

**Nothing More,  
Nothing Less  
For All People  
With Disabilities**

**Access to Independence of Cortland County, Inc.**

# ACCESS NEWS

**Winter 2015**

**NUMBER XXXXIII**

## ATI Welcomes New Staff

Earlier this month, Access to Independence welcomed two new staff to its family of independent living advocates.

On February 3, Anne Marie Piche joined ATI as a part-time Transition Specialist. Anne will primarily coordinate efforts to help individuals transition from institutional settings back into the community. Anne brings to ATI dedicated experience working with people with developmental disabilities.

On February 18, Maria Mucaria joined ATI as a part-time Administrative Assistant. Maria will provide essential operations and program support for ATI's CEO. Maria brings to ATI personal experience with overcoming disability-related barriers as well as her experience as Disability Program Navigator for Cortland's One-Stop.

Please join ATI in welcoming both Anne and Maria when you call or visit the office.



**Above:** Maria Mucaria (left) and Anne Marie Piche (right) joined Access to Independence in February.

## ATI Calls For 2015 Volunteers

Earlier this month, ATI announced the opening of a number of volunteer opportunities for 2015.

ATI is currently seeking motivated volunteers to help with the planning of its 2015 fund development initiatives, including its April 25 Bowl-a-Thon, its July 25 ADA Celebration and its December 5 Holiday Gala.

ATI is also seeking volunteers to help with various local systems change initiatives that (1) aim to identify (inventory) lack of access for people with disabilities (e.g., housing, transportation, medical facilities, sidewalks, businesses, etc.); (2) increase public awareness of these deficiencies; and (3) take action to facilitate change.

For more information on how you can help out with either initiative, call 607-753-7363 or email [volunteer@aticortland.org](mailto:volunteer@aticortland.org).

## ATI Awarded \$99,000 Grant

In January, the New York Association on Independent Living (NYAIL) awarded Access to Independence (ATI) a three-year, \$99,000 grant to serve as an Auxiliary Transition Center for residents in Cortland and Tompkins Counties.

Over the next three years, ATI will work with the Southern Tier Independence Center (STIC) to identify individuals residing in institutional settings who express interest in transitioning into the community.

ATI will provide intensive support services to help interested individuals by collaborating with community-based supports to assess and develop person-centered transition service plans.

For more information, please call Access to Independence at 607-753-7363 or send an email to [info@aticortland.org](mailto:info@aticortland.org).

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## **A Year in Review: A Letter to Supporters from the ATI Chief Executive Officer**

2014 was a monumental year for Access to Independence and for people with disabilities in general. I'd like to share with you some of the great work that our staff and Board of Directors have accomplished over the past year.

In 2014, the ATI Board of Directors was extremely active in governing the continued growth of ATI. For the third consecutive year, ATI generated more than \$1 million in revenue to fund staffing and programming for people in our community. Not one dollar came from city or county tax coffers, providing ATI a very important opportunity to operate and advocate on behalf of all people with disabilities without having its hands tied by the politics of the local bureaucracy.

In 2014, ATI secured \$48,465 in donations from 211 individual and business donors, 53 of which were new, first-time donors. ATI secured a \$75,000 grant to conduct statewide systems advocacy initiatives. ATI secured \$150,000 from the Office of Housing and Community Renewal to complete home modifications. ATI secured \$75,000 from the NYS Education Department to launch innovative transition and employment services for youth. ATI secured \$99,000 from the NYS Department of Health to help people transition back to the community from nursing homes.

In 2014, ATI maintained employment of 11 staff persons and secured funding to add a minimum of one new staff person in 2015. ATI staff credentials include a Master of Public Administration, two Masters of Social Work, a Master of Education, a Certified Benefits Counselor, two Certified Aging in Place Specialists, a retired home builder and Certified Code Enforcement Officer and more than 200 years of experience working with people with disabilities to secure their freedom and civil rights.

In 2014, ATI provided intensive services to 392 consumers between the age of 5 and 96. Those consumers experienced cognitive, physical and/or mental health disabilities. Nearly one-third of ATI's consumers were older than 60 years. ATI provided services to another 200 people with disabilities, their family members or their caregivers this year. ATI also provided at least one service to more than 6,300 individuals from across the state and some parts of the country.

