OPPORTUNITY PROJECT, INC.
Brain Injury Programs and Awareness

Children's Specialized Hospital®
An RWJBarnabas Health facility

OP NEWS

The Opportunity Project Newsletter • 2025













COMMUNITY INTEGRATION INITIATIVES BUILD CONFIDENCE IN OUR MEMBERS!







A Clubhouse Program Empowering People with Brain Injury

WE ARE SUCCEEDING IN SO MANY AREAS...THANKS TO YOU!

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Program Achievements
- Brain Injury Awareness Month 2025
- Member News

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60 East Willow Street
Millburn, New Jersey 07041
973-921-1000
www.opportunityproject.org

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Speech-Language Pathologist
Tom Shea, PsyD
Vocational Specialist

Message from the Board Chair



Kerri Berson Levine
Board Chair

For over 30 years, Opportunity Project has delivered critical, life-changing programs and services to individuals with brain injury and their families. As New Jersey's first and only independent Clubhouse program, we've established a national standard for brain injury support and empowered our members to pursue their goals and build meaningful lives.

This edition of *OP News* puts a spotlight on how we help survivors of brain injury navigate their individual journeys after their lives are forever altered. I am proud of our members' achievements across diverse areas such as vocational support and career placement; wellness, nutrition and fitness; cognitive development, occupational therapy, speech and language services, music and art therapy; and mental health services.

Opportunity Project was founded after two life-altering events: my brother Gary, son of founding trustees Marc Berson and Rita Yohalem, nearly lost his life in a serious car accident, and Danny, the son of founding trustee Lisa Goldman, was profoundly affected by a brain tumor. The founders identified a significant gap in community and post-medical care services for individuals with brain injury. While excellent acute medical care and rehabilitation services were available, there was a lack of critical transitional and community integration services. Our founding trustees brought the nationally recognized Clubhouse model of community support to Opportunity Project's program.

Since opening its doors, OP's Clubhouse has helped hundreds of individuals with brain injury and their families and grown to a 14,000-square-foot facility in downtown Millburn, NJ. **Today, our hybrid model — offering both in-person and virtual participation — ensures access to critical, dynamic programming and new opportunities for community involvement that are not offered in a medical setting.**

We're proud that OP once again earned top-tier accreditation from the Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF), placing our Community Integration and Employment Services in the top 3% nationwide for meeting high standards that improve quality of life for those we serve.

Our role in the community and as a part of the RWJBarnabas Healthcare System has never been more essential. Despite reduced government funding, no individual with a brain injury is ever turned away due to an inability to pay. Clubhouse membership is lifelong, and our doors are always open.

None of this would be possible without our partners, supporters and donors who understand the critical need for our brain injury programs and services. We are thankful for you! With your continued support, our Annual Golf Classic event has raised over $3.5 million to date, and we aim to raise more than ever in 2025. Brain Injury Awareness Month is expanding and we will continue to grow it into a statewide initiative.

As always, I invite you to join me for a cup of coffee at the Clubhouse. A member will greet you, our incredible staff will explain our programs and you will recognize irreplaceable components of the Clubhouse, such as how the OP kitchen mimics a home kitchen- so a member can relearn to cook for themselves in our nutrition program, after a life-altering injury. Thank you for your support.

Kerri Berson Levine
Board Chair



Opportunity Project Founders:
Marc E. Berson, Rita Yohalem and Lisa Goldman

Letter from the Executive Director



Eduardo Plata, MA, CFRE
Executive Director

I am thrilled to provide you with an update on our organization's recent developments. I am immensely grateful for the dedication of the team and our board, who have contributed to the significant strides we've made in our strategic plan alongside our members and caregivers.

Firstly, I am proud to announce that we have earned a three-year reaccreditation from CARF International! This achievement reflects our unwavering commitment to providing high-quality, person-centered services for individuals with brain injury. CARF accreditation is a rigorous process that ensures we meet the highest standards of care, and we're honored to receive this recognition once again. We earned the **International Brain Injury Clubhouse Alliance (IBICA) Seal**, reinforcing our commitment to standards-based Clubhouse programming! Lastly, we are proud to have earned a **Candid Platinum Seal of Transparency** for a second year in a row! This recognition demonstrates our commitment to transparency including sharing information about our goals and finances to help donors continue to make informed decisions.

