

Thank you to everyone who completed the Thrive readership survey. We reviewed your feedback and we are making some changes. Going forward, there will be more opportunities to highlight staff and individuals served, including the new *Celebrating Wins* section (read more below!). We are also changing the way the newsletter is described in email subject lines, so everyone knows this is our official company newsletter.

Enjoy, and reach out to [Courtney Heiser](#) or [Larissa Whitaker](#) with any stories you'd like to share in an upcoming issue of Thrive.

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## Reflections of Benchmark Leaders Upon Retirement

By *Doug Beebe*, Benchmark CEO

One of the greatest privileges of my time at Benchmark has been working alongside exceptional leaders. In 2026, two of those leaders, Karen Shollenberger and Jeff Cross, will retire after making a lasting impact on AWRC and Benchmark.

Karen's influence reaches far beyond the many programs she helped grow. Her true legacy is the leaders she mentored, many of whom now guide our organization forward. Jeff took on the challenge of expanding Benchmark as a national brand and exceeded every expectation, elevating our outreach and reputation across the country. I will miss them both as colleagues and value them always as friends. Rather than speak for them, I asked each to share their own reflections -- and I'm glad I did.



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### A Letter from Karen Shollenberger, Retiring Vice President

After 37 years with Benchmark, I will step out of my operational leadership role on January 31, 2026. I joined when we were a small nonprofit serving fewer than 100 people to grow what was then a new residential group home program, never imagining how the journey that would unfold. Today, Benchmark supports more than 20,000 individuals nationwide through a wide range of services. We walk alongside people from their earliest days through their senior years, meeting them wherever they are—in their homes, workplaces, and communities, helping every person reach their potential.

From my early days as Director of Residential Services to my role as Vice President since 2001, I have had the privilege of overseeing diverse programs including residential services, day programs, recreational and music therapy, BCBA supports, nursing, Camp Red Cedar, and Family Preservation. I am deeply proud of the large-scale projects I helped bring to life: transitioning children from institutional care into warm, supportive group homes; opening Missouri's residential services for individuals with complex behavioral needs; helping close the Fort Wayne State Developmental Center and other large institutions; launching Indiana's Family Preservation Services; and providing emergency placements during critical transitions. Through countless committees and initiatives—from policy development to building projects—I witnessed the power of what we can accomplish together.

The individuals we serve have been my greatest teachers. They have shown me resilience in the face of extraordinary challenges, joy in the smallest moments, and courage that still humbles me. Yet, what fills me with the greatest pride is the leaders I have helped develop—who have risen through our ranks to carry this mission forward. I have been fortunate to work alongside exceptional people. Together, we have created a culture of mutual support, respect, and genuine friendship.

Thank you for 37 extraordinary years!



## **Karen Shollenberger**

Retiring Vice President

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### **A Letter from Jeff Cross, Retiring Senior Development Advisor**

One of my favorite Benchmark moments came from a man we serve who, after years of trauma and failed placements, stood up at a self-advocacy meeting and said, "I live at Benchmark. I have a family now." That statement captures the heart of who we are.

I greatly value my relationship with colleagues and co-workers at Benchmark. It has been a privilege to work with such a dedicated and committed team. Many of you I know well. Others I know only by what you have accomplished. I have an especially deep respect for our front-line managers, DSPs, case managers, nurses, and clinicians—this is where the work gets done one-on-one, and you excel.

Over the past fifteen years, I've had the privilege of helping Benchmark grow into a national leader—now serving in 20 states and recognized as the premier provider for individuals with complex needs. Benchmark is known for doing what others cannot or will not do.

With success comes responsibility. Going forward, Benchmark will have more opportunity even as predicted challenges in Medicaid funding grow, service delivery models are forced to change,

and state adoption of value based managed care becomes the norm. However, it will be imperative for Benchmark to differentiate its services by growing measurable quality, developing innovative and cost effective service models, increasing workforce engagement, and embracing technology in services and business practices. Most critical will be the preservation of our culture and its DNA of commitment to people served regardless of the challenges.

The future brings both opportunity and responsibility. Preserving our culture, investing in quality, innovation, workforce engagement, and technology will be essential. My advice is simple: be bold, take chances, and be a changemaker. Every day, someone is counting on you to show up and deliver.

