

Staying Together

Apart



The Independent Citizen

How do we stick together when safety requires we stay apart?

The year 2020 required sacrifices for the greater good, including at CAU. We wear masks and follow rules for quarantining, cleaning and safe visitation at residential programs and all programs. While our top priority remains keeping each other safe, we are focused on the connections that help members meet their goals and grow, and what we can do to help them be happy and well.

"I knew I wanted to study computers," said Steven Alcocer, a member receiving support coordination with CAU. With the help of his support coordinator and his mother, Steven got a new laptop just before the pandemic shut down his in-person day program and computer programming classes. He is thrilled to have his own computer and has been keeping up with virtual schooling to earn his certification.

"It's important that my son is studying and healthy and we are good at home," said Steven's mother, Bernardina. "I give thanks to God too for [our support coordinator] Andrea and the program. Really, I'm very grateful to them."

All residential program members at CAU have been invited to connect and learn virtually with online groups

Winter 2021



from the Academy of Continuing Education. Our virtual service offerings are extensive to support members with everything from behavioral health to employment training.

As the year ended, dozens of members and staff at CAU shared that their appreciation for life was renewed this year. They reached and celebrated accomplishments too, including graduating from high school, finding jobs in their chosen fields, and even getting married. CAU is making sure life doesn't stop due to the pandemic. For those who must quarantine at residential programs, staff are making sure that the days are as enriching and enjoyable as possible with creative challenge activities that we share with each other through pictures.

"I am very thankful that I studied hard and graduated from high school this year," said youth services member Cassandra Ortiz Figueroa. "I am grateful to CAU and to have a nice apartment to live in ...and that I am getting through this pandemic."

As vital services for people with disabilities and youth at risk continue during this time, CAU is working to meet growing and changing needs. Donate to CAU and learn more at:

caunj.org/support-us/

A Message from our Executive Director



On behalf of CAU, we wish your family a very happy holiday season and a peaceful new year!

We want to let you know that CAU is open to help you find the right services for you and your family. Our programs are running and adhering to safety and screening protocols to protect the health of our members and staff. Don't hesitate to ask questions about what programs can help you meet your goals.

Some of our services, including Day Habilitation and Recreation, remain temporarily closed due to state safety regulations around reduced building capacity limits and social distancing. Call us or

sign up for the newsletter on our website to learn about the latest virtual services and groups being offered. You can also join us online for weekly interfaith and advocacy meetings.

As the year ends, I want to give a sincere thank you to all who have donated goods and funds to our members and team to help ensure that we are well equipped for safety and meeting members' needs this year under some challenging circumstances.

Our staff have gone above and beyond to support members this year, and our team is stronger than ever heading into 2021. I am proud to say that our programs are growing to serve more people and further the mission of our organization to help people achieve independence and a fulfilling life in the community.

Bernadette Griswold
Executive Director



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Board Member Spotlight: Dr. Karen Ensle

Karen Ensle has been involved with CAU for three decades and serves as secretary/treasurer of the board of trustees. She has been a family and community health sciences educator in Union County since 1987.

Ensle is a registered dietitian nutritionist and was involved in the board passing a policy to offer more healthy food options at the CAU office. She has worked with residential program leaders over the years to educate them about nutrition and healthy eating. This work is essential because people with developmental disabilities have a greater risk for obesity, she said, and she is happy to see CAU encourage members to get moving if they can with events like the annual Walkathon.

"We have a diverse population and people deserve to be treated with respect," Ensle said. "They deserve decent housing and services and CAU has been able to do that over the years...helping to continue that to happen is important."



CAU Recognizes the International Day of Persons with Disabilities

In New Jersey and in places around the world in 2020, people with disabilities faced increased risks related to COVID-19, extensive job losses, and mandated closures of critical in-person programs and services that support their well-being, goals, and independence.

According to new research from the National Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Family Support at the University of Pittsburgh, caregivers of those with developmental disabilities were more likely to report having less support for their child's educational goals, trouble accessing childcare, loss of employment or reduced work hours and increased financial strain.



International
Day of
Persons with
Disabilities

3 DECEMBER

Disability inclusion is essential as the world recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic. On the International Day of Persons with Disabilities (Dec. 3), CAU reflects on our commitment to creating a more inclusive world and the triumphs of our members through the challenges of this year.

The International Day of Persons with Disabilities was proclaimed by the United Nations in 1992 with the aim to promote the rights of people with disabilities and awareness of their situations in political, social, economic, and cultural life around the world.

