



NEWSLETTER

FALL 2024

IN THE ISSUE:
*Business Partner Receives
Iowa Employer Award*



LIVING OUR MISSION

Connecting people, creating opportunities, and nurturing growth since 1957.

WWW.EPISERVICE.ORG

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ABOUT US

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SARA DRISH
Human Resources Director

NICOLE ERICSON
Community Development Director

MARY JANSSEN
Children & Family Services Director

BONNIE KIPPER
Community Services Director

KATIE SLADE
Executive Director

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BW Collective

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scan here
TO VIEW A COPY OF OUR
LATEST COMMUNITY REPORT



Here at EPI, our mission is to provide high-quality, person-centered services that empower individuals with differing abilities to live fulfilling and independent lives. We are constantly striving to improve our services and ensure that we meet the needs and expectations of those we serve - and of the important people in their lives. To continue delivering the best possible care, we need your input!

Why Your Feedback Matters

Your feedback is invaluable to us. Whether you are someone we serve, family member, caregiver, or community partner, your insights help us understand what we're doing well and where we can improve. By sharing your experiences and suggestions, you play a crucial role in shaping the future of our services and ensuring that we continue to provide the highest standard of care.

To better understand how we're doing, we'd like to hear your thoughts on several key areas:

- **Quality of Services:** How satisfied are you with the quality of services provided by our team? Are there specific areas where we excel, or areas where we could improve?
- **Communication:** How well do we communicate with you or your loved one? Are you receiving the information you need in a timely and clear manner? Are there ways we can enhance our communication?
- **Service Accessibility:** Are our services easily accessible to you or your loved one?

Do you feel that we offer enough resources and support to meet your needs?

- **Programs and Activities:** Are the programs and activities we offer engaging and beneficial? What types of programs would you like to see more of in the future?

Watch your Mail (& email)!

We've made it easy for you to share your feedback with us. Our survey is quick, easy to fill out, and gives you the opportunity to provide detailed responses. Scan the QR code below if we don't already have your email.

What We'll Do With Your Feedback

Your feedback will be carefully reviewed by our team to identify areas for improvement and celebrate the aspects of our services that are working well. We're committed to transparency, so we'll share our findings with you and outline any changes or improvements we plan to make as a result of your input (stay tuned to our electronic news and printed newsletter for updates).



We are deeply grateful for your trust in us and for taking the time to share your feedback. Your insights are essential in helping us grow, evolve, and continue providing the highest quality services. Together, we can create a supportive and empowering environment for everyone we serve. We look forward to hearing from you!

KATIE'S CORNER

CATCH THE LATEST NEWS FROM OUR
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, **KATIE SLADE.**





ADVOCATING TODAY FOR A BETTER TOMORROW BY MAGHAN BOWMAN

Though the election season is over, our advocacy work is only just beginning. We believe, by supporting the rights and needs of individuals with disabilities, we're working not only for a more inclusive society today but also for a brighter, more accessible future.

EPI is a member of a national trade association American Network of Community Options and Resources (ANCOR). They've recently released an advocacy toolkit called Amplifier, to help step up our advocacy efforts.

This Amplifier initiative embodies our commitment to a brighter future by equipping advocates, families, and professionals with easy-to-use tools to inspire systemic improvements.

The Importance of Advocacy in Disability Services

Advocacy is about giving a voice to those who need it most and ensuring equitable opportunities in all aspects of life, from healthcare to education, employment, and

community living. When we advocate for disability rights, we break down barriers, challenge stigmas, and push for policies that support independence and self-determination.

Amplifying the Message


By providing access to data, stories, and strategies through this toolkit, we empower the people we support, their families, our staff and advocates to connect with legislators, engage with the public, and promote policies that prioritize the rights of individuals with disabilities.

Key Areas of Focus

- 1. Policy Advocacy:** Effective advocacy often starts with policy. From Medicaid funding to employment opportunities, advocacy efforts push for legislation that benefits individuals with disabilities.
- 2. Community Support:** Disability advocates work closely with communities to promote inclusion and accessibility, ensuring that people with disabilities have the support needed to live independently and participate fully in their communities.

 **LIKE US ON SOCIAL MEDIA!**
Just by following us, liking, commenting or sharing our posts you help EPI engage with others!