In 2014, ATI staff invested nearly 1,880 hours to fight for systems changes throughout the Cortland community. ATI increased community awareness of the lack of affordable, accessible and integrated housing options for people with disabilities, fought for increased public transit options, developed a community resource guide for transition-aged youth, launched efforts to help medical facilities become more accessible for patients with disabilities and launched efforts to facilitate increased access to social and recreational opportunities throughout the County.

In 2014, ATI staff invested an additional 1,000 hours to fight for systems changes at the state level. ATI staff serve in key leadership positions on several governor-appointed state councils. As a result of years of ATI advocacy efforts, Governor Cuomo established an Employment First Commission to make competitive, integrated employment the first option when considering supports and services for people with disabilities. The State also announced the phasing out of the use of sub-minimum wage sheltered workshops for people with disabilities.

Many thanks and much appreciation goes out to all of ATI's staff, Board Members and community supporters for making 2014 ATI's best, most productive year ever! Just the same, our work is not done. People with disabilities in our community are still unable to enjoy the same civil rights as people without disabilities and are still unable to participate fully in all aspects of life due to persistent structural and attitudinal barriers. With your help and support, 2015 will bring even more progress in our fight for equality!

For more information on the services Access to Independence provides, or to learn about how you can get involved, find us on Facebook, visit our website at [www.aticortland.org](http://www.aticortland.org), call us at 607-753-7363 or send an email to [info@aticortland.org](mailto:info@aticortland.org).

## ATI Launches Recognition of 25th Anniversary of the ADA - Calls for Renewed Efforts to Eradicate Discrimination and Barriers to Human and Civil Rights

*"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."*

Throughout history, disenfranchised groups of people have fought for (and continue to fight for), human and civil rights and freedom. We don't have to look too far from our own door step for examples, including the fight for the end of slavery, the fight for women's rights, the fight for the end of racial discrimination and the fight for the equal treatment of all people in society. Other examples include the fight for gay rights, the fight for the end of poverty and the fight for the human rights of people with disabilities.

History has also shown that it is never easy to effect change in a community or society where the result of equality comes at the cost of the status quo. That means, in order for everyone to have equality, some of the privileged or the more fortunate have to be willing to level the playing field so that they no longer have unfettered control and access to the majority of resources.

Facilitating this kind of change can be difficult. It can cause controversy, bad feelings, discomfort, and even fury. It is very often unpopular to challenge the status quo, especial-

ly in a small community where generations of families have struggled to cope with the ubiquitous changes that have happened in other communities and cities around them. But it is the continuation of this status quo that imperils democracy, that perpetuates apathy and that reinforces discrimination.

Perhaps the fight for the human and civil rights of people with disabilities is not your top priority or even on your list of top concerns, but it is for ATI and it is for the nearly 7,500 Cortland County residents, 3.5 million New Yorkers and 63 million Americans with disabilities, of all ages. We are fighting, educating, increasing awareness and making progress at the national and state level. But, as has been the case for the past 240 years, the hardest fight is at the local level.

This year, in recognition of the 25th Anniversary of the ADA, Access to Independence is re-dedicating itself to the fight for the equality of all people with disabilities, in the areas of healthcare, housing, transportation, citizenship, and access to social, recreational, educational and employment opportunities.

In addition to celebrating the accomplishments of the last 25 years, ATI plans to redouble its efforts to renew the fight started so long ago and that continues today

by so many groups of people that have been and continue to be disenfranchised.

Whether it be minorities, or women, or people with disabilities, or another group, the fact remains that structural and attitudinal barriers exist that prevent unequivocal access to all aspects of human and civil rights by all residents of our nation. These barriers restrict access to education, employment, transportation, commerce and citizenship. These barriers perpetuate the insidious income disparities that exist between the privileged and the less fortunate.

Access to Independence is committed to empowering people with disabilities to lead independent lives in their community. Access to Independence is committed to expanding its fight for the human and civil rights of people with disabilities to make sure that we can exercise our ability to control our own lives, make our own decisions and to participate FULLY in society. Join us in fighting for changes, local, state and national, that will lead to the elimination of barriers and the promotion of an all-inclusive future.

For more information on how you can get involved, please visit our website: [www.aticortland.org](http://www.aticortland.org), call us at 607-753-7363, or email us at [info@aticortland.org](mailto:info@aticortland.org).



