requires adaptation, and we continue to evolve to ensure smoother transitions and communications.

For families who have waited years, "Welcome Home" is more than a phrase. It's a relief. Possibility. A door opening after a lot of uncertainty.

For Avenues, it's a promise that begins with a phone call and continues for decades.

ROAD TRIP

Avenues Launches the Hornbrook Adventure Program

Last May, Avenues launched the Hornbrook Adventure Program (HAP). For many adults with developmental disabilities, the obstacles to traveling can be prohibitive. Named after longtime supporters Jim and Anita Hornbrook, HAP is intended to provide opportunities for our clients to travel safely with the support and care they need.

Article continued on page 9

Greetings from the Wisconsin Wells!

Four Avenues clients, along with staff members Cal and Rafael, hit the road for our very first HAP trip. They spent the week sightseeing and making unforgettable memories. Highlights included a Steely Dan tribute show, a classic duck boat tour, and an old-time photo shoot full of laughs.





Avenues program participants smiled big for the group photo

Celebrating Every Journey: A Look Back at the Avenues Annual Dinner

This past October, Avenues hosted its Annual Dinner and Dance, a very special night celebrating the individuals we serve and their families.

Stephen Kray, CEO and President, welcomed everyone and shared updates about the many great things happening at Avenues. Ron Reeves, Director of Day Services, acted as the emcee for the event, guiding the program and introducing the theme for the evening, Celebrating Every Journey. Guests enjoyed an inspiring video of our program participants and each of their unique journeys at Avenues, set to the well-known song "Life is a Highway."

During the evening, we also presented the William and Jean Knaack Spirit of Avenues Award to Ash & Willow Salon owner Holly Santelli, recognizing her long-standing support and volunteerism. Holly and her team have provided free haircuts, styling, and more to Avenues clients for the past 15 years. She and her team even installed a barber chair in one of Avenues' residential homes, making it easier for clients to access routine hair care and feel their best.

“ Haircuts and styling may seem like trivial personal care tasks, but for our clients it makes a huge difference in how they live their lives with confidence, dignity, and independence. ”
 —Stephen Kray, President and CEO of Avenues to Independence

The Spirit of Avenues Award is named in honor of our founders, William and Jean Knaack, who paved the way for individuals with disabilities to become true members of the local community. This award is presented annually to individuals who embody the values of Avenues—challenging ideas of what is possible and making a significant impact in the lives of the individuals we serve at Avenues.

To view more pictures from the event visit: https://avenuestoindependence.org/pics_flicks/.

A special thank you to all of our sponsors who made this incredible evening possible.

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Avenues in the News: Recent Media Coverage Highlights



Extra, extra! In recent months, Avenues to Independence has been proud to see our mission and partnerships featured across Chicago broadcast media and nonprofit trades. From spotlighting meaningful community partnerships to

elevating awareness around our clinical services, these stories reflect the growing visibility of our work.

CBS-2 Chicago: How Small Acts of Kindness Inspire Our Community

In December, Avenues' staff and clients, along with Holly Santelli of Ash + Willow Salon in Park Ridge, were featured on CBS-2 Chicago News. The segment celebrated the 15+ years that Holly and her team have generously provided free haircuts to Avenues clients, an achievement that was recently recognized when Holly received the William and Jean Knaack Spirit of Avenues Award at our Annual Dinner (see

page 6 for more). The story highlighted some of the amazing individuals we serve, who shared how impactful these haircuts have been in helping them live with dignity and independence.

ABC-7 Chicago: Avenues In-Studio Interview

ABC 7 Chicago shared the inspiring story of Avenues and Holly Santelli of Ash & Willow Salon's ongoing partnership to offer free haircuts to Avenues' clients. The segment showcased how something as simple as a haircut brings joy to our clients, while also raising broader awareness about the importance of supporting adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Nonprofit Magazine Better.net Features Article from Avenues President and CEO Stephen Kray

Avenues' recently expanded Clinical Services Department was featured in an article by Stephen Kray in nonprofit magazine Better.net. The article shines a light on our growing Clinical Services offering, and how as our clients age, we are adapting to better serve their needs.



Scan the QR code to watch the full CBS Chicago segment



Scan the QR code to watch the full ABC Chicago segment



Scan the QR code to read the full Better.net article



Jane & Albert Wohlers Visionary Award Recipients Jerry and Sue Feldman (center) with friends and Avenues Staff.

Avenues Masquerade Noir Gala Raises Over \$620,000

On Saturday, February 21st, Avenues to Independence hosted its annual gala, Masquerade Noir: The Black + White Ball, at Loews Chicago O'Hare. Guests enjoyed a night of mystery and intrigue featuring live music by the Maine South High School Jazz band, a delicious sit-down dinner, and an after party full of experiences including a mentalist, aerial dancers, a saxophonist, and of course, lots of dancing! The night transported guests to the Plaza in true Capote style, and the energy in the room was off the charts.

A highlight of the evening was honoring Jerry and Sue Feldman with the Jane and Albert Wohlers Visionary Award, recognizing their longstanding support of Avenues for over twenty years. Family and friends surrounded the Feldmans to celebrate their accomplishments and a surprise video from Avenues clients was shown, congratulating them on the award. Jerry and Sue Feldman's commitment to Avenues has made a profound impact on the individuals we serve, helping them live with dignity and independence.