Signing off with best regards.

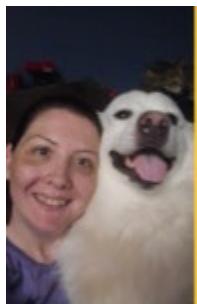


**Jeff Cross**  
Retiring Senior  
Development Advisor

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## From the Frontlines

Hear from Benchmark employees across the country.



**Leah Blaha,  
BSW**  
Intensive Care Coordinator  
Alabama Case Management

### **Leah, what do you like best about your job?**

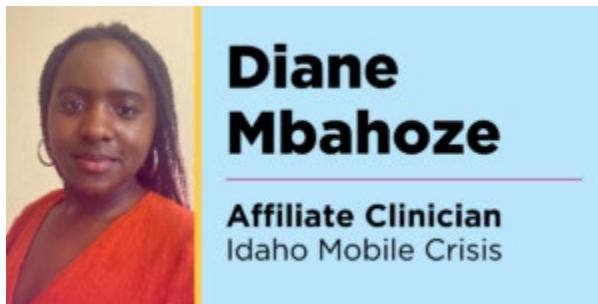
The best part about being an ICC, as well as an autistic individual, is that I get to help families in need of understanding both their children and the ways they can interact with older autistic individuals, emotional support. Everyone on my caseload knows they can text or call me at any time for whatever reason, and I'm there to listen, empathize, and provide my unique perspective. I have a never-ending quest for new resources and ways to help the parents help their children. When I interact with the children on my caseload, I never take credit for the information I send to their parents because I'm not in the job for the glory--I truly want to help them. This isn't just a job for me; it's my calling in life.

**What is most challenging about it?**

The biggest challenge for me is knowing when to put my phone away and engage in self-care. My brain hyperfixates on ways that I can make this better for one family or how frustrating a situation is with an unresponsive parent and it plays on a loop. My support system knows very well that they have to remind me to be present in the moment and not stress about things I cannot change.

**What are your hopes for the new year?**

I'd love to expand my horizons by taking on new hobbies, traveling to new places, and exploring the lesser-known parts of the cities I visit for work. If I have to go to Fort Payne, AL, once a month to see a family, it would be fun to walk a trail through DeSoto State Park or to go to the museum for the country band, Alabama. Just because I go to a place for work, it doesn't mean I can't enjoy being there as well. On a self-care note, I spend a lot of time reading when I'm not working, and my goal for 2026 is to read 200 books.

**Diane, what do you like best about your job?**

My favorite part of my job is being able to support members of the community struggling with various forms of mental health or substance use crises. I am grateful for being able to give back to the community that has given me so many opportunities for growth, both personally and professionally.

**What is most challenging about it?**

I find the majority of my work with clients in crisis highly rewarding. It can be challenging when a client's family is not well-informed about mental health, but as mental health professionals, it is part of our job to educate families and help them access resources so they can better support their loved ones.

**What are you looking forward to in 2026?**

In 2026, I look forward to supporting more people in crisis and further developing my skills.

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## Announcing the Strength and Heart Award

At Benchmark, we know that what sets our team apart isn't just talent — it's the powerful combination of **strength** and **heart** that fuels our mission every single day. Whether you're supporting individuals directly, leading frontline teams, processing payroll, or keeping our offices running like clockwork, your impact matters — and it deserves to be celebrated.

That's why we're thrilled to introduce the ***Strength and Heart Award*** -- a new quarterly recognition designed to spotlight employees who go above and beyond with both grit and compassion.

# **STRENGTH + Heart**

## **EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION AWARD**

### **What does strength look like?**

Think determination, resilience, innovation, advocacy, and character.

### **What does heart look like?**

Think empathy, compassion, patience, kindness, and a spirit of inclusivity.

Each quarter, we're inviting you to nominate your incredible peers who embody these qualities. Shine a light on those co-workers who inspire you by showing up with both strength and heart.

**Nominate a colleague using the form linked below by March 2, 2026.** (Note: Supervisors cannot nominate an employee they directly supervise.)

A selection committee will choose one outstanding recipient each quarter. Each recipient of the Strength and Heart Award will receive a **\$1,000 payroll bonus!**

The first winner will be announced in early April.