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Email: [ccaaa@cortland.org](mailto:ccaaa@cortland.org)

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*Every single day,  
ordinary people accomplish  
extraordinary things.*

## ATI Launches Statewide Advocacy on 2015 Policy and Budget Issues

It's that time of year again when Access to Independence sends advocates to Albany to meet with legislators on pressing disability policy and budget matters. This year, there is more at stake than ever before. Advocates are demanding action that would increase their ability to participate more fully in society...consistent with the fact that disability rights are human rights.

**PUBLIC TRANSIT:** On February 3, five ATI advocates participated in the New York Public Transit Association (NYPTA) Legislative Day to fight for improved access to public transportation in Cortland County and beyond.

Advocates told legislators that transportation was an especially critical issue in Cortland County. They explained that public transportation was often times the only option for them to get to jobs, to go to school, to get to medical appointments and to participate in social activities.

Advocates reminded legislators that Cortland's public transit only operates from 6:00 am to 6:00 pm from Monday to Friday, a far cry from the luxury of options had by many people without disabilities and with the resources to afford taxi service or the purchase of vehicles.

Advocates called on state leaders to increase funding for public transportation and to offer incentives to City and County governments to do the same. Advocates explained how, unlike many other communities across the nation, Cortland County provided limited if any local funds to support its public transit system.

**INDEPENDENT LIVING and AGING:** On February 11, eleven ATI advocates participated in the New York Association on Independence Living (NYAIL) Legislative Awareness Day to fight for increased access to home and community-based services and equal access to opportunities afforded to people without disabilities.

Advocates shared with legislators personal stories of discrimination and of difficulties overcoming physical and attitudinal barriers that persist 25 years after the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Advocates told legislators about how their housing choices were confined to a single high-rise building in downtown (segregation) due to the lack of incentive by private developers and County Legislators to take action.

Advocates reminded legislators that while there has been progress on improving access to community liv-

ing, small and rural communities like those in Cortland are left behind because they do not have financial wherewithal to fund many of the needed changes as do larger and more urban communities.

Advocates called on state leaders to increase funding for New York's 40 Independent Living Centers (ILCs) by \$6 million and provided evidence of how ILC's have saved the state more than \$1.2 billion as a result of the services it provides that help people live independently in the community rather than in institutions. Advocates also asked legislators to support and fund inclusive community development efforts for areas in upstate and central New York.

Advocates told legislators that County support for aging services had decreased year after year, with very important programming too often left on the chopping block. Advocates recounted stories of how Cortland's Office for the Aging provided essential services to people in the more rural parts of the county and how it was providing more services to a growing population of older individuals.

Advocates called on state leaders to support the Governor's proposal to reorganize the state bureaucracy relating to the provision of community-based services to people of all ages and abilities by creating a State Office for Community Living to oversee ageing and disability services statewide. Advocates urged state leaders to increase funding for home and community-based services for older individuals and urged legislators to take action to combat elder abuse.

ATI is set to send advocates to Albany on several more occasions in the coming months to continue meetings with legislators to educate them on the plight and needs of people with disabilities, their families and caregivers, and older individuals in Cortland County. Specifically, advocates are set to join advocates from across the State to advocate for changes to the mental health and psychiatric rehabilitation system, and the needs of various disability and youth and family serving systems.

In July, ATI will join with more than 1,000 national advocates to attend the National Council on Independent Living (NCIL) annual March & Rally at the Capitol. Keep it locked to ATI's Facebook page and stay in-the-know! For more information or to register for an upcoming advocacy trip, contact Aaron T. Baier at 607-753-7363 or by email at [abaier@aticortland.org](mailto:abaier@aticortland.org).

## My Internship Experience at ATI: by Amanda Park

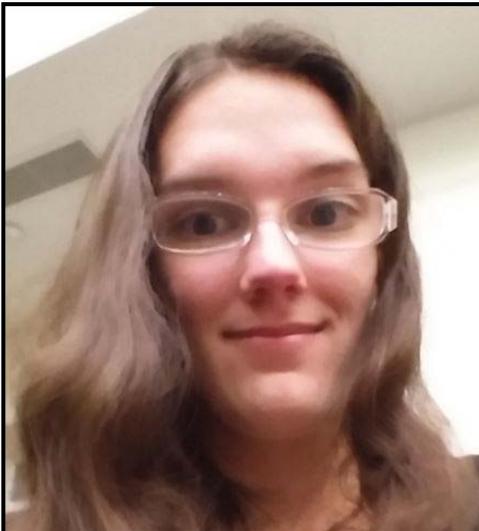
Last year, I worked at ATI for six months as an intern Program Assistant. I began interning with ATI because I was feeling aimless after graduating with an Associate's degree and wanted to explore and find my passion in life. In my time at ATI, I learned much about the organization, independent living, and my own future.