The evening culminated in an exciting paddle raise, ensuring that any Avenues client who wants to travel will have the opportunity to attend a HAP trip within the next three years. Overall, Masquerade Noir was an outstanding success, raising more than \$620,000 to support the people of Avenues.



An exciting paddle raise in support of the Hornbrook Adventure Program.

This night was made possible by the generosity of our donors and sponsors, event co-chairs Danielle Hartung and Fran Thompson, and all of our Masquerade Noir committee members. Your support turned a vision into reality, creating a memorable evening filled with celebration, entertainment, and fun.

Thank you to everyone who joined us for Masquerade Noir: The Black + White Ball. Every contribution made that evening supports Avenues clients' journeys to live with independence and dignity. It was truly your presence that made the event a success, and we look forward to welcoming you back next year for another unforgettable evening of celebration, community, and support for Avenues.

To view more photos from the event:

<https://avenuestoindependence.org/gallery/Album.cfm?ID=3233>.



Scan the QR code to watch the 2026 Jane and Albert Wohlers Visionary Award Presentation

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Article continued from page 5

Hello from St. Augustine, Florida!

The HAP program reached new heights as staff members Cal and Tabitha traveled with four Avenues clients to sunny St. Augustine, Florida. Together, they navigated air travel with confidence and embraced every adventure- from beach time and city exploring to a visit to the Capybara Café and memorable dinners out. It was a milestone trip filled with memories and new experiences.



Having a great time in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin!

This fall, staff members Chloe and Madeline took four Avenues clients on a fun-filled girls' weekend in Lake Geneva. The group enjoyed lakeside views, shopping, and delicious meals out together. From visiting a petting zoo to manicures, and attending the Dancing Horses show, the trip was packed with special moments and plenty of smiles.

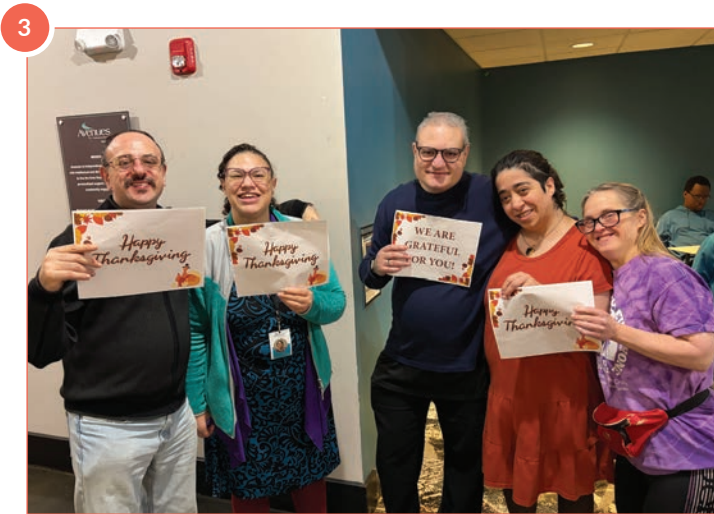
“It was really amazing to see pictures of clients that I’ve known for 15 years, standing by the ocean, in front of a beautiful sunset, or out to eat at a nice restaurant. Knowing that they worked hard and they deserve these experiences, just like we all do.”

— Stephen Kray, President and CEO of Avenues to Independence



Scan the QR code to see more HAP highlights from the past year

Great Things Happen At Avenues



7



1

Fun at the Brookfield Zoo

A little rain didn't stop Jenny and Cindy from enjoying a special outing to Brookfield Zoo Chicago earlier this fall. Despite the weather, the two had a wonderful time exploring the zoo and were especially excited to visit the new primate habitat.

2

Un-BOO-lievable Fun!

Halloween at the CFI did not disappoint! Clients showed off their creative costumes, played bingo, sang karaoke, and enjoyed classic Halloween movies. The highlight of the day was a spooky haunted house that brought just the right amount of thrills and chills to the celebration.

3

A Season of Thanks

Avenues celebrated the season with our annual Thanksgiving Lunch. Clients and staff gathered to share a delicious meal, enjoy festive activities, and spend meaningful time together in the spirit of gratitude.

4

Craft Night at Sasser House

Maine South High School Key Club brought holiday cheer to Sasser House by hosting a festive ornament decorating night this season. Clients and students came together to get creative, decorate ornaments, and enjoy time connecting through conversation and laughter.

5

Easter Seals Training

This fall, we joined Easterseals Serving Chicagoland and Greater Rockford's Illinois Autism Partnership, whose experts provide coaching and training to help Avenues staff better support clients on the autism spectrum.

6

Avenues Annual Holiday Party

Avenues' Annual Holiday Party was held at the CFI this past December and was filled with festive fun from start to finish. Clients spent the day playing bingo, dancing, and showing off their karaoke skills. The celebration included a pizza party for lunch and a special surprise visit from Santa, who arrived with matching holiday t-shirts for everyone - a joyful moment that made the day even more memorable.

7

Avenues Thrift Shoppe is #1

Big news! Avenues Thrift Shoppe has been ranked the #1 thrift store in Chicago by Business Rate! Pictured here is Agnes, our amazing store manager, alongside the incredible volunteers who make the shop such a special place. From great finds to even greater people, this recognition is well deserved.

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