Thank you for being part of the Benchmark family and for your role in helping others live as independently as possible, be included in the community, and reach their full potential. Let's celebrate the strength and heart that powers our mission together.

[Nominate a Co-Worker with Strength and Heart](#)

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# Perks and Potential: Employee Assistance Program Offers Employees Free Counseling and More!



**Sarah  
Serna**

Benefits  
Administrator

By Sarah Serna, Benefits Administrator

Benchmark partners with the National Employee Assistance Program (NEAP) to provide employees with free, confidential support and resources. This benefit includes no-cost counseling sessions with a licensed therapist, along with a wide range of additional services fully paid for by Benchmark.

In addition to counseling, NEAP offers health and wellness webinars, free financial and legal consultations, referrals for child and elder care, and more. These resources are designed to support employees through challenges both big and small.

Learn more about NEAP and how to connect with a therapist or access other services by [reviewing this PDF](#). We're also hosting a webinar about the NEAP on February 17 at 2:00 pm EST. You can register here: [Register for NEAP Webinar](#).

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## Introducing *Celebrating Wins!*

At Benchmark, our mission is to help the people we serve live as independently as possible, be included in the community, and reach their full potential. We work toward that mission in big and small ways every day. Often, it's the small milestones that spark the biggest momentum. That's why we're excited to introduce a new Thrive newsletter feature: ***Celebrating Wins***. This series will highlight the meaningful victories, both large and small, achieved by the individuals we serve. A first trip to the gym on a path toward self-improvement. A toddler taking their first steps. Someone joining a group activity they once avoided. A new friendship forming. These moments matter, and they deserve to be recognized.

We invite you to share these wins with us so we can celebrate them together. To submit an entry for *Celebrating Wins*, follow this link: ([Submit a Win!](#)), tell us about the individual's achievement, and upload a photo if available and if a signed photo release is on file.

As we step into a new year, let's start a new tradition of recognizing the accomplishments of those we serve. Together, let's celebrate every step toward connecting people and potential!

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## Social Media Highlights

You know, you don't have to wait until Thrive comes out to see some great photos of the individuals we serve from all over the country! Follow us on social media, just search Benchmark Human Services on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [LinkedIn](#). Also, if you would like to share any photos you've taken of or with the individuals in your area on social media, please add them to the new [Social Media Upload](#) form on the Intranet.





## Staff Bring a New Vision to Lima Day Services Site

In November, Benchmark opened a new Day Services site in Lima, Ohio, after the program outgrew its existing building. Prior to moving in, the Northwest Ohio team was given the opportunity to suggest modifications to the space.

Director Ryan Knodel said leadership welcomed the boots-on-the-ground expertise of the program team when imagining the new environment. “These are the staff who work side-by-side with the people we support each day. We wanted to ensure the new space would be conducive to serving people well, so we asked the team, ‘What should this look like?’” The team suggested thoughtful and practical modifications and design features, such as slip-resistant floors, accessible sinks, adjustable kitchen workspaces to accommodate wheelchair users, multiple sensory and quiet areas, and more.

“Both the individuals we serve and the staff love the new location,” Knodel said. “It’s warm, welcoming, and intentionally designed to meet a wide range of needs. The staff truly knocked it out of the park!”



## We Show Up: Leston's Story

Last fall, we had an opportunity to share an Active Consulting success story at a national conference. Leston is an individual who received services from Benchmark's Active Consulting program in Arkansas. Prior to his involvement in this program, Leston spent 130 days in jail following a property destruction incident.

Through a collaboration between Summit Community Care, St. Francis Area Developmental Center, and Benchmark Human Services, Leston is now enjoying life in the community. Congratulations to everyone on the Arkansas team, and thank you for everything you do to connect people and potential! [Watch his story.](#)



**Click to Watch Leston's Story**  
<https://youtu.be/iBsYXu-yGIM>

## Our Benchmark Story - Closing 65 Years of Stories

Thank you to everyone who joined us in celebrating 65 Years of Stories. In case you missed it, check out a recap of last year's celebration campaign in the [video below](#).



## Promotions

Below is a list of employees who were promoted in October, November, and December and the position to which they were promoted. Congratulations to all!