The projects I worked on were satisfying and meaningful. I participated in a project to improve Cortland's sidewalks, a project to make social recreation and faith-based facilities more accessible, and National Disability Employment Awareness Month, where I assisted in making sure ATI's three events were successful!

Also during my time, I was introduced to the organization YOUTH POWER! and after spending a few months getting involved and attending the University of YOUTH POWER!, I became a member of their Board!

Through all of these experiences, I learned about the power of a group of people coming together for meaningful change locally. I've also learned that Independent Living Centers are an integral part of the community. People with disabilities are empowered by the opportunities presented by ATI and meaningful change can be advocated for to remove barriers that limit people with disabilities' involvement in the community.

So, what's next for me? I will be attending SUNY Cortland to pursue a Bachelor's degree in Mathematics and working towards becoming an actuary. I will also continue to work with YOUTH POWER!'s Board of Directors and even volunteer with ATI periodically. Being an intern at ATI has been an unforgettable and life-shaping experience!



### Join ATI's Disability Advocacy Network!

- Keep current on pressing disability issues!
- Receive email alerts on policy & budget matters!
- Fight for the civil rights of people with disabilities!
- Join 1,000+ statewide advocates to fight for change!

Email Aaron Baier:  
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email: [info@aticortland.org](mailto:info@aticortland.org).

## Cortland County Special Needs Registry

In conjunction with the Cortland County Health Department, the Cortland County Office of Emergency Management has created a volunteer registry to identify individuals in the County who may require special assistance during a public emergency or natural disaster. The registry intends to identify people who do not have someone who is within walking distance to assist them in the case of an emergency.

Consider these questions: What would you do if the roads were obstructed and impassable? What if the phone lines were down? What if there was a power outage that lasted for days and you could not get out of your home? Who would know where you were and what needs you had if Cortland County were to experience a catastrophe?

People who need assistance to get out of bed, who are oxygen dependent, who need help with medication administration are just a few examples of the folks that First Responders need to know about to prioritize rescue efforts. The Special Needs Registry lists individuals who are isolated and would be at serious risk in the case of a county-wide emergency or disaster.

For more information on the Special Needs Registry, or to be added to the list, contact Fran Pizzola, ATI Community Education Coordinator, by phone: (607) 753-7363, or by email: [fpizzola@aticortland.org](mailto:fpizzola@aticortland.org).

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## Mentoring the Next Generation of Mentors - Aaron Baier, Consumer & Systems Advocacy Coordinator

Young people have the power to change the world. Young people deserve an opportunity to change the world. Young people will change the world. In order for youth to combine their power with opportunity, they sometimes need a helping hand along the way. That's the purpose of a mentor...sharing ones experiences with another to provide guidance and support.

Over the past year, I have begun sharing my professional experiences with several youth and young adults who are involved in a statewide network called YOUTH POWER! (check them out at [www.youthpowerny.org](http://www.youthpowerny.org)). Many of these youth are *THE* leaders of the organization and serve on its board of directors, while others are up-and-coming leaders who provide input to the organization.

Either way, my experiences aim to help these young people learn about the "systems" of government, business, and society. I help them learn how to communicate, set goals, work as teams, and even advocate more effectively.

How do I do this? As a mentor, I step-up and step-back.

I step-up by showing a young person a skill, like how to write a business letter. I show them examples of what I have written, point out things to keep in mind and also how to get started. I then step-back

and give them the freedom to write their own letter with their own voice. Occasionally, I step-back-in to provide guidance and support to help them develop the skill further.

My experiences aim to help young people to plan events, manage money and run a meeting. Life skills can be taught a number of ways. As a mentor, I can step-up and show a young person how to run a meeting and bring them to a meeting that they would find valuable. I can speak with them and help them understand what is being talked about and why it might be important.