 **SIGN UP FOR OUR EMAIL NEWSLETTER**
Stay up to date on the latest happenings around EPI. Scan the QR code below!

 **SEND US YOUR EMAIL**
If we don't currently have your email, we'd love to! Send an email with your info by scanning the QR code below.

3. Awareness and Education: Public perception and understanding are crucial. Education campaigns within the Amplifier initiative help to dismantle misconceptions and encourage widespread acceptance and support for people with disabilities.

How You Can Help

Advocacy is a community effort, and each of us can play a role. Whether you're reaching out to policymakers, educating others about disability rights, or simply amplifying stories of those impacted by advocacy efforts, every action counts. By supporting these initiatives, you contribute to a future where everyone, regardless of ability, can thrive.

Areas to Watch

The following initiatives are the areas we can take action on through the toolkit providing us with messages and contact information.

- Ask Your Representatives to Recognize Direct Support Professionals
- Advocate for the HCBS Relief Act: Strengthen Community Services
- Ask Congress to End the SSI Savings Penalty!

- Support the Disability Community Act!
- DOL Overtime Rule Action Center
- DSPs Take Action: Urge Congress to Acknowledge DSP Profession!

Looking Ahead

As we advocate today, we're building a society that respects and celebrates diversity, equity and inclusion. With continued advocacy, we can look forward to a world where every person has equal access to the support they need and the opportunities they deserve.

Scan the QR code to follow along with us and begin advocating today!





EPI BUSINESS PARTNER RECEIVES IOWA EMPLOYER AWARD BY NICOLE ERICSON

Melanie Zimmerman, Manager at the Village Inn in Cedar Falls, Iowa, is a shining example of leadership in disability inclusion in the workplace. Recently recognized with the Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE) Iowa Employer Award, Melanie's dedication to creating a welcoming, supportive, and empowering environment has had a profound impact on her employees, Village Inn, and the broader community. Her journey highlights the power of inclusive employment and the ways in which commitment to accessibility can reshape workplaces.

Surrounded by EPI team members who gathered to share a meal and celebrate this prestigious honor, Melanie holds her award. The inscription reads, *"For the passionate and endless effort to increase inclusive employment for Iowans with disabilities."*

For Melanie, inclusion goes beyond hiring; it's about building a culture that values each person's abilities. She has committed to hiring and retaining individuals with disabilities, fostering a team at the Village Inn that mirrors the diversity of Cedar Falls

itself. Under her guidance, Village Inn has become a model workplace for disability inclusion, proving that diverse teams are stronger, more resilient, and a benefit to everyone involved.

Melanie's impact on the workplace is evident in the culture she's built. Through training and open communication, she has established a work environment that prioritizes mutual respect and understanding. This inclusive culture not only makes employees feel valued but also encourages them to give their best, knowing that their contributions are both appreciated and supported.

One of Melanie's coworkers, Becky, shares while proudly displaying her one year pin, **"I celebrated one whole year here and I love it."**



Becky has enjoyed getting to know her coworkers, and one of her favorite memories with them, she shared, was the Christmas party her work team hosted at local arcade, where she challenged friends to ski ball, ate

CHILD CARE SPOTS AVAILABLE!

The Hawkeye Child Development Center - ALC is a program of EPI offering care to children from infant through preschool age.

Located downtown:
120 Jefferson Street
Waterloo, IA 50701

Open Monday through
Friday: **6:30 AM - 5:30 PM**

Scan the QR code on the right to find more info online at www.episervice.org!



some delicious pizza, and shared laughs with new friends - one friend being the very ride that got her there and home that night.

What truly sets Melanie apart is her dedication to understanding and supporting the individual needs of her team members. She works closely with each person to learn their strengths, challenges, and career aspirations.

By offering reasonable accommodations and flexible scheduling, she creates an environment where each employee can thrive, grow, and achieve their goals. This person-centered approach has had a transformative effect on her employees, giving them the chance to enjoy financial independence, a sense of purpose, and a welcoming workplace.

However, Melanie's efforts resonate far beyond the walls of Village Inn. Her commitment to inclusion has earned her the admiration of both customers and community members who value diversity in local businesses. Village Inn has become a symbol of how one person's leadership can create ripples of positive change, inspiring others to recognize the

talents and contributions of individuals with disabilities.