### **Delaware**

Michael Berkley, Residential Manager

### **Georgia**

Elizabeth Cavender, Licensed Clinical Staff  
Rebecca Toth, Regional Director  
Sheree Telfair, Crisis Homes Director

### **Indiana**

Amanda Hensley, Team Leader  
Angel Thomas, Program Coordinator  
Anne Santos, Riding Instructor  
Brianna Alt, Day Program Coordinator  
Gunnar Matthews, Team Leader  
Haylee Eaton, Supported Living Supervisor

Lisa Hendrix, Industrial Operations Team Lead 3

Michael Anderson, Activities Coordinator  
Michael Cross, Supported Living Supervisor  
Nerak Huffman, Team Leader  
Ornella Kashala, Client Financial Specialist  
Samantha Bryant, Program Coordinator  
Tiffany Richardson, Supported Living Manager

Vanessa Tonkel, Activities Coordinator

### **Maryland**

Mary Briggeman, Activities Coordinator

**Montana**

Ashley Neymeyer, House Manager  
Daniel Prevedel, Team Leader  
James Gregg, Team Leader  
Megaan Wilke, House Manager

**New Jersey**

Brianna White, Team Leader  
John F. Kabah, Team Leader  
Mildred Davis, Team Leader

**Ohio**

Besty Meyer, Team Leader

## Milestones

Thrive honors employee hire anniversaries for January, February, and March celebrating those who have worked at Benchmark for five years and longer.

Aliyah Armstead - 5	Valerie Biamby - 5	Lemlem Fijachew - 6
Ana Gutierrez Solano - 5	Vanesha Brown - 5	Mary Torok - 6
Angela Wilson - 5	Wing Yan Plomitallo - 5	Melissa Knickerbocker - 6
Arzola Winston - 5	Akofa Makolle - 6	Melissa Robusto - 6
Brandon Kern - 5	Alisha Key - 6	Nicole Tucker - 6
Catherine Conner - 5	Amanda Michel - 6	Precious Snipes - 6
Chandler Scott - 5	Amanda Nelson Reid - 6	Quantry Harris - 6
Christopher Hollis - 5	Amanda Scully - 6	Samuel Kuria - 6
Deanna Douglas-Moore - 5	Amy Barnett - 6	Sharnice Williams - 6
Destiny Nichols - 5	Amy Demore - 6	Shelisa Fikes - 6
Edward Baker - 5	Amy Rumpf - 6	Tiera Norton - 6
Elijah Nyoro - 5	April Silverman - 6	Valerie Church - 6
Felicia Jackson - 5	Armah Gray - 6	Abby Roebuck - 7
Habsa Sileymane - 5	Asa Lowder - 6	Aisha Jefferys - 7
Ivory Moore - 5	Beth Meyers - 6	Albert Crumbley - 7
Jacob Owusu - 5	Bhalchandra Joshi - 6	Caroline Herman - 7
Kathleen Collins - 5	Catherine Piterski - 6	Connie Nicholson - 7
Kathy Currington - 5	Christopher Rollins - 6	Corey King - 7
Kelly Johnson - 5	Daniel Beights - 6	Deborah Meacham - 7
Larry Fields - 5	Dawn Bedford - 6	Femi Oshin - 7
Marie Ellis - 5	Debora Nugent - 6	Haley Seeley - 7
Marisa Mercuri - 5	Deborah McCrary - 6	Kebrina Salisbury - 7
Meredith Starks - 5	Dymon Coachman - 6	LaToya Bostic - 7
Mikaya Watts - 5	Eric Schlueter - 6	Lisa Howle - 7
Nicole Yaunches - 5	Gregg McGinnis - 6	Mary Njomo - 7
Patricia Ikenwe - 5	Gregory Ungemach - 6	MyQuell Warfield - 7
Paul Vanlue - 5	Hannah Matthews - 6	Paula Pike - 7
Quade Houston - 5	Hazel Ogunlade - 6	Rhonda Keeney - 7
Raphael Gathuru - 5	Jessica Umber Williams - 6	Semika Roach - 7
Ronald Fowler - 5	Joan Wall - 6	Shannon McGlynn - 7
Shirley Mann - 5	Judy Chege - 6	Timothy Stewart - 7
Stephanie Jefferson - 5	Kenneth Ennals - 6	Angela Smith - 8
Tara Strahm - 5	Leah Safley - 6	Ayesha Thomas - 8