CAU and other agencies serving people with disabilities have adapted and continue to adapt to best meet the needs of members through this time. From offering virtual services for life skills, employment, education, behavioral health and more, to creating daily and weekly challenges to enrich time spent at home in CAU residential programs, our members and staff continue to work together to reach their goals.

"It's been helpful to have my staff to get through everything," said member Genevieve Smith. "I look forward to going back to reading, math and art at day program."

For member Jessica Gaeta, virtual educational services have been a good fit to continue to study music and theater, self-help, math, history, and visual and digital art.

"It was hard to get used to at first but it's really good for me right now," Gaeta said. "I love to be doing art a lot and I like studying it too...the teachers do a good job of making it exciting."

People with disabilities are also among the essential workers keeping business moving through the pandemic. Member Reginald Payne braved the rush on supermarkets early this year as an employee at ShopRite and Target.

"If I didn't have a job it would be hard to take care of myself," Payne said. "I pay my bills like rent, internet and my phone bill."

CAU members are also speaking up about advocating for safety and helping each other through the pandemic.

"I'm doing something important- we have to keep the members safe," said Tabitha Floyd, a member and employee who ensures CAU residential programs are sanitized as part of the mobile cleaning crew. "I tell them to wear their masks to be safe."



Jessica Gaeta is attending virtual services through the Academy of Continuing Education at CAU.

A Thanksgiving to Celebrate Perseverance and Blessings

When Barshay Stinson became part of the Transitional Opportunities Program at Community Access Unlimited five years ago, he was an 18-year-old looking to leave the foster care system who had rarely been able to leave Jersey City.

Today he has a job he enjoys and is thrilled to move in with his fiancé and baby girl in January. He realizes he has much to be thankful for despite the many challenges this year has brought.

"This year has been very exciting for me," Stinson said. "The most difficult part of this year was dealing with the coronavirus with my fiancé because I couldn't come to all of her appointments. The most stressful thing was making sure I saw my daughter being born because I was working when she went into labor."

As a delivery driver for Amazon who started in January, Stinson weathered the chaos of online orders earlier in the year and says the job is a great fit because he loves to drive. Stinson led youth advocacy efforts at CAU as president of MAC Attack for four years. He spoke at conferences and had the opportunity to travel around New Jersey and the country meeting young people who grew up in similar situations and wanted to speak about the issues affecting them.

"This program exposed me to see more of New Jersey and have a bigger outlook on life and what I want to do in the future," Stinson said. "I'm thankful too for my support counselors for pushing me a lot."

The TOP program provides comprehensive residential services to youth and support services to prepare them for a self-reliant adulthood.

"I am thankful to CAU and the staff I work with," said Stinson's roommate, Ramone Cajigas. "I am thankful that I am able to work on having a better relationship with my family and that I am trying to do better in my life every day."

As people with special needs, members at CAU faced and overcame unique challenges this year, including a months-long lockdown for those living in residential programs, state-mandated closure of day programs that provide critical structure and enrichment, and thorough safety and cleaning procedures in all programs that will continue for as long as COVID-19 remains a threat. Many adapted to new virtual services to continue their education and other goals at home.

"Being confined in the house because of the pandemic was terrible," said member Wendy Smith, who had to leave her job in assembly at a warehouse program. "But when you're in the house you have to stay positive not negative."

Smith said she is still counting her blessings- she got engaged last year and looked forward to a full Thanksgiving feast on the 26th prepared by her direct support staff and enjoyed with her housemates.

Asked what they were most thankful for this year, CAU members and staff also said that they found new gratitude for their lives and surviving the start of a pandemic.

"Even though 2020 has been full of unwelcome surprises, the pandemic and a diagnosis of breast cancer for me, I am thankful for my faith in God," said Rose Kuprianov, a support coordinator at CAU. "I am grateful for my family and for my daughter Natalie's support professionals who have been invaluable during the pandemic so that I could continue my service to the individuals I provide support coordination to."



TOP members Barshay Stinson, left, and Ramone Cajigas, right, are working toward their goals for adulthood in the program.

After Lockdown, a Dream Come True Wedding for Couple with Disabilities

After six months of physical separation during COVID-19 lockdown, Megan and Maurice Stephens couldn't wait to be together and say their vows. "COVID-19 wasn't going to stop our wedding," Megan said. It was meant to be, according to Maurice.