I can then step-back and let them begin to participate in the meeting. This could be a youth group meeting, a Board meeting or it could be their own CSE meeting. If the subject is important to the young person, then the skill will follow them throughout life.

Every young person has dreams and values. As mentors we have the opportunity to learn about their values...that is, whether they believe in strong family connections, or close ties to friends, or in good education, or in rebelling against the system, for example. We learn about their dreams to be a lawyer, a police officer, a photographer, or a tattoo artist.

As mentors, it is not our place to squelch a dream or to simply push

our own values. Rather, we can show young people a world which cares for them and respects their background and their future. We must be "real" with young people and hold them to realistic expectations.

Sharing real experiences, teaching real skills, having realistic expectations, and a mutual respect that only comes from mentoring will ensure our youth have a bright future.

So, how can you become a mentor?

Well, through Access to Independence's Peer Mentoring Program, which aims to provide unique mentors with disabilities to young people with disabilities.

ATI strives to open doors for young people to be more involved in their own lives and in the lives of everyone in their community. ATI empowers youth to strive for independence and guides them with shared experiences and offers the tools that will allow them to be successful in their own lives and which help them to think of others.

For more information on Access to Independence and its Youth Transition Services or Peer Mentoring services, contact Aaron T. Baier, Consumer & Systems Advocacy Coordinator, by phone at 607-753-7363, or by email at [abaier@aticortland.org](mailto:abaier@aticortland.org).

**ATI Community Computer Lab**

**Open Monday - Friday**

**9:00 am - 4:45 pm**

**Computers are available for consumers only.**

**For more information, call (607) 753-7363.**



## 2015 Tax Season in Full Swing - Don't Forget About the EITC!

The 2015 tax season is in full swing! Taxpayers with and without disabilities are preparing to file their taxes in anticipation for what is often the largest cash payment many receive all year: - their tax refund.

Unfortunately, many taxpayers do not realize they may qualify for an even larger tax refund by claiming the Earned Income Tax Credit or EITC. Worse, many miss out on a refund altogether, fearing that filing their taxes and claiming the credit may lead to an additional tax burden — an all too common misconception.

What is the EITC? According to the IRS, the tax credit is “a benefit for working people who have low to moderate income.”

Eligibility for the EITC is as follows:

- \$46,997 (\$52,427 married filing jointly) with three or more qualifying children
- \$43,756 (\$49,186 married filing jointly) with two qualifying children
- \$38,511 (\$43,941 married filing jointly) with one qualifying child
- \$14,590 (\$20,020 married filing jointly) with no qualifying children

The maximum credit allowable for the 2014 tax year is \$6,143 with three or more qualifying children, \$5,460 with two qualifying children, \$3,305 with one qualifying child and \$496 with no qualifying children.

## ATI Launches 2015 Survey of Consumer Satisfaction

On February 2, Access to Independence launched its 2015 survey of consumer satisfaction. ATI mailed surveys along with self-addressed, stamped envelopes to consumers that did not list a telephone number.

Throughout the month of February, a group of ATI staff will call remaining consumers to request their participation in the survey over the phone.

While not mandatory in order to receive services, ATI hopes consumers will be willing to provide feedback on their experience with ATI.

ATI plans to tally all satisfaction survey results by mid-March and then report back to its Board of Directors at its April meeting.

ATI hopes to secure feedback on the quality of its services and staffing. ATI also hopes to get input on areas of unmet need for people with disabilities in Cortland County.

ATI asks all consumers to please take a moment to complete the survey, which should only take 10 minutes.

For more information, contact Susan Lewis by telephone at 607-753-7363.



## VOLUNTEER INCOME TAX ASSISTANCE (VITA) OFFERS FREE TAX PREPARATION

To schedule an appointment,  
call (607) 745-2114.

### Eligibility Requirements:

Single with no dependent(s) & earn less than \$30,000

Single with dependent(s) & earn less than \$52,000

Married & earn less than \$52,000

## Bariatric Support Group

March 18, 2015, April 15, 2015

May 20, 2015, June 17, 2015

5:00 - 6:00 pm

Access to Independence  
Community Room

607-753-7363

**Cortland County  
Housing Consortium  
2015 Meeting Schedule**

February 25, 2015: 8:00 - 10:00 am

May 27, 2015: 8:00 - 10:00 am

August 26, 2015: 8:00 - 10:00 am

November 18, 2015: 8:00 - 10:00 am

All meetings will be held in Room 203  
Main Street SUNY Cortland Building  
9 Main Street

For more information, Contact Aaron  
Baier by telephone: 607-753-7363 or  
by email: [abaier@aticortland.org](mailto:abaier@aticortland.org).