Receiving the APSE Iowa Employer Award is a fitting tribute to Melanie Zimmerman's exceptional dedication to disability inclusion in employment. Her proactive, person-centered approach serves as an inspiration, demonstrating how a supportive work environment benefits not just employees but the entire community. With leaders like Melanie, we're reminded that inclusive workplaces lead to a brighter, more compassionate future for everyone.

Congratulations, Melanie, on this well-deserved recognition—your commitment is paving the way for a better tomorrow.

If you're inspired by Melanie's story to join our ever-growing list of business partners, reach out today by scanning the QR code below or by giving us a call at 319-232-6671.





EXCEPTIONAL PEOPLE, MAKING EXCEPTIONAL STRIDES BY SARA DRISH

In case you missed what's been happening with our staff recently, it's time to take a moment to celebrate their exceptional accomplishments.

Honoring our Direct Support Professionals

First, we celebrated all 155 of our Direct Support Professionals (DSPs) during DSP Recognition Week in September. Twelve of these DSPs were specially honored for going above and beyond, earning a place in the Five Star Club. Here are some of their achievements:

- **Chloe** for her innovation in helping individuals achieve their goals.
- **Mike** for advocating to secure a safer, more suitable job for someone he supports.
- **Nulee** for being a great representative of EPI at volunteer sites.
- **Stephanie** for her encouragement of others to try new things.
- **Meka** for her creativity in connecting those we serve with their communities.
- **Jackie** for her dedication to meeting each person's goals.

- **Danielle** for providing constant comfort for those she supports.
- **Kaylee** for her willingness to go the extra mile - ensuring the best quality of life for everyone.
- **Rachael** for her focus on building strong community relationships.
- **Chris** for consistently putting the people she supports first.
- **Colin** for eagerly jumping in and thriving within his new role at the Virtual Connection Center.
- **Gisela** for her self-starting attitude and leadership.

Celebrating Leadership and Excellence

Join us in congratulating, **Maghan Bowman**, EPI's Executive Operations Director, on her election to the Board of Representatives of the American Network of Community Options and Resources (ANCOR).

Our employment services team also shined at the recent statewide Iowa Association of People Supporting Employment First (APSE) conference:

- **Trista Higuera** was nominated for the Advocacy Award for her dedication to supporting those she serves.



EXCEPTIONAL EMPLOYEES

Did you know? EPI employs close to 300 individuals! Roughly 55% of our workforce are Direct Support Professionals (DSP).



SEVEN-TIME EMPLOYER OF CHOICE

EPI is a seven-time recipient of the Courier's Top 20 Employers of Choice. Our latest award was in 2023!



CAREER OPPORTUNITIES

When you work at EPI you're working to make the world a better place - starting right here in the Cedar Valley. Scan the QR below to apply today!

- Two individuals served by EPI's employment team were nominated for Personal Achievement Awards for their incredible progress in securing and maintaining employment in the community.
- **Lindsay McDermott** received the Professional Award for her tireless dedication to advancing the Employment First initiatives, to EPI, her team, and those served by EPI and throughout the Cedar Valley area.

Welcoming New Talent and Honoring Long-Standing Dedication

We're thrilled to welcome Jennifer Quigley, our new Program Manager, who brings extensive experience in disability services.

Recently, we celebrated several milestone anniversaries with EPI.

Celebrating 10 years:

- **Bethany Giachino**
- **Philip Gillott**
- **Esther Meuer-Valtchev**
- **Rachael Tyler**

Celebrating 20 years:

- **Megan Henning**

Celebrating 25 years:

- **Bobbie Schmidt**

A Heartfelt Thank You

We're consistently inspired by the dedication of our 300 staff members. If you'd like to recognize an exceptional team member or share our opportunities with someone you think would be a great fit, scan the QR code below.

Thank you to each and every one of our staff members for your exceptional work.





TRUE COMMUNITY CONNECTION BY BONNIE KIPPER

As Preston sat at a picnic table outside of the Sunrise Petting Zoo, he smiled, looking over at the goats he feeds each week, and said, **"I love my community."**

Preston has taken part in many of EPI's various programs and services over the past 15 years, and now, he spends his time volunteering at many different local nonprofit organizations, as well as attending various community activities and events.