From the time they met at a Halloween party held by Community Access Unlimited, the two instantly connected and took things slowly to make the relationship a lasting one, Megan said.

Maurice proposed to Megan on her birthday in June of 2019 at one of her favorite places to eat, the Rainforest Cafe.

"I was scared and nervous, but I knew Megan would be happy no matter what," he said.

A few months into planning their nuptials, the couple realized that their plans to have a large wedding wouldn't be possible due to the pandemic. To make matters worse, they were separated while quarantined at different CAU residential programs.

"We couldn't see each other, and it was very hard," Megan said. "It did make our wedding day more special."

Thankfully, their family and support system at CAU stepped up to make their special day possible and find the couple the perfect apartment in Fanwood, where they moved just in time for the wedding. On October 17, the couple were married before their closest family members and friends in a garden at Warinanco Park in Roselle.

"It was important for us to invite CAU members and staff because they really are a second family for both Megan and Maurice- we really wanted to share the day with them" said Marguerite Modero, Megan's mother. Rolando Zorrilla, managing assistant executive director of youth services at the agency, served as the best man.

Continued



Megan and Maurice Stephens were married in a small outdoor ceremony on Oct. 17 at Warinanco Park

Wedding continued...

Modero teaches music and theater classes at the CAU Academy of Continuing Education and is the founder and director of the CAU Community Players, an inclusive theatre group made up of performers with and without disabilities.

Maurice has brought his talents in painting and visual arts to CAU productions to share in the family's love of musical theater. He said Megan's passion for the shows convinced him to join in.

"Maurice is a very creative person, and he fits in perfectly with our family," Modero said. "It meant so much to have everyone at CAU at the wedding, because without the staff at CAU they would not have made this journey into adulthood and found this love."

Through employment supports at CAU, both Megan and Maurice are working part-time to help finance their independence.

"Maurice is one of a kind- he loves me a lot and he cares for me," Megan said. "We share a lot of happiness and ups and downs. We have a lot of togetherness and we understand each other...We were very excited to move in together. I want to be on my own and independent."

Many people discount that people with disabilities want to find love and companionship, according to Modero.

"I think as advocates of people with disabilities we need to say that they deserve love and a relationship and their happily ever after if it's possible," she said. "I'm grateful to CAU for having an enlightened perspective on marriage. They treated them as two adults with dignity and understood they were in love."

Megan agreed that finding love can mean taking chances to connect with others in your community.

"I would definitely tell people with disabilities to not be afraid to get out there and do things," she said.

Maurice added that they have already started asking other CAU couples when they plan to tie the knot.



CAU Executive Director Bernadette Griswold with Megan Stephens on her wedding day.

Learn more about CAU services—ask us what is available virtually!

Support Coordination - Accepting new members and working remotely. Let's work together to create the perfect Individualized Support Plan for your family!

Day Habilitation-Join us for virtual sessions to learn life skills and subjects such as Reading and Health and Wellness

The Academy of Continuing Education - remote learning. Choose courses in math, reading, media, science, art, self-help, and history! ACE is our answer to post-graduate learning for adults with developmental disabilities.

Behavioral Management - Virtual services available. Our approach works to increase positive behaviors and create lasting outcomes. We can complete behavioral assessments and develop and implement structured behavioral modification plans.

Residential Services - Our residential staff receives advanced training to support complex medical and behavioral needs.

Employment Services- Our team can help you reach your full potential with career planning, prevocational training and supported employment!

Support Services- Let us build a support services plan that meets your personalized needs. Read more about our services on our website.

Assistive Technology- Whether you or your loved one needs assistance communicating, navigating their environment, or overcoming other challenges, our AT supports can help individuals and families achieve a better quality of life.

caunj.org
info@caunj.org
908-354-3040

Family Caregivers Show Unwavering Strength Weathering COVID-19

Thomas Corea decided to put his career on hold and become a stay-home dad when his son, TJ, was 18 months old. Not long after that, he and his wife, Carol, discovered TJ was on the autistic spectrum. Thomas Corea has been the family caregiver for his son, now 26, ever since.

While Thomas Corea is a positive person – he is a musician by trade – he often found it daunting to deal with the system that is in place to provide people with disabilities and their families the supports they need.

“Unless you stand on a mountain and scream, you get nothing,” he said. “You try to keep your head above water and their head above water to keep them safe.”