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**Update on Benefits Changes for 2015**

If you receive Social Security benefits, you have probably noticed that your check increased this month. The Social Security Administration approved a 1.7% cost of living raise for everyone receiving SSI, SSDI, and Retirement benefits.

The premium for Medicare Part B stayed the same for 2015 - it remains \$104.90 per month. Medicare Part B is coverage for doctor's visits, durable medical equipment, lab work, x-rays, and other procedures done in a doctor's office or lab. If you are receiving Medicare Part B and have a low income, you may be eligible for help paying your premium. If you would like assistance in finding out whether or not you qualify for this help, call Susan Lewis, ATI Independent Living Coordinator, at 607-753-7363.

Medicare Part D is coverage for prescriptions. The premiums for these plans vary depending on what plan you choose. If you receive full extra help paying your premiums, you will not be required to pay for a plan with a premium up to \$36.94. If you have a low income, you may be able to qualify for extra help paying for your Part D plan. If you would like assistance in finding out whether or not you qualify for this help, call Susan Lewis, ATI Independent Living Coordinator, at 607-753-7363.

Social Security work incentive limits changed slightly for 2015. If you are working and receiving SSDI benefits, the trial work period amount increased to \$780 per month and the Substantial Gainful Activity amount increased to \$1,090 per month. These work incentives can be very confusing for anyone thinking about going back to work. If you would like to try working and need more information on Social Security work incentives, call Susan Lewis, ATI Independent Living Coordinator, at 607-753-7363. Don't let the fear of losing your benefits stop you from trying to go back to work!

**DISABILITY RIGHTS, NEW YORK, INC. (DRNY)**

DRNY is the federally and state-authorized Protection and Advocacy System and Client Assistance Program for people with disabilities in New York State. DRNY provides free legal and other advocacy services to advance and protect the rights of people with disabilities and to ensure that they are free from abuse and neglect and unlawful discrimination. DRNY provides these services under federal grant funded mandates.

New York State residents can contact DRNY for assistance with problems directly related to their disabilities. DRNY investigates complaints and provides direct assistance to people with disability-related issues under the terms of its federal grants and its annual goals and priorities. DRNY currently has funding to support people with disabilities in the following areas: individual rights issues, assistive technology, client assistance program, voting access and social security.

Contact DRNY at:  
Disability Rights New York.  
725 Broadway, Suite 450  
Albany, NY 12207

Phone (518) 432-7861  
Toll Free: (800) 993-8982

TTY: (518) 512-3448  
Fax: (518) 427-6561

E-mail: [mail@DisabilityRightsNY.org](mailto:mail@DisabilityRightsNY.org)  
Website: <http://www.disabilityrightsny.org>

## Governor Cuomo Establishes Employment First Commission for People with Disabilities!

On September 7, 2014, Governor Andrew M. Cuomo signed an Executive Order to establish an Employment First Commission. The purpose of this new entity is to make competitive, integrated employment the first option when considering supports and services for people with disabilities.

The initiative aims to increase the employment rate by 5%, and decrease the poverty rate by 5%, for New Yorkers with disabilities who receive services from the State. The entity also aims to register 100 businesses as having formal policies to hire people with disabilities as part of their workforce strategy.

Access to Independence (ATI) has long advocated for better employment opportunities for people with disabilities in Cortland County. Since 2006, ATI has provided peer mentoring and work readiness services which aim to provide people with disabilities with job shadowing, employment training and peer support during the job search process.

Currently, ATI is building capacity to provide transition services for youth with disabilities. These services will help to prepare students for college and employment.

While sheltered employment is no longer an option, the Governor's commitment to competitive employment is a good first-step. However, continued advocacy is needed and ATI is working with its State partners to ensure the Employment First initiative is a success.

On November 24, the New York State Independent Living Council, Inc. (NYSILC) and the New York Association on Independent Living (NYAIL) issued a letter to Governor Cuomo on behalf of ATI and their other statewide Members. The letter provides recommendations which will help set the direction for the Employment First initiative. These recommendations are as follows.

