



**UNITED WAY**  
Central Jersey

# **2024 REPORT TO THE COMMUNITY**



# LEADERSHIP LETTER



**The United Way of Central Jersey (UWCJ) Board of Trustees and staff** are pleased to share this report on our services for the community. In 2024, we provided preventive, evidence-based services for over 11,000 community residents, prioritizing young children and their families. Our services are informed by research proving that positive early childhood development directly affects children's health, social and economic outcomes along with building the foundation for the cognitive and character skills needed to succeed in life.

Our compassionate and innovative system for family success enables everyone in our community to thrive. **Each program is designed to meet urgent needs today** and address the root causes of systemic injustice to achieve a more equitable tomorrow. Many UWCJ clients benefit from participating in more than one of our programs.

**Low income first time mothers** can enroll in our Nurse-Family Partnership (NFP) program.

**When children are ready to start school**, their parents can enroll in our Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors education and advocacy workshops. Students receive back-to-school supplies and holiday gifts distributed through our "Stuff the Bus" and "Gifts of the Season" campaigns.

**Parents who have questions about day-to-day life issues**, such as housing, food, benefits programs and childcare receive assistance from our Middlesex County Alliance for Child and Family Success.

**These families and all community members can improve their financial security by** working with coaches at our Family Financial Opportunity Center. Eligible residents can have their federal and state taxes prepared for free from our Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program.

We also operate **programs for elementary school students in Jamesburg and South River and our immigrant neighbors** through our partnership with the Deportation and Immigration Response Equipo (DIRE).

As administrator of the Middlesex County Local FEMA Board, United Way ensures that **neighbors in crisis get food and shelter**.

**We encourage you to reach out to us at 732-247-3727 or online at [uwcj.org](https://www.uwcj.org)** to learn more about services available for you, your family, or neighbors. These services are available at no cost due to the generosity of our public and private donors and help from our volunteers.

**Join us as we press forward**, united by the belief that everyone, especially young children, deserves a fair chance to succeed. Please consider becoming a United Way donor or volunteer. Together, we can overcome the challenges ahead.

*Lawrence P. O'Connell*

**Lawrence P. O'Connell**  
Chair, Chief Volunteer Officer

*Gloria Aftanski*

**Gloria Aftanski**  
President, Chief Professional Officer



# NURSE-FAMILY PARTNERSHIP



**Our 8 bachelor level nurse home visitors supported 225 families,** which included 205 children. 41 mothers graduated from NFP in August, culminating 1,000 continuous days in partnership with their nurse.

**4 exciting components of the program launched this year.** 150 mothers receiving support through UWCI's contract with the New Jersey Department of Children and Families received financial assistance for the purchase of infant formula or breastfeeding supplies, enabling these limited-income families to stretch available resources for other basic needs.

**96 NFP families also received assistance** directly from UWCI's FEMA Award for the purchase of food, again stretching family resources for other basic needs such as rent, child care, transportation and more.

**UWCI's initial grant from United Way Worldwide's Ride United Transportation Access program** made Lyft transportation available for purposes such as grocery shopping, medical appointments and employment as well as appointments for services.

**The Parent Leaders group** continues to expand and assumed the lead in planning monthly educational programs for current and graduate program participants as well as social events that continue to expand participants' circles of support.



**"Through my nurse home visitor's consistent support and encouragement, I gained the confidence I needed to navigate this overwhelming journey.** She helped me not only adjust to the realities of triