

October 2025 Newsletter

Competitive Integrated Employment – Is It For You?

By Judith Wieber

Self-Initiated Living Options (SILO) has a Subminimum Wage to Competitive Integrated Employment team, SWTCIE. The mission or goal of the team is to support people with disabilities to transition from sheltered workplaces where they work alongside other disabled employees for a very low, much less than minimum, wage, to places of employment with nondisabled employees, receiving a competitive wage for comparable work done.

SWTCIE is a NYS funded program, a grant, which allows individuals earning subminimum wages to have experiences such as paid internships, job shadowing, short term work experiences, classroom and on the job training, assistive tech training, benefits advisement, and more.

This month I got to talk with Alyssa, a former job coach, now employment specialist on staff here at SILO. Alyssa confidently asserts that the purpose of SWTCIE “is assisting individuals earning subminimum wages in obtaining meaningful employment in their communities.” Many program participants have been found to be positive about the experience. They are excited to become a bigger part of their communities.

Alyssa, prior to working for SILO and the SWTCIE program, once was a job coach. I asked her to shed some light on what her previous job entailed: “My time working as a job coach gave me insight into community resources, networking tools, and experience working with individuals with disabilities in the workforce.”

When I asked Alyssa the difference between being a job coach and an employment specialist, she responded, “One way my new role is different from my previous role has to do with Customized Employment. In my previous role as a job coach, individuals mostly applied to posted job openings with employers. In my current role, it goes beyond the individuals applying to posted job openings. Customized Employment is about being creative, thinking outside the box, and finding a role that would benefit both the employer and the individual. This job role would not be posted in the employer's job openings but rather be a role that is created based on the individual's interests and skills, and the employer's unmet needs for their businesses. It is a win-win for individuals and employers alike.”

Meet Marianna, One of SILO'S New Interns

By: Kaitlyn Fedziuk & Marianna Vlachos

Q: Tell me a little about your academic background and how it connects to this role.

A: I recently graduated from Sacred Heart University with a degree in Health Science. While studying, I had the opportunity to intern at Peconic Bay Medical Center in the Patient and Family Centered Care Department. There, I worked alongside social workers and saw how they played

such a key role in supporting patients, both emotionally and practically. This experience inspired me to pursue my Master of Social Work (MSW), as I realized how important it is to advocate for people and offer emotional support during difficult times.

Q: What made you interested in interning with SILO?

A: After my experience at Peconic Bay, I knew I wanted to work in a setting where I could make a difference in people's lives, especially those who are underserved. When I interviewed with SILO, I was really drawn to the passion everyone had for their work. It was clear that SILO is a place where people truly care about what they do, and that made me want to be a part of it. I also love that SILO emphasizes giving everyone, especially those with disabilities, a voice in their own lives, which is something I feel strongly about.

Q: What do you already know about SILO and our mission?

A: I know that SILO is all about supporting people with disabilities and advocating for their rights. You are really focused on creating inclusive communities where everyone has the chance to be heard and involved in decisions that affect their lives. It's not just about providing immediate resources; it's about making sure people are empowered to live independently and with dignity. I also really like that SILO takes a person-centered approach, which I think is so important in making sure people's needs are met in a way that works for them.

Q: Why is advocacy for people with disabilities, the elderly, and/or the homeless important to you?

A: Advocacy for these groups is important to me because I believe everyone deserves respect and a voice, no matter their challenges. During my undergrad, I learned about global health issues and the disparities in healthcare, which made me more aware of how people with disabilities, the elderly, and the homeless face extra barriers. I'm excited to learn how SILO's programs help overcome these barriers and empower individuals to have more control over their lives.

Q: Is there a particular program/service here you're most excited to learn about?

A: I'm really excited to learn about NY Connects. I think it will give me a real sense of the struggles people face in accessing services and help me develop the skills to connect them with the resources they need. It's important to me to understand how to best counsel and refer individuals to the right programs, so they can get the support they deserve.

Q: What skills are you hoping to develop during your time here?

A: I'm hoping to develop my skills in client advocacy, counseling, and referrals. I want to learn how to help individuals navigate systems more effectively and feel more empowered in their decisions. Gaining hands-on experience in a social services setting like SILO will allow me to build practical skills that will help me in my future career as a social worker.

Q: What would make this internship a successful and meaningful experience for you?