First, NYS should create a coordinator position to oversee more aggressive use of programs which help people with disabilities get civil service jobs. NYS should double its commitment to increase the number of people with disabilities in civil service jobs. NYS should also implement staff peer disability resource coordinators in every One-Stop Center.

Second, NYS should adopt a policy to require State contractors to promote employment for people with disabilities. Currently, the policy only incentivizes women and minority owned businesses. The State should mirror the current policy to include businesses owned by people with disabilities.

Third, NYS should provide adequate funding for work readiness services with a focus on working-age young adults. One of the biggest barriers to achieving employment for people with disabilities, particularly youth transitioning from education settings, is the lack of work readiness training. Success during a job search and on the job is a result of quality training and preparation, which is not always offered in schools. This can be accomplished through increased funding for vocational rehabilitation and employment and training programs.

Fourth, NYS should establish a small business tax credit for New Yorkers with disabilities. While other tax credits exist, this particular opportunity is needed as it would increase the time-span it can be used and would broaden the number of workers and businesses who qualify to use it.

Access to Independence believes that all people with disabilities have the right to control their own lives, make their own decisions and to participate fully in society. Employment opportunities for people with disabilities is a key ingredient that has for too long been denied. For more information, please contact Aaron T. Baier, Consumer & Systems Advocacy Coordinator, by phone at 607-753-7363, or by email at [abaier@aticortland.org](mailto:abaier@aticortland.org).

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## ATI Announces 2015 Local Disability Priority Advocacy Agenda

In January, Access to Independence announced its Local Disability Priority Advocacy Agenda for 2015. ATI maintains a master list of advocacy needs (new and old) while it continues work to eradicate the structural and attitudinal barriers that persist in our community.

However, because ATI has just 12 people on staff, it is fundamentally unable to independently identify every single new or persistent barrier in our community. That is why ATI needs you to keep us posted of new or persistent barriers!

ATI has separated its Local Disability Priority Advocacy Agenda into six broad categories: Education, Employment, Health Care, Commerce, Social and Citizenship. This Agenda will aim to guide the Agency's local systems change and advocacy efforts throughout the year and ATI will evaluate the Agenda on an annual basis to add or remove new priorities.

ATI's 2015 Local Disability Priority Advocacy Agenda comprises the following initiatives:

**Education:** ATI will identify the need for up-to-date student resource guides (including information on ATI) in the county's five school districts. ATI will facilitate development of a Community Resource Guide and collaborate with school districts to distribute them to students with disabilities and their families.

**Employment:** ATI will collaborate with local businesses to promote and facilitate Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) Business Trainings and assist businesses to make these trainings a regular part of their staff training.

**Health Care:** ATI will advocate for increased access to local medical offices, facilities and locations. ATI will inventory these facilities and rate each on accessibility to the public. ATI will advocate to ensure that there is an increase in the number of facilities that make necessary policy and structural changes to improve accessibility.

**Commerce:** ATI will undertake advocacy and activism activities which aim to enhance local public transportation. Cortland County must retain an accessible and affordable public transportation system, not only for medical appointments, but for employment and daily living needs. Further, ATI will support ongoing public awareness surrounding the importance of public transportation and calls on Cortland County, the City of Cortland, SUNY Cortland, and TC3 to invest in the enhancement of public transportation.

**Social:** ATI will advocate for increased access to local tourist, recreation and faith-based facilities and locations. ATI will inventory these facilities and rate each on accessibility to the public. ATI will advocate to ensure that there is an increase in the number of facilities that make necessary policy and structural changes to improve accessibility.

**Citizenship:** ATI will advocate to ensure that Cortland County's plans around housing reflect the needs of people with disabilities and seniors. Cortland County must have a united vision and strategy to improve the state of affordable, accessible and integrated housing. As part of this initiative, ATI will pursue grant funding to outsource the development of a housing analysis on Cortland County's policies around housing, as well as advocate for County Legislation to mandate Visitability Design features in any new construction.