As we did last year, we went to Capitol Hill with hundreds of advocates to increase awareness and secure crucial funding support for individuals with brain injury from research, education, prevention, and direct support. Community activations in and out of the Clubhouse, such as car safety, tabling at brain health seminars, chamber engagements, hosting private tours, restaurant week and brain injury awareness month events, have provided us the platform to share our wok and raise critical funds.

We currently serve a record number of nearly 70 members, with a goal to reach over 80 by the end of this year. We also introduced art therapy through our partners at Caldwell University. The leadership team hosted our 2nd Annual Team Summit, filled with team-building activities and discussions focused on our goals for the future. Our OP Member Committee and founding member Gary took the lead on coordinating our first ever OP Walk-A-Thon which was a huge success!

An acknowledgment goes to our most recent grantors including EJ Grassman Trust, Lillian Lorber Charitable Trust, New Jersey State Golf Association Youth Foundation, OceanFirst Foundation, PSEG Foundation, Summit Foundation, The Hyde and Watson Foundation and The Tyler Foundation. Your support of our various initiatives and programs has significantly impacted our members.

Thanks for all your support to OP. I look forward to seeing you at a future event.

Eduardo Plata, MA, CFRE
Executive Director

LEADING CAUSES OF BRAIN INJURY FOR OP MEMBERS

46%	STROKE
26%	MOTOR VEHICLE ACCIDENT
12%	ANOXIC/HYPOXIC
6%	ASSAULT
6%	FALL
4%	TUMOR

Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) is an alteration in brain function, or other evidence of brain pathology, caused by an external force. Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) is an injury to the brain that has occurred after birth. Examples include stroke, aneurysm and tumor.



5.3 million people in the U.S. live with long-term disabilities as a result of brain injury. Effects of TBI can include impaired thinking or memory, movement, sensation (e.g., vision or hearing), or emotional functioning (e.g., personality changes, depression). These issues can have lasting effects on individuals, families and communities.

About the Clubhouse

The Opportunity Project Clubhouse is a community intended for members with brain injury to create and engage in meaningful activities in order to attain their goals and sustain the daily functioning of the program. Members choose which work unit(s) to participate in based on interest and experience and structure their day around their individual goals and the required Clubhouse tasks. **Our program is comprised of five units, incorporating all operations and activities:**

Maintenance Unit: Responsibilities include supporting the overall functioning of the physical Clubhouse space and equipment including, organization, inventory, and sanitizing.

Communication Unit: Facilitates the exchange of Clubhouse information including, technology support, member outreach, leading meetings and contributing to the Member Newsletter.

Recreation Unit: Focuses on creating and executing social activities and events.

Health and Safety Unit: Assists with physical and mental health and wellness including, providing peer-to-peer support, accessibility checks and emergency preparedness.

Administrative Unit: Contributes to the interior management of the Clubhouse, such as answering phones, welcoming guests, sorting and delivering mail.

PROGRAM ACHIEVEMENTS

Mental Health

Brain injury often brings about drastic life changes and recovery is a life-long process.

Social supports, coping skills, self-care and self-esteem are vital components in developing strong emotional connections and meaningful roles in society.

Jacqueline Marino-Rizzi, Mental Health Support Specialist, helps members address and cope with crucial mental health challenges that significantly influence recovery, quality of life and one's overall well-being.

Opportunity Project's Caregivers' Group and Caregivers' Council (new this year), The OP Peer-2-Peer Resilience Squad and Reverse Mentorship programs provide additional critical support and resources to help members and their families adjust to life's changes throughout brain injury recovery.

Group sessions such as Mental Health Mondays, Life Beyond Brain Injury and Team Building Fridays help promote inclusion, camaraderie and creativity while boosting morale, all of which lessen the incidence of mental health disorders and behavioral health related illnesses.

In addition, Jacqueline leads our fun-filled theme days at the Clubhouse… another great way to encourage creativity, engagement and brighten everyone's day!



We love our favorite flannel for another fun theme day!



Creative ways to have fun and feel good!



Members share their inspiring success stories!

Nutrition, Health & Wellness

Melissa A. Moyer, Program Manager and our Health and Wellness Coordinator, leads various initiatives focusing on overall wellness. Members motivate each other to make healthy decisions and participate in a host of activities including fitness, music therapy, nutrition, healthy cooking and health education classes.