All people wish to feel connected to their community, and My Life, My Way was implemented by EPI as a way to help persons feel even more connected through many different volunteer opportunities and community activities and events. EPI focuses on giving each individual the freedom to choose what they do with their day while offering opportunities to take part in all that this community has to offer.

Some common places that persons can choose to volunteer include the Salvation Army, the Northeast Iowa Food Bank, House of Hope, and Preston's personal

favorite, the Sunrise Petting Zoo. Other community activities and events most often chosen include wellness classes, sporting events, rodeos, bowling, festivals, or simply spending time with friends. The opportunities are endless.

Preston spends most of his days volunteering, with one of his favorite tasks being taking care of and feeding the goats.

When asked about Preston's growth over the time she has known him, staff member Rachael stated, **"Preston has really come out of his shell. He used to be really shy, and now he introduces himself to others and makes conversation with anyone."**

Why is My Life, My Way important to the people we serve? With over 1,000 activities a month offered through My Life, My Way, donations and grants from our community and its members help EPI connect persons served with their community, empowering them to choose how they want to spend their day, and hopefully helping them to gain confidence and come out of their shells, just like Preston.

MY25/MAINSTAY

Changing our eating habits gets us closer to sustainable good health. Our experience using My25/Mainstay with our staff and persons

served has resulted in persons moving towards their ideal healthy weight and a reduction in preventable health medications. My25/Mainstay isn't a

diet - rather it provides nutritional resources and tools to enhance weight management, mealtime habits, and independent skills.

CONNECTING FAMILIES TO QUALITY CHILD CARE

by Mary Janssen

Child care isn't just about finding a safe place for children while parents work—it's about creating environments where children can learn, grow, and thrive. Access to high-quality child care sets the stage for a child's long-term success, and choosing the right provider is an essential decision for families.

That's why, Iowa becomes the first state to adopt an online child care search tool allowing families to find quality child care along the way by entering routes.

Whether you're wanting to look for care near home, work, or any stops along the way - you can customize your search based on your family's needs using an interactive map displaying providers with current openings.

Follow these three simple steps:

1. Enter Your Location: Start by entering your city, zip code, or county to find providers nearby.

2. Filter Your Search: Customize your search by selecting filters such as the type of care (center-based or in-home), age group, hours of operation, and transportation options.

3. Explore Results: Browse detailed information about each provider, including their licensing status, capacity, contact details, and even "favorite" providers to see side-by-side comparisons!

The tool also connects families to additional resources, including information about financial assistance programs, provider quality ratings, and steps to enroll your child.

Find additional search information and a short video on how to use the Child Care Search tool by scanning the QR code to be taken to <https://childcaresearch.iowa.gov>.





ACHIEVING CHAD'S DREAM BY BETHANY GIACHINO

While sitting in one of his favorite spots - outside on the patio - Chad smiled, looked around and shared, **“I moved here in July. I really enjoy living on my own.”**

It's the first time someone places a set of keys in your hand, the first box you unpack in effort to make your place feel like a home. For many, this feeling happens soon after graduating school. For Chad, it came 34 years later.

Taking in the huge milestone, we sat outside celebrating the accomplishments and relationships he's made while living independently. There's a house cat named Bella who enjoys sitting on Chad's patio set. They often sit out there together while he plays classic hits on his radio.

We met his neighbor to the right; she has two dogs he introduced us to. She's also the owner of a beautiful garden he likes to admire from his favorite spot on the patio.

We watched as Chad spoke with his neighbor about her in-home child care activities she had planned. She shared

the kids were going to learn about fish that week and Chad excitedly began sharing stories from fishing with his dad when he was young. These memories sound like it might be where his love for classic hits came from.

Chad has become friends with many of his neighbors but one special memory is a moment he'll never forget.

It was the day he mustered up the courage to knock on door of his neighbor on the left. They said "hello" in passing many times but this time he wanted to invite her over for lunch.

When she accepted his invitation, he began preparing and cooking the meal for them. Their conversations over this shared meal he had prepared, turned into a discovery of similar hobbies.

Chad was so excited to find someone who also enjoyed bowling! Since lunch that day, bowling together on Tuesday nights has become a tradition.