A: A successful internship for me would involve both learning and contributing. I want to gain practical experience in advocacy and client support, while also making a tangible impact in people's lives. It would be meaningful if I can help connect individuals to resources that can improve their quality of life and leave SILO with a stronger skill set for my future career.

Meet Jessica, One of SILO'S New Interns

By: Judith Wieber & Jessica Bergersen

Q: Tell us a little about yourself.

A: I'm Jessica, I am a new intern here at SILO. I live in Ronkonkoma in a fixer upper house that I am renovating with my husband. I have two dogs, who I consider to be my children.

Q: What are some of your hobbies?

A: I love to read and do anything creative, such as decorating my home, doing crafts with friends, or painting. I also love animals, hiking, gardening, and taking care of houseplants.

Q: What year in school is this for you?

A: This is my first semester of my first year in graduate school... the second time around. I have a bachelor's in psychology and a master's in creative arts therapy from many years ago. I am back for my master's in social work now.

Q: Is there a personal reason for choosing social work as your field of study?

A: Yes. I've always just felt a strong desire to help people, and I've always been extremely interested in the field of psychology, in particular, people's behaviors and what motivates them. I initially went to school for Creative Arts Therapy, which is the same as regular talk therapy, except Art Therapists are specially trained to aid clients with using art as a therapeutic tool and treatment modality. Unfortunately, Art Therapy is very niche, and I have found that jobs in that specific field are hard to come by, so my life ended up going in a different direction, and I ended up working in the field of social work. I find that I really enjoy the administrative aspect of it. I wanted to go back to get my degree so that I can sharpen my skills, expand my knowledge, and, when I graduate, qualify for additional roles and jobs in the future.

Q: Tell me a little about your academic background and how it connects to this role.

A: I have a bachelor's degree in psychology, and a master's degree in creative arts therapy counseling. When I graduated with my master's degree, I ended up getting a job working for a Nursing Home Transition and Diversion (NHTD)/Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) Waiver provider, and have been working on this program ever since, for over a decade now. I ended up really enjoying working on this program and the different direction life ended up taking me. I wanted to go back to school to get the correct degree for the field I landed in.

Q: What made you interested in interning with SILO?

A: After so many years of working on the NHTD and TBI waiver programs, I have come to know the Regional Resource and Development Center/TBI Waiver department at SILO very well and have always thought SILO seemed like such a lovely place to work. I also am very curious and interested in all the other programs available at SILO, since I only know about the NHTD and TBI Waiver programs.

Q: What do you already know about SILO and our mission?

A: I know SILO is an Independent Living Center, and houses many programs designed to provide supportive services to those in need.

Q: Why is advocacy for people with disabilities, the elderly, and/or the homeless important to you?

A: I personally have always felt a strong desire to help others, especially vulnerable populations. I find it very fulfilling to be a “voice for the voiceless”, and aid with advocacy and helping people to access supports that are beneficial to them.

Q: Is there a particular program/service here you’re most excited to learn about?

A: I’m honestly excited to learn about all of it. The more I know about available resources that I can potentially connect my clients and future clients with, the better position I am in to aid them.

Q: What skills are you hoping to develop during your time here?

A: I look forward to sharpening clinical skills and learning as much as possible from my supervisor, Lee Ann Piccola-Voight, who is a Licensed and Registered Clinical Social Worker. I also hope to learn about all the resources that exist for vulnerable populations.

Q: How does this internship fit into your long-term career goals?

A: I currently am co-owner of an NHTD and TBI Waiver Provider Agency, and I hope to continue that for as long as possible. I already work closely with SILO and am looking forward to my internship here, leading me to learning about additional resources and making some connections that will better help me serve my clients.

Q: What would make this internship a successful and meaningful experience for you?

A: The exposure to different programs and different clientele has already been rewarding, educational, and interesting for me in the short time that I have been here. I am also happy to meet and make connections with SILO employees, so that I can learn from them.

Q: Where do you see yourself 5 years from now? 10 years from now?

A: 5 and 10 years from now, I hope to just be a better version of the self that I am today. I am passionate about constantly learning, growing as much as possible, and always being in a state of self-improvement.

Pal-O-Mine Organizational Profile

By Michael Kohut

For 30 years this September, Islandia has been home to a place which offers an abundance of respite and connection for populations that too often find themselves rationing such feelings. Pal-O-Mine Equestrian, located on Old Nichols Road, is a 13 acre ranch that specializes in assisting veterans and the differently abled to grow and heal through animal therapy.