This year in our popular Food & Culture class, we explored Europe and Africa. Members have learned about different cultures, their histories, traditional foods, and historical places. We have also cooked many delicious dishes from these regions in our healthy cooking group!

OP collaborates with various organizations to enhance the well-being of our members including, providing ongoing education on nutrition and brain health with Dr. Ehrhardt from the Ehrhardt Center for Integrative Medicine and coordinating food donations from Common Market for our members.

In addition, members continue to find joy and explore their creativity by participating in music therapy groups as well as yoga and fitness classes at the Clubhouse.



Members completed a healthy brain educational series with Dr. Ehrhardt.



Members love OP's healthy cooking group.



Member Porfi appreciates the food delivery. Thanks Common Market!

Occupational Therapy

Occupational Therapist, Emma Kaplan, works with members individually and in groups on overcoming the obstacles that interfere with daily life. In OT, members develop skills including decision making, problem solving, time management, health management, sleep hygiene and coping with fatigue. Increasing community engagement is another key focus.

This year, a Member-Led Group initiative was developed to empower members to facilitate their own groups, augmenting the peer-driven environment. As members work to create their groups, they are fostering self-direction, organizational skills, creativity and self-esteem. Members have developed groups including drawing tutorials, presentations on culture, exercise demonstrations and more!

Additionally, the OT group, in partnership with Monmouth University, facilitated a CarFit event which focused on providing education to members and the Millburn community on safe driving habits to prevent injury and improve safety.



Member Angel leads a strength training class.



Member Erika practices one-handed knitting techniques.



The OT group leads a CarFit event promoting safe driving.

Social Work

Jennifer Harry, LCSW, Social Worker, assists members and their families by providing counseling in order to identify areas where members need assistance and then connects them with community resources. Additionally, the Social Determinants of Health (SDOH) screening conducted by OP is offered to all members and their caregivers. The screening assesses needs related to aspects of daily living, such as food security, housing stability and access to utilities.

The Social Work Unit also facilitates the intake process and the onboarding of new members. This comprehensive process includes an interview, application, member-led tour and a trial day. We are thrilled to report that there has been significant growth of new members joining the Clubhouse this past year. Recently, we have welcomed eight new members! Our newest members have been valuable contributors to the Clubhouse while our veteran members have been instrumental in supporting their smooth transition.



Member Chris and Jennifer help thank our donors with giveaway bags.

Potential new members should contact Jennifer Harry, LCSW at jharry@opportunityproject.org

Speech-Language Therapy

Communication is the basis of our ability to connect with one another; after a brain injury, many aspects of communication can be disrupted and made more difficult.

Gianna Riccio, Speech and Language Pathologist, assists OP Members to create connections by targeting cognitive skills needed for job or school success and language skills needed to engage in meaningful conversations and relationships.

Weekly group sessions include Book Club, where the members collaborate to choose a book, and Hot Topic to discuss current events in order to reinforce literacy skills and comprehension.

Members continue to work on improving their public speaking skills by participating in various engagements, including leading tours at the Clubhouse, sharing their stories at community events and collaborating with Montclair University speech and language students.



We are excited to welcome Gianna Riccio, our new Speech-Language Pathologist!

Vocational Training

Tom Shea, PsyD., Opportunity Project Vocational Specialist, continues to ensure vocational success for members by helping them explore and pursue their talents and interests while building job-readiness skills as well as providing employment training and job coaching support. These hands-on experiences are critical for success at paid employment jobs.

We are proud to report that Opportunity Project performed exceptionally well in our triennial Commission on Accreditation of Rehabilitation Facilities (CARF) International survey. The Vocational Program achieved a perfect score from the surveyors for a remarkable third survey in a row!

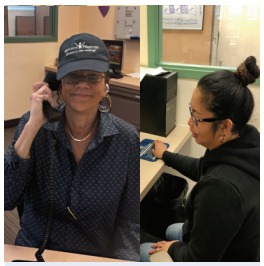
In addition, the Vocational Unit recently received authorization to provide cognitive rehabilitation services for OP members. This program uses an interdisciplinary focused approach to help our members build compensatory strategies to address challenges in their ability to achieve successful employment outcomes. Participation from our members has tripled this year for this new program. We are thrilled to provide this additional support to help members reach their vocational goals.