OUR MISSION

Connecting people, creating opportunities, and nurturing growth since 1957.

So, why did it take 34 years for Chad to achieve his dream?

Due to Chad's disability, he faced several barriers to living alone. Over time, with services from EPI, he mastered many skills needed for independent living. And still, his team felt he needed staff present "just in case"... just in case a stove was left on after cooking lunch for a neighbor or in case of an emergency.

Donations and grants from our community and its members have helped EPI develop technology enabled services where virtual staff are available "just in case."

For example, if Chad were to fall, the technology in his home would alert staff, and within minutes, someone could be dispatched to assist. That virtual staff Chad connects with - by a mere push of a button - are just down the road in the Cedar Valley.

Chad's story is just one example of how we deliver life-changing services to those who need them most in our community.

OUR VISION

Working together we will realize a future where all people are recognized and valued – encouraged and supported to live, work, and grow – in their communities.

OUR VALUES

- People
- Stewardship
- Creative Cooperation
- Integrity

We believe every individual, regardless of their abilities, deserves the opportunity to live a fulfilling life with support to gain greater independence.

Currently, we have 19.8% of supported community living homes enhanced with tech enabled services.

Scan the QR code below if you are interested in learning more about this topic or want to follow along as we continue to expand.





SPREADING HOLIDAY CHEER THROUGH THE GIVING TREE TRADITION BY MADI MONTROSS

As the holiday season approaches, it's a time to reflect on gratitude and think about how we can lend a helping hand to those around us - especially here in our community. During times of uncertainty, one thing remains constant: the steadfast, strong-willed human spirit that shines brightly within all of us at EPI and beyond.

This year, we're excited to continue a cherished tradition with our annual EPI Giving Tree event, running now through December 20. **This season, there are 338 needs for 99 individuals we support**, each representing a meaningful opportunity to make someone's holiday a little brighter.

The Story Behind the EPI Giving Tree

The Giving Tree tradition began over 15 years ago with a simple mission: to meet modest needs of the individuals served by EPI - needs that might otherwise go unmet. By fulfilling a need on the Giving Tree, you provide someone with a gift to open during the holiday season, bringing

a touch of joy to those who may not otherwise receive one because they or their families do not have the means.

Be a Part of the Giving Tree Tradition

Helping out is simple and impactful. Here are a few ways to join in:

Browse the Wish Lists: We have four Giving Tree wish lists, each filled with items that can make a real difference. You can review these lists, select the gifts you'd like to purchase, and complete your checkout. During checkout, be sure to select "Exceptional Persons, Inc." as the shipping address (it should appear as an option) to ensure the gift is delivered directly to us for distribution.

Local Purchases: More interested in supporting local businesses? You can! If you'd like to purchase an item locally rather than through the wish lists, just fill out the form found on our website to claim the item. This way, it will be removed from the wish lists and reserved for you to shop independently.



PLANNED GIVING

Please include the Exceptional Persons Foundation in your will and estate planning to ensure EPI services live on forever.



QUALIFIED CHARITABLE DISTRIBUTIONS

Consult with your financial advisor on how to make a tax free donation to EPI as part of your IRA required minimum distribution!



WANT TO MAKE A DONATION?

Your generosity means so much - thank you! Donations allow us to fulfill our mission when other funding runs short. We accept donations anytime. Visit us online at www.episervice.org.

Make a Cash Donation: Not sure what to get? You can also contribute by making a cash donation. Simply designate your donation for "Giving Tree," and we'll handle the shopping to fulfill someone's holiday wishes.



Regardless of how you'd like to help out, get started by scanning the QR code found here. This will take you to our Giving Tree page with more information on those who will be receiving your generous gifts.

What Are Some of the Items Requested?

The Giving Tree wish lists include essentials and some simple comforts. Needs range from warm winter coats, socks, and shoes, to household basics like pots, pans, and cleaning supplies for individuals moving into their first apartments. Some have asked for books or movies to enjoy during quiet moments, while others look forward to receiving practical items that will help them throughout the year. Each gift fulfills

a real need, bringing warmth and joy to someone's holiday.

