CEO OF LIFE'S WORC

express their feelings, ideas and even criticisms," Billia says of the importance of DSPs. "We need to ask our direct support professionals, the people in the trenches, how we are doing. What could we be doing better? What are we doing well?"

Billia and Koufakis have a good working relationship. His background in finance helps him to be mindful of the bottom line. Koufakis is always looking at ways to make lives better and more fulfilling for the people they support.

"We want to continue to grow our programs," Koufakis explains. "We also want to better handle our aging populations in the homes. We are in a hiring crisis, not just at Life's WORC, but across the state, across the nation. We also need to look at how the people we support are treated when they walk into the hospital or a doctor's office."

Billia is a boots-on-the-ground CEO and complements the vision for the future set out by Koufakis and the board of Life's WORC. He wants the right employees in the right jobs to make their visions reality.

"If everyone gives 100 percent, and can always be mindful of how what we are doing affects the people we support, we can accomplish all the things we need, reach all the goals we set," he says.

Koufakis also has her sights set on the goals the people they support set for themselves. One in particular which is dear to her heart: job skills and employment opportunities.

"While not all of the people we support may be capable of holding a job, we want them to build confidence and lead a productive and purposeful life," Lynne Koufakis says.

In fall of 2024, WORC Force will open Long Island's largest job skills center for those with disabilities, offering training in 15 different career options including car detailing, food service and catering, computer training, retail, and hospitality, at a 24,000-square-foot facility in Garden City. This state-of-the-art facility will both train those who are interested in getting a job and those who simply wish to learn new skills. It also will include training in how to prepare a resume, interview skills, and how to dress for success. The facility will also offer fitness and recreational programs.

Life's WORC has been a leader in getting the public to re-evaluate its notion

CEO Michael Billia connects with members of the nursing staff who work for the Garden City-headquartered Life's WORC. They are, from left, Cheyenne Fuller-Prawl, Tracey Campbell, Melina Madaia, Lori Smith and Jennifer Gillen. Standing, Vice President of Development and Public Affairs Tina Moreno, Ize Akhigbe, Billia, Melika Charles and Katherine Hoskins.

Gov. Kathy Hochul, left, and Life's WORC Board Chair Lynne Koufakis.

of those who have intellectual and behavioral disabilities. Through outreach, public events and positive media coverage, Life's WORC has endeavored to show the public that those they support are capable of much more than the outdated notion of what a "special-needs" person can do. This includes the range of jobs they can master as well as the ability to self-advocate and to make choices about what they want in life.

Koufakis, who recently was invited to join New York State's Developmental Disabilities Advisory Council, says that public perception and partnering with elected officials and corporate partners are part of Life's WORC's formula for success.

"Nothing happens overnight," she says, "but if you don't work together, nothing will happen. We have to all work together if we want to get things done: lawmakers, organizations, parents and the private sector."

She is confident that as the public develops more understanding of the people Life's WORC supports, there will be more acceptance, and with acceptance will come more assistance.

"More understanding will show in the way they are treated, the way they are viewed," Koufakis says. Life's WORC's outreach has included inviting Jets players to its Christmas party for autistic adults and staff, giving Gov. Kathy Hochul and other elected officials a tour of facilities and programs, and even inviting WABC-TV's Chantee Lans to one of the residential programs to celebrate Thanksgiving.

"Honestly, the best part of my job is working with all the exceptional people in the agency and being part of such an incredible family," says Billia, who also takes the supervision of staff seriously. "My favorite quote is from Simon Sinek: 'Leadership is not about being in charge, it's about care of those in your charge.'"

As all the pieces come together, Koufakis and Billia believe they will not just meet, but exceed their goals.

"We are looking forward to expanding our bandwidth and creating more community-based centers that will embrace all skill levels," Billia says. "Our aim is to help the people we support create the best life they want to live."

PARTNER CONTENT

Former NY Jets Robert "Bobby" Jackson, left, and Marvin Washington brought the holiday cheer during the Christmas celebration for autistic individuals supported by Life's WORC, along with some special guests.