According to estimates from the National Alliance for Caregiving, 65.7 million Americans serve as family caregivers for an ill relative or a relative with a disability. Per the Administration for Community Living, research indicates family caregiving takes a significant emotional, physical, and financial toll. With nearly half of all caregivers over the age 50, many are vulnerable to a decline in their own health, they say. Studies show that coordinated support services can reduce caregiver depression, anxiety, and stress.

To ease that stress, Thomas Corea turned to CAU, first for direct support services while TJ was in school, then for respite services when he turned 21. Monique St. Claire is the family's support counselor, providing the family with 6.5 hours of respite support one day each week. St. Claire takes TJ on short trips, such as to outside events.

“TJ's mother and father need a break because he takes a lot to handle,” St. Claire said. “I'm getting him out of the house and giving his parents respite... He gets frustrated when he doesn't get what he wants. But I can reason with him and then he says with a sweet voice, ‘Okay.’ It's very endearing.”

St. Claire's support became even more important when COVID-19 hit the United States and all TJ's other supports stopped. St. Claire is back to visiting weekly.

“He lost all his routine,” Thomas Corea said. “He lost his sense of day and night. He needs constant attention... Now that he has it back, he's back to normal.”

Kareem Colon has an intellectual disability, epilepsy, and several other health issues. He needs constant care, including with eating, personal care, and behavioral assistance. His father, Benny, is his family caregiver. While Kareem was still in high school, Benny visited the school once a week to learn how to care for his son once Kareem turned 21 and graduated.

After graduation, Benny Colon first investigated Day Care programs for Kareem but quickly realized his son would not receive the care he needed.

“They told me he would have one-on-one attention,” he said. “Then when I went to sign the papers, they said it would be one-to-three. That wouldn't work.”

That is when Benny turned to CAU for assistance getting the support services to which Kareem is entitled. Andrea Stuart is the CAU support coordinator for the Colon family, helping Benny Colon identify and secure the best support services that meet the needs of both Kareem and his family, including community-based supports that also serve as respite for Benny.

“Any time I have a problem I call Andrea,” Benny Colon said. “If I need extra help, she's there. So far, it's been 100 percent good. They know what they are doing.”

While the pandemic ended Stuart's regular visits with Kareem and the Colon family, she stays in touch with Benny Colon to make sure the family is getting all the supports they need.

“Kareem is a great person,” Stuart said. “He's very lucky to have two parents who love him and care for him and make sure he has everything he needs.”

November was National Family Caregivers month, a time to celebrate the commitment and love family caregivers show for their loved ones and the sacrifices they make. Yet CAU's St. Claire and Stuart both think family caregivers such as Thomas Corea and Benny Colon should be celebrated every day of the year, especially for braving through the pandemic.



Monique St. Claire (left), support counselor at Community Access Unlimited, poses with one of the families she supports (left to right), TJ, Carol, and Thomas Corea.

Getting People Back to Work with Employment Services

From prevocational training services to supported employment, Community Access Unlimited is equipped to help individuals with disabilities and others with special needs reach their career and life goals. We can also help eligible adults and youth in Union County get back to work or find a job or internship!

CAU employment services are more important than ever. The rate of new job growth for people with disabilities has slowed in recent years. Between March and April 2020, coinciding with business closures and restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic, the percent of adults with disabilities currently working decreased by nearly a quarter, declining from 18% to 14%, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics monthly Current Population Survey.

People with disabilities seeking assistance in their job search or job readiness training, as well as businesses looking to hire people with disabilities in New Jersey can contact Community Access Unlimited.

"Everybody brings different skills, talents, experience and a diverse background to work," said CAU Assistant Executive Director of Employment Sandra Lynch. "It brings more talent to the workforce. People need to look at it as an opportunity, not an extra chore."

The Employment Services team acts as a liaison between employers and members to facilitate a win-win relationship for both parties. CAU offers comprehensive career planning, prevocational training and supported employment for small groups and individuals. Whether an individual is seeking life skills training for job readiness or is searching for their dream position, CAU is equipped to provide the employment support needed.

We offer comprehensive youth services and can assist low income in and out-of-school youth with job training, summer internships, career planning and counseling and other opportunities. Housing assistance and financial assistance for training and job-related expenses are available. These services will help youth access employment opportunities with assistance from American Job Center! This initiative is offered in partnership with the County of Union under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act.