Special Thanks to Our Community Partners and Tree Hosts

A heartfelt thank you goes out to our community partners who are hosting Giving Trees at their offices: *PDCM, Veridian Fiscal Solutions, Discerning Wealth, Truck Center Companies, and Lee Wealth Management*. Your support and generosity help us make the season brighter for so many.

We're grateful for everyone who has helped sustain this tradition, and we're excited to see the kindness and generosity of our extended EPI family once again. With each fulfilled need, we come together to make the season warmer, brighter, and full of hope.

Happy Holidays to all, and thank you for being part of this wonderful tradition!



As 2024 comes to a close, we at EPI are reflecting on the many milestones reached this year - all made possible by the unwavering support of our incredible community. Thanks to your generosity and dedication, we've been able to continue our mission of serving individuals in need, fostering greater independence, and creating opportunities for a brighter future.

Your steadfast commitment to our work inspires us every day and fuels our ability to deliver high-quality services to those who rely on us. However, the need for support remains greater than ever, and your help is crucial to bridging gaps when other funding falls short.

By making a year-end contribution to the Exceptional Persons, Inc., you can ensure that individuals in your community have access to vital resources and support that empowers them to thrive.

GIVING A YEAR-END GIFT HAS ITS BENEFITS **BY MADI MONTROSS**

Here's How You Can Make a Difference Before the End of the Year:

- **Give a Gift Online:** Scan the QR code found below to make a secure donation online at www.episervice.org
- **Mail a Check:** Send in a check before December 31st to the address below:

Exceptional Persons Foundation
PO Box 4090
Waterloo, IA 50704
- **Take advantage of IRA tax benefits:** If you're 70½ or older, you can make a qualified charitable distribution (QCD) directly from your IRA. This allows you to give without treating the distribution as taxable income. Be sure to speak with your financial advisor to learn more about this giving option.

If you have any questions, please reach out to someone within our Development team at 319-232-6671.



PLANNED GIVING

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QUALIFIED CHARITABLE DISTRIBUTIONS

Consult with your financial advisor on how to make a tax free donation to EPI as part of your IRA required minimum distribution!



WANT TO MAKE A DONATION?

Your generosity means so much - thank you! Donations allow us to fulfill our mission when other funding runs short. We accept donations anytime. Visit us online at www.episervice.org.

Your generosity ensures that EPI can continue restoring and enhancing critical services for those who need them most. Together, we can make an even greater impact in the coming year.

From our EPI family to yours, we wish you a joyful holiday season and a healthy, happy New Year!

A HEARTFELT THANK YOU

As we draw near to the end of the holiday season, we want to take a moment to express our deepest gratitude to everyone who made this year's Giving Tree another success.

Many thanks to the incredible support from our staff, board members, family members, community, and beyond.

A special thank you goes out to the businesses who hosted Giving Trees in their offices: *PDCM, Veridian Fiscal Solutions, Discerning Wealth, Lee Wealth Management, Truck Center Companies, and International Paper.*

Your unwavering generosity and partnership played a key role in ensuring the season was brighter for those we serve.

Your support goes beyond providing holiday cheer - it helps meet vital needs and fosters a sense of belonging and hope. The kindness shown by our community ensures that the people we serve not only enjoy a wonderful holiday season but also benefit from these necessities for years to come.

We're continually inspired by the generosity of our extended EPI family and the compassion shown toward those in need. Together, we've sustained this meaningful tradition for over 15 years, and each year, the Giving Tree reminds us of the power of community.

Thank you for making this holiday season warmer, brighter, and full of hope. We look forward to continuing this tradition of kindness and giving in the years to come. From all of us at EPI, we wish you a happy and healthy New Year!

Exceptional Persons, Inc.
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ELECTRONIC SERVICE REQUESTED



OUR MISSION

Connecting people, *creating* opportunities, and *nurturing* growth since 1957.



OUR VISION FOR TOMORROW

Working together we will realize a future where all people are recognized and valued – encouraged and supported to live, work, and grow – in their communities.



QUESTIONS?

Contact our Senior Communications Specialist, Bethany Giachino, with any questions about our newsletter at bethany.giachino@episervice.org.

STAY UP TO DATE

Our goal is to stay in close contact with you by sending out bi-weekly email communications to help keep you informed.

Scan the QR code below to visit <https://bit.ly/43cayBk> and sign up online to receive our latest news faster than twice a year!

