Exciting News from Alternatives Unlimited and The Bridge of Central Mass.

We are now "Open Sky Community Services!"

We are very pleased to announce that following the affiliation of our two organizations last summer, we have now come together under one name – Open Sky Community Services. The new name is a dba (doing business as) of Alternatives and The Bridge. Both organizations have retained their 501(c)3 status, and donations can be made to either Alternatives, The Bridge or the dba of Open Sky Community Services.

Last year, the two agencies decided to explore what it might be like if they came together as one. We decided to “affiliate” – to bring the best of both together – and the affiliation became official on July 1, 2018.

Since that time, the organizations have operated as one, with the temporary name “Alternatives and The Bridge.”

Lots of people from the agencies participated in a “Branding” process to explore who we are as one, what our goals and purposes are, and how we would define ourselves to others. A branding task force and visionary group shared information and explored ideas with our branding consultants.

Along this journey, we identified core beliefs we shared:

• Both agencies place people at the top of all we do. Humanity first.
• We embrace the idea that the community is a powerful and necessary partner in helping people live their best lives. And, people coming together form powerful communities.
• We believe in using best practices and innovative approaches.
• We share the goal of helping people to see beyond their circumstances, beyond limitations, beyond stigma. We know that people can see beyond and live beyond what they may have thought was possible. Their possibilities are limitless.

From these beliefs, the choice to become Open Sky Community Services made perfect sense to us, as an expression of what we offer – limitless possibilities for people who may perceive they have limitations. The sky is the limit.

So, welcome to this inaugural newsletter of Open Sky Community Services ... See Beyond, Live Beyond.

openskycs.org
Managing Change

For individuals we serve, learning how to manage change is a critical skill – one we work hard to model and teach. Over the past year, many of our individuals and staff have experienced multiple changes due to the launch of a new model by the Department of Mental Health called ACCS (Adult Community Clinical Services), which replaced CBFS (Community-Based Flexible Supports). This new model promises to offer significant improvements benefiting the individuals served, but the necessity of adding more clinical staff and requiring licensure for more of the program leaders has presented some challenges and resulted in many changes.

In addition, bringing together two agencies with different cultures and approaches has not been easy. Efforts are underway to develop new approaches that combine the best of both or offer completely new ways of doing things. This process takes time.

We also feel compassion for and understand that people who worked with Dennis Rice as Executive Director of Alternatives have experienced a sense of sadness and loss on the occasion of his retirement. As the co-founder of Alternatives and its leader for over 40 years, Dennis represents the face and heart of Alternatives. His energy, passion and commitment to community inclusion and arts and culture are legendary and are not going away. Dennis has agreed to stay on with the new organization for a period of time to help with transition, training and ValleyCAST among other things. His new title is Senior Advisor and Executive Director Emeritus.

What is most important to know is that our mission of serving people has not changed. At the very heart of what we do, both agencies have the same goal. We want to provide the best possible supports, treatment and skill-building to help people see beyond perceived limitations to live their best lives.

Dennis Rice with long-time Alternatives employee Pat Stafford.
Recognizing Dennis Rice’s Life’s Work & Legacy

Over 200 people gathered on the community plaza at the Alternatives Whitin Mill site on Friday, September 28 to recognize and honor a man who not only co-founded an agency, but who also helped revitalize a town by renovating the Whitin Mill to house the main offices of Alternatives, as well as several of its programs.

The Mill is much more than that today. It is also the home of numerous art, music and theatrical organizations and the centerpiece of a philosophy that bringing people of all abilities together to perform in, create or enjoy various cultural activities is the ultimate form of community inclusion.

As part of the celebration for Dennis, a video featuring notable friends and colleagues as well as his daughter Quinnlan was shown. His wife, Kelley Gamble spoke eloquently about the journey they have shared in the agency, and long-time colleague and friend Michael Seibold shared memories and a photo album. A more lighthearted presentation was given by Lisa Jeronymo and Arlene Beck, as they decked out Dennis for his upcoming role as “Chief Domestic Partner,” sharing such 1950’s housewife advice as “don’t bother your spouse with your concerns – they are trivial,” and “be sure to greet her at the door with a smile.”

At the end of the presentations, President and CEO Ken Bates announced that the community plaza has been named the Dennis H. Rice Community Plaza – a fitting tribute for a man whose mission has been uniting people of all abilities through community engagement and community life.

Dennis Rice with his wife, Kelley Gamble and their daughter, Quinnlan Rice.
Celebrating the Affiliation at Wachusett Mountain

Close to 800 staff and individuals of Alternatives and The Bridge gathered at Wachusett Mountain to enjoy games, a barbecue, music, magic and the big reveal of the name of the combined agency. Senator Harriette Chandler lauded the two agencies for having the foresight and courage to come together, noting that they are indeed stronger together. Dennis Rice expressed his support for the move, stating that leaving Alternatives in the hands of Ken Bates felt right to him. Luke Knowles, a staff member of The Bridge who was served by Alternatives in the past, characterized the two agencies as forces for good that combined are even greater forces for good. He also teased the crowd by revealing the tagline – See Beyond, Live Beyond – words he had used to describe what we do: help people see beyond perceived limitations.