CAU can also help eligible people who are unemployed and in need of child care, transportation, or other needs to work through a partnership with the County of Union under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act. CAU can assist with costs such housing and food, child care, transportation and auto repairs, medical and prescription services and uniforms or other appropriate work attire and grooming. CAU will help eligible people access employment opportunities with assistance from American Job Center in Union County. Contact CAU to ask about employment services today!

Call 908-354-3040 and ask for the Intake department or email info@caunj.org



CAU Has New Employment Programs!

CAU Employment Supportive Services for Union County Youth, Dislocated Workers and Adults

**An initiative offered in partnership with the County of Union
under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)**

Are you unemployed and in need of help with child care, transportation
or have other needs to assist you in getting to work?

Contact Community Access Unlimited to ask about assistance with costs for:

- housing and food
- child care
- transportation and auto repairs
- utilities
- medical and prescription services
- uniforms or other appropriate work attire and grooming
- other assistance aimed to help eliminate barriers to employment



CAU will help you access employment opportunities with assistance from American Job Center in Union County.

Contact Community Access Unlimited for eligibility information.

Call 908-354-3040 and ask for the Intake department or email info@caunj.org

CAU Youth Comprehensive Career Services for Union County In- and Out-of-School Youth

**An initiative offered in partnership with the County of Union
under the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)**

Contact Community Access Unlimited for Youth Services and
Employment help!

Community Access Unlimited has comprehensive youth services and
can assist low-income youth with:

- Paid and unpaid work experiences, such as summer internships, job training, job shadowing and other opportunities.
- Supportive Services to help remove barriers to finding a job, such as housing assistance and financial assistance for training and job-related expenses.
- Labor market education and training (understanding local job opportunities and employment trends), plus career planning and career counseling.

**To help you access employment opportunities with assistance
from American Job Center!**

Contact CAU to ask about eligibility!

Call 908-354-3040 and ask for the Intake department or
email info@caunj.org



CAU Students Learn Money Management Skills and More at Home

Thank you to our partners at Valley Bank!

Educators of people with disabilities continue to raise the bar for remote learning and virtual services to meet the needs of the people they serve.

Staff at Community Access Unlimited have been working hard since the start of the pandemic to make sure members don't miss out on enrichment just because they are at home.

CAU is currently accepting registrations for virtual Day Habilitation, the Academy of Continuing Education (ACE), and Vocational services. Members can choose from a wide selection of groups such as Life Skills, Fundamentals of Reading, World Cultures, Culinary Arts, and Health and Safety in the Workplace, depending on what services suit their needs.

"It was important for us to create a virtual learning experience that emulates an in-person day program structured day that provides age appropriate activities, offers variety and choice, and focuses on small groups and individual interactions," said Onekia Grier, managing assistant executive director of Day Habilitation & Educational Services.



Alyssa Elenis prepares for her virtual ACE program at home.

Both Day Program and ACE have virtual groups, but with different offerings. ACE is CAU's answer to post-graduation learning for adults with developmental disabilities. Program choices are designed to appeal to every type of student.

This fall, CAU students participated in a financial literacy workshop series presented in partnership with Valley Bank. The program was specifically designed for members using presentation materials provided by Valley. The four-part series has concluded for ACE students and is currently being offered to students in the Pathways to Academic & Career Exploration to Success program, a college and employment prep service for high school and college-aged youth at risk. The special series is not the only collaborative educational partnership for ACE this year— the program also partnered with Kean University in November for a virtual music workshop for individuals with disabilities.

Students said they were eager to learn more about money to set goals and develop good habits.

Student Alyssa Elenis works part time at ShopRite and has set a goal to save enough money to buy a new laptop for her online classes.

"I think I spend too much money and I want to lower that," she said. "They did a great job with the class and were helpful with answering questions."

Student Jessica Sucuzhanay said she enjoys taking ACE classes to continue learning and retaining her education.

Money Management continued...

"I want to learn how to save and manage money," said Sucuzhanay, who is looking for a part-time job. "I want to know how to spend money when I go to the supermarket and how to create a budget to plan for the future."