Having received mounted therapy to treat cerebral palsy as a child, I recall a distinct sorrow when I aged out of the ability to continue the practice. I could no longer be assisted onto “Rusty,” my old steed, without specialized equipment, like the *Sure Hands* lift at this facility. Mobility is no barrier here, only advertising budget and hours in the day.

As a private non-profit, Pal-O-Mine relies on word of mouth and networking to connect with clientele, an estimated 75 percent of whom are disabled. Upon encountering staff at a meeting of the Suffolk County Rehabilitation Council, I felt obliged and privileged to shed light on their mission and mindset.

Speaking with Alexandra Cella - former Administrative Service Coordinator who worked at the facility from 2010 until summer of 2025 - quickly revealed just how *focused* the organization is on optimizing their methodology, even though Pal-O-Mine offers services and opportunities to such a diverse population.

The intake begins with "matching each individual to the correct specialist, and animal, then goal setting with that individual," Cella said. This is done in a controlled and calm environment; no visitors are allowed without an appointment as “maintaining low foot traffic is important.”

Adherence to these rules is obvious as one enters the facility. Flanked on all sides by trees, an almost contagious tranquility affects one as you walk, or ride, the grounds. It’s difficult to believe the ranch is minutes away from Long Island’s bustle.

You may feel your heart rate drop as horses, or the occasional chicken, pass you by. This is reflective of the long symbiosis between people and the animals we domesticate. "A horse’s heartrate and breathing is low compared to us, they can sense human heartrate from about 100 ft. away," Cella remarked.

The sensitivity of horses to human behavior means that Pal-O-Mine must carefully select and train each horse, determining their physical attributes through a process called “confirmation.” Once

this is complete, a horse finds its role, as each client is specifically matched to the one that best fits their needs and demeanor. An equine student with autism, for example, may be paired with Teddy, a Paint-Cross breed. Teddy is often paired with students that have vestibular and sensory seeking needs.

In contrast, Espresso, an Appendix horse, is much taller. They are often used by more independent riders for the walk and trot activities, which is more typical than what a student might receive from a horse like Teddy.

The horses sourced by Pal-O-Mine come into the facility on a 3-month trial period; this gives staff adequate time to gauge how each one reacts to stimulus under different circumstances. The strict screening process means that about 80 percent of the horses brought in don't make the cut for adaptive lessons. Donations are welcome; Pal-O-Mine is always on the lookout for horses that fit its specific needs.

Few things on the ranch display this more starkly than the 7 miniature horses. The minis were friendly and docile when I was introduced. I was sad to not be able to feed them, but for a great reason. At Pal-O-Mine, no horses are hand-fed; this prevents the development of poor manners and the association between human hands and nourishment. They do, however, love peppermint, and mint water is used to encourage drinking. Turns out that old saying doesn't account for tempting horses with a refreshing treat.

The miniatures are used for psychotherapy programs, since for them, "patience is innate," Cella said. This year, they participated in a program that brought them to local dementia centers. Even the smallest horses at Pal-O-Mine can have a big impact on people. "One student initially felt uncomfortable around others with disabilities, but since doing the programs at Pal-O-Mine, she has become an enthusiastic participant in groups. She works alongside those with all abilities and has greatly matured and grown." Cella notes this example with a hint of well-deserved pride.

Rachel Gearwar, the Assistant Clinical Director at the ranch, asks that anyone unsure about their eligibility in Pal-O-Mine programs to reach out and see. "We work with people of neurodivergence and normative development," Gearwar says. And the breadth of programs available to clients means that there's almost certainly a place for you, on or off horseback. October boasts an on-site woman's retreat at Pal-O-Mine's therapy center, which can accommodate up to 10 guests overnight. This is so popular it demands a waitlist, as anyone in the country is welcome to sign up.

Rachel is also the liaison to Pal-O-Mine's military programs, which include the Equine Assisted Psychotherapy (EAP) program. "Available to military personnel and first responders, as well as anyone in need, the EAP program knows no barriers from ages 5 to 95," Gearwar said. She reflects on the natural therapeutic value horses hold: "Horses know intuitively what a therapist needs to discover. They invite us to be curious, mindful, and present. When you have that, the client becomes more aware of the question: What do *you* need to work on?"

Even if you've never considered animal therapy, a visit to Pal-O-Mine might be of great value, even just as an opportunity to give back. Volunteers are welcome, as they enable the mission of the ranch.