Barbara Walden - 8	Latonya Elliott - 10	Dedria Handerson - 14
Charlotte Ellis - 8	Lorry Augustin - 10	Erika Moore - 14
Hellen Waruingi - 8	Maria Hainline - 10	Jeremy Wimbley - 14
Jared Bess - 8	Michaela Jan Carpenter - 10	Kimberly Leal - 14
Jennifer Imlay - 8	Sharday Mabins - 10	Orlando Wash - 14
Kara Emery - 8	Tanisha Colon - 10	Rosita Stewart - 14
Kendra Butler - 8	Traveon Stevenson - 10	Ruth Bates - 14
Kristina Fought - 8	Tyree McCreight - 10	Sycilla Smith - 14
Laura Christiaens - 8	Adriana Garcia - 11	Tammy Carroll - 14
Lauren Lloyd - 8	Ami Clancy - 11	Alocia Robertson - 15
Nadine Sims - 8	Andrew Harris - 11	Angela Honshell - 15
Nazaire Nicolas - 8	Barbara Lane - 11	Anthony Bryant - 15
Patience Stewart - 8	Christine Sellers - 11	Benjamin Harrison - 15
Penny Fawbush - 8	Deandra Burnett - 11	Debra Williams - 15
Rose Filteau - 8	Dymond Davis - 11	Julie Heiges - 15
Stella Carlson - 8	Elizabeth Hohman - 11	Rasheda Patterson - 15
Vicky Bollinger - 8	Heather Macbeth - 11	Susan Brown - 15
April Evans - 9	Irene Omboga - 11	Andrew Baden - 16
Balinda Fonner - 9	John Miller - 11	Casey Lolmaugh - 16
Donald Oshiomah - 9	Karen Bischoff - 11	Douglas Houser - 16
Dorianne Schmidt - 9	Lacesha Jeffers - 11	Laine Muston - 16
Geoffrey Avery - 9	Linda Powers - 11	Stacy Christopher - 16
Jacqueline Hightower - 9	Pamela Parker - 11	Ann Williams - 17
Jamaal Sanders - 9	Rachael Nelson - 11	Harold Eagleson - 17
Jamal Green - 9	Steven Bright - 11	Lucy Ngwenya - 17
Jeffrey Frady - 9	Tedwick Theodore - 11	Theresa Prentice - 17
Kaia Zelt - 9	April Clerkley - 12	Jill Tatalovich - 18
Kathryn Wilkinson - 9	David Herrmann Sedano - 12	Rhonda McAuley - 18
Kelli Saine - 9	Deaundra Lewis - 12	Rosalind McCall - 18
Kezia Jackson - 9	Doug Beebe - 12	Shawn Fields - 18
Ryan Haley - 9	Jeremy Joyner - 12	Jennifer Smith - 19
Sean McCaulay - 9	Lateachca Carswell - 12	Justin Tucker - 19
Sheila Canada - 9	Stacie Fitzgerald - 12	Kim Stephens - 19
Taneka Borders - 9	William Exner - 12	Tyaan Winn - 19
Taylor Berg - 9	Cawanna Wadley - 13	Yared Belew - 19
Tracee Smith - 9	Jonathan Rushton - 13	Kathy Thorson - 20
Afolabi Ogunbowale - 10	Joseph Gootee - 13	Kimberly Larson - 20
Alandra Stroud - 10	Kathleen Manegre - 13	Nathan Heimann - 20
Brandon Riley - 10	Keith Miller - 13	George Sewell - 21
Cheryl Bilbrey - 10	Laurie Heckman - 13	Julius Kerkula - 21
Christa Raines - 10	Melissa Shaw - 13	Clara Chibweya - 22
Craig Whonsetler - 10	Nikki Cotterman - 13	Courtney Heiser - 23
Dimitris Katsaounis - 10	Ragna Urberg - 13	Kelly Stahl - 23
Jacqueline Shuppert - 10	Renee Broughton - 13	Timothy Cline - 23
James Bain - 10	Tondaleah Eversole - 13	Joyce Wright - 27
Karen Agaiby-Mena - 10	Belinda Christensen - 14	Todd Staszak - 30
Kevie Thomas - 10		Curlie Young - 36
Lakeshia Horne - 10		