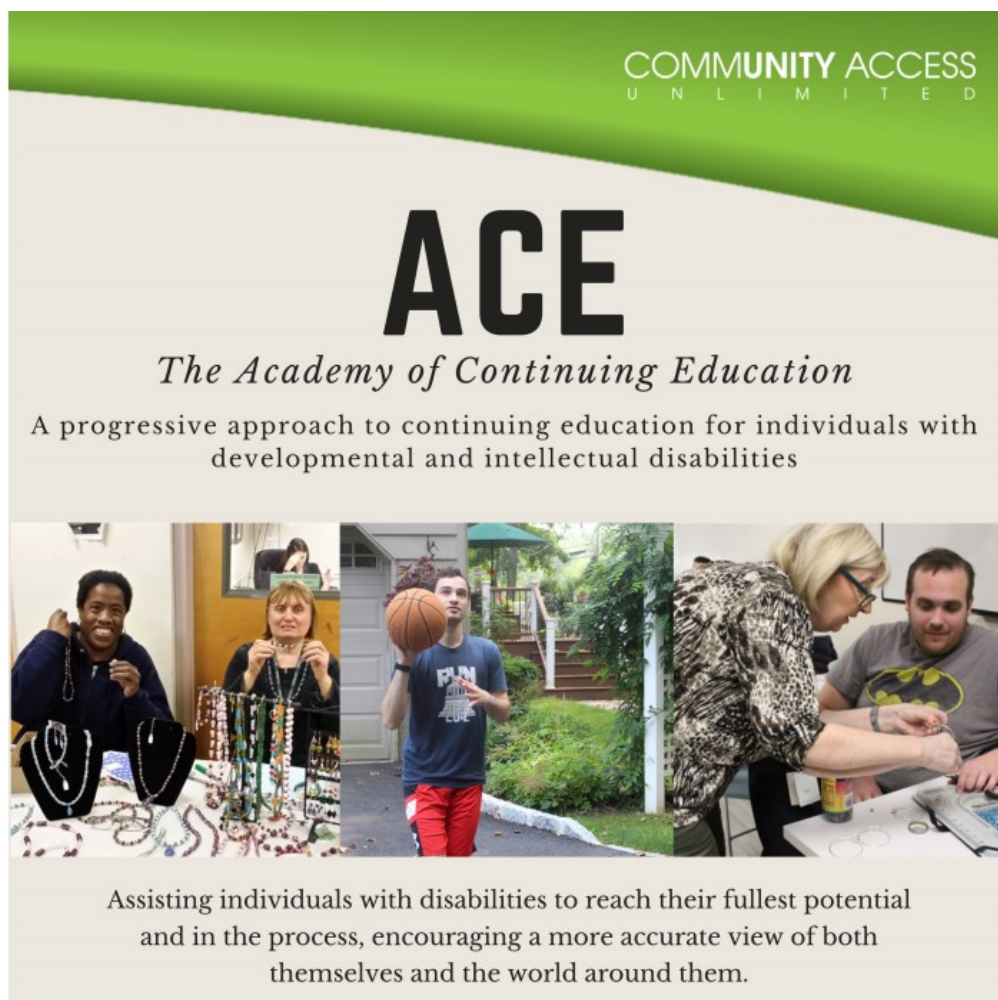
Elenis said that she is reaping the benefits of virtual services with classes in music and theater, computers, art and media, and self-help.

"It helps a lot," she said of her self-help class. "We practice taking notes, learning about current events, and managing how we're feeling."

The financial literacy series has helped members better understanding how money works, how to make smart spending decisions and what a bank can do to support and help them reach their financial goals, according to Stacy Marshall, assistant executive director of Educational Services.

"It's empowering to understand money and make knowledgeable decisions about how to spend that money," Marshall said. "They can feel more independent going out into community and making those choices. We appreciate our partnership with Valley Bank to learn about personal finance."

ACE is also looking for volunteers and part time consultants to further enhance our art group offerings. Give us a call to learn how you can get involved today!



COMMUNITY ACCESS
UNLIMITED

ACE

The Academy of Continuing Education

A progressive approach to continuing education for individuals with developmental and intellectual disabilities

Assisting individuals with disabilities to reach their fullest potential and in the process, encouraging a more accurate view of both themselves and the world around them.



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Community Access Unlimited's Mission: *Our mission is to provide community access through effective, systematic, comprehensive support services for people with disabilities and their families, giving them the opportunity to live independently and to lead normal and productive lives as citizens integrated into the general community. Services also include the provision of decent housing preferably income integrated and affordable to low and moderate-income people.*

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Support CAU with Giving Assistant

Your purchases at 1800+ popular online retailers have the power to support our mission by helping us do more. When you earn cash back using their platform, you can also choose to donate a percentage of those earnings to CAU. It's like changing the world with every purchase.