Ken Bates outlined the future of the new agency, highlighting both strengths and challenges, and noted that the future is limitless for the agency as well as for the people we serve.

FACTS about Open Sky Community Services

• Affiliation of Alternatives Unlimited, Inc. and The Bridge of Central Massachusetts
• 100+ programs serving individuals and families
• Services for people with mental health challenges, developmental and intellectual disabilities, brain injury, autism spectrum disorder, substance use disorders and homelessness
• Specialized services and supports for LGBTQ+ youth and transition-age youth
• Trauma Response Services
• The Bridge Training Institute
• 1300 employees
• An annual budget of $83 million
• Program locations throughout Central Massachusetts
• Headquarters in Worcester at 4 Mann St.
• The Whitin Mill maintained as important site for cultural events and community inclusion
• ValleyCAST cultural and arts programming
Celebrating the Affiliation at Wachusett Mountain

Close to 800 staff and individuals of Alternatives and The Bridge gathered at Wachusett Mountain to enjoy games, a barbecue, music, magic and the big reveal of the name of the combined agency. Senator Harriette Chandler lauded the two agencies for having the foresight and courage to come together, noting that they are indeed stronger together. Dennis Rice expressed his support for the move, stating that leaving Alternatives in the hands of Ken Bates felt right to him. Luke Knowles, a staff member of The Bridge who was served by Alternatives in the past, characterized the two agencies as "forces for good that combined are even greater forces for good." He also teased the crowd by revealing the tagline – See Beyond, Live Beyond – words he had used to describe what we do: help people see beyond perceived limitations.

Ken Bates outlined the future of the new agency, highlighting both strengths and challenges, and noted that the future is limitless for the agency as well as for the people we serve.

FACTS about Open Sky Community Services

• Affiliation of Alternatives Unlimited, Inc. and The Bridge of Central Massachusetts
• 100+ programs serving individuals and families
• Services for people with mental health challenges, developmental and intellectual disabilities, brain injury, autism spectrum disorder, substance use disorders and homelessness
• Specialized services and supports for LGBT Q+ youth and transition-age youth
• Trauma Response Services
• The Bridge Training Institute
• 1300 employees
• An annual budget of $83 million
• Program locations throughout Central Massachusetts
• Headquarters in Worcester at 4 Mann St.
• The Whitin Mill maintained as important site for cultural events and community inclusion
• ValleyCAST cultural and arts programming

"forces for good that combined are even greater forces for good"

– Luke Knowles
We’re On A Mission...

A task force including individuals served, employees, board members and leaders of the agency came together to wordsmith the language of our Mission Statement. They reviewed work that had been done through the branding process and from a senior leadership team retreat. Next, the group divided into two teams who worked independently to draft mission statements. When the groups came back together, they were astonished to see that each team had come up with remarkably similar statements. A few tweaks later, the statement was ready to send to the Executive Leadership Team. From there, it was presented at a retreat of the Board and Executive Team, where the final statement was approved.

Our Mission

By blending best practices with the power of community, we partner with individuals and families to see beyond and live beyond their perceived limitations to pursue fulfilling lives.

New Website Launched

Be sure to visit our new website www.openskycs.org to learn more about Open Sky Community Services.
Valley Bag Toss – Raising Fun & Funds

It was a beautiful, fun-filled day and record-setting year for the 5th Annual Valley Bag Toss. Spearheaded by Open Sky Board Member Molly Hollibaugh, the community cornhole tournament saw 122 participants and dozens of spectators gathered at the Whitin Mill to raise more than $20,000 in support of Open Sky’s health and wellness initiatives.

Five years ago Molly was an Alternatives Board Member whose family had a long history of support for the agency. Her goal in creating the Bag Toss was to introduce a new audience to the important work being done by Alternatives and to provide an opportunity for people of all abilities to come together around a common interest.

She suspected that the popularity of cornhole would help to draw community members new to the organization and that planning a high-energy event would keep them coming back. Her plan worked perfectly.

Each year has seen a high rate of return by previous teams and an increase in participation by new community members. Just as impressive has been the growing percentage of teams that include a team member served by Alternatives or The Bridge. This year, that number topped 20%!

We are so thankful for the support of our 16 corporate and individual sponsors, led by Presenting Sponsor Flexible Fundamentals and Featured Sponsors Koopman Lumber & Hardware and Zentangle. Their generosity and the contributions of all of the Bag Toss participants will reap benefits for the people we serve throughout the coming year.

See you next year on September 14 on the Dennis H. Rice Community Plaza at the Whitin Mill for the 6th Annual Valley Bag Toss!
Recruiting New Team Members: Seeking "Rock Stars"!

As part of the strategy to recruit new team members for Open Sky, social media postings have become an area of focus for the Recruitment team. We know that we have many "rock stars" in our agency and by sharing their stories and perspectives, we hope to entice more of the same to join us. Below are a few examples of postings. During the month of October, 28% of people entered our website careers pages via social media – indicating that these efforts are important and effective.

If you think you may be a rock star clinician or direct care worker, visit www.openskycs.org/careers and see if your dream job awaits.