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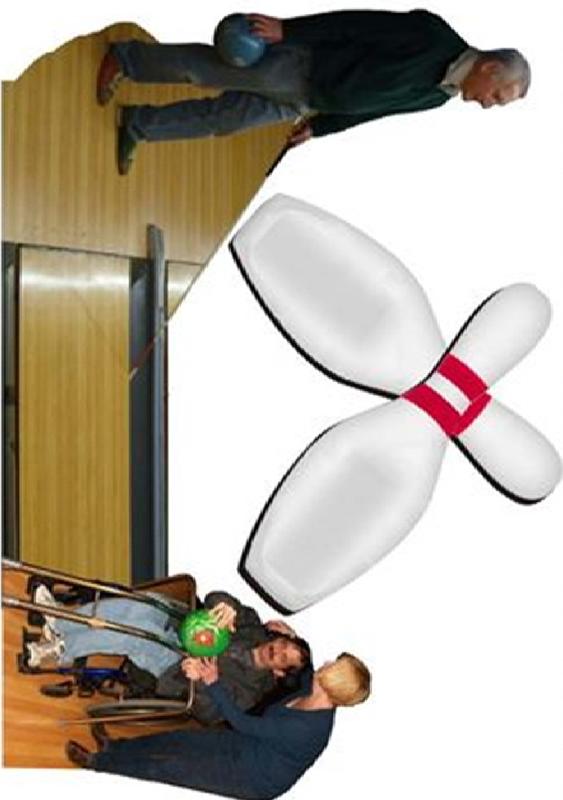
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**Location: Cort-Lanes**

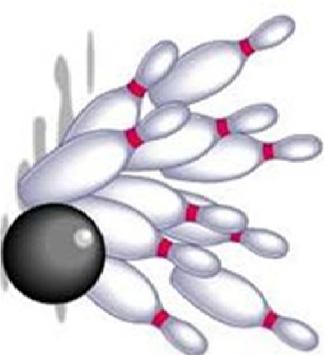
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Nothing defines a community's ability to integrate its citizens better than the quality, variety, and accessibility of its transportation options. Bus systems offer fixed, flexible and accessible route service for residents to move freely throughout the community to access jobs, school, commerce, and any events and activities that a community has to offer. Taxis fill the gap between the fixed routes of busses and the un-walkable distances in rural areas. For walkers and bicyclists, curb cuts, accessible crosswalk systems, and clean sidewalks ensure safe opportunities to move throughout a community. While a challenge, the vision of a "Complete Community" is not impossible for Cortland County.

### WHAT DOES ACCESSIBLE TRANSPORTATION MEAN?

Accessible does not always mean "for people with disabilities." In fact, accessible simply means that ANYONE can access a service when they need it. Affordability, lifts / ramps, audible / tactile signals, and curb cuts are in fact accommodations for people with disabilities. However, those accommodations offer a more complete experience and benefit to everyone in a community, even people who do not have a disability.

### CORTLAND COUNTY PUBLIC ACCESS NEEDS

| <u>Bus System:</u> #   | <u>Taxi &amp; Ride-Share Services:</u> #   | <u>Pedestrians &amp; Bicyclists</u> #  |
|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Expand bus service to nights and weekends!</li><li>Expand the number and frequency of county-wide routes!</li><li>Expand the number and frequency of inter-county routes!</li><li>Increase reliability and timeliness of all bus routes!</li><li>Maintain affordable fares!#</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Broaden taxi oversight to the County level!</li><li>Mandate companies to offer ADA compliant taxis!</li><li>Increase company responsibility for reliable, timely, clean, safe and courteous service!</li><li>Mandate affordable and fair rates for county-wide and inter-county trips! #</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Continue to upgrade deficient City and County curb cuts and crosswalk systems to achieve ADA compliance!</li><li>Increase safe route options for pedestrians and bicyclists to travel without fear of injury!</li><li>Implement new policies to keep sidewalks clear of unnecessary obstructions and obstacles!#</li></ul> |
|   |   |   |

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- Lost quality of life for residents with no alternative transportation** - Not everyone in our community drives a car. Many people, including people with disabilities, seniors and veterans, rely on public transportation to go to work, school, go shopping at local businesses, and attend medical appointments!
  - Lost commerce with business** - It is a proven fact that communities with quality public transportation experience better commerce. People shop locally if they can get to their favorite stores!
- Lost employment opportunities** - Improved commerce leads to increased need for labor. By improving public transportation, we create new jobs. Public transportation also offers people a reliable way to get to their existing jobs, no matter what day or time they work!