Member Sami helps prepare a mailing.



MJ prepares for his job interview with Tom's help.



Tracy and Abi manage the front desk.

If you are interested in becoming an employment or volunteer partner, please contact Tom Shea, PsyD., Vocational Counselor at tshea@opportunityproject.org

Thank you to our employment & volunteer partners:

AMC Theatres
The Beth Greenhouse
Newark Beth Israel Medical Center
Carpet House
Children's Specialized Hospital
Home Depot
Kumon Math and Reading Center of Millburn & Maplewood
La Strada Nuova Millburn
Millburn Free Public Library
Montclair Art Museum
RWJBarnabas Health
Sage Eldercare
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2024 Annual Golf Classic

OPPORTUNITY PROJECT, INC.
GOLF CLASSIC

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The Golf Classic raises funds that go directly towards





our brain injury programs and awareness activities.





In 2024 we raised over $245,000!





2025 Brain Injury Awareness Month

Thank you for your help in raising over $56,000 for Brain Injury Awareness Month!

Funds go directly towards our brain injury programs and prevention.

Thanks to our members and team for proudly representing OP at various awareness initiatives including the Brain Injury Awareness Proclamation presentation by Millburn Mayor Annette Romano, the OP Pop-up Hot Chocolate stand and the exciting trip to Capitol Hill to advocate for funding on behalf of individuals with brain injury.

The third Annual Restaurant Week in collaboration with Explore Millburn-Short Hills, to raise funds and create more visibility for our mission, was the best one yet. We secured participation from fifteen restaurants and received over 61,000 views from the social media reels. Additional celebratory highlights included the Community Coffee Event with the Chamber of Commerce, the Jersey Mikes' Fundraiser and the truly memorable OP's Got Talent Show featuring performances by our talented members. **Thank you to our friends and partners at Children's Specialized Hospital for lighting their buildings up green (the official color of TBI awareness) in honor of Brain Injury Awareness Month** and thanks to all of our supporters including those who also hosted private fundraisers for the cause.

Thank you to our sponsors and supporters for participating in Brain Injury Awareness Month!



Mayor Annette Romano presented the proclamation.



Advocating for funding on Capitol Hill.



The OP Talent Show was spectacular!



Thank you for joining us for the Community Coffee Event.



Thanks Jersey Mikes for a great fundraiser!



Thank you to all of our Restaurant Week supporters!

Thanks Explore Millburn-Short Hills on a great Restaurant Week partnership!

To participate in March 2026 Brain Injury Awareness Month email: jlondon@opportunityproject.org

Thank you to the OP Administrative Team: Beth Daugherty, Julie London and Haneefah Ali!

Thank you to our sponsors!



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Chiesa Shahinian & Giantomasi PC

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Sudler Family Foundation

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Member News

We are excited to share the continued progress of the Opportunity Project Member Committee (OPMC) and the impactful work they have accomplished this past year. With a strong focus on member leadership and engagement, the OPMC has taken meaningful steps to enhance how members contribute to the daily operations and culture of our Clubhouse.

This year, the OPMC designated specific areas within the Clubhouse for each of our five work units: Communication, Health & Safety, Administrative, Recreation, and Maintenance, to more effectively guide member-led work.

Another major area of growth has been in our community programming. The number of member community outings have doubled, in response to feedback from our most recent satisfaction survey and needs assessment. These outings have expanded opportunities for social connection, skill development, and community integration.

The OPMC continues to be a driving force in identifying areas for improvement, implementing meaningful services, and ensuring members' voices are central to everything we do. We are incredibly proud of their dedication to building a more inclusive, engaging, and empowering Clubhouse.

Congratulations to Michael Moran,
Director of Program Development & Innovation
Thank you for the wonderful work you have done during your ten years of dedicated service to OP! We are going to miss you so much and wish you the best of luck in your new position and future endeavors! - The OP Family



UPCOMING EVENT

Please join us at our Annual Golf Classic on September 15th!

For details visit opportunityproject.org

Your support has made an everlasting difference.

Please continue your commitment with a tax-deductible gift.

Mail your gift in the enclosed envelope or visit opportunityproject.org/donate
jlondon@opportunityproject.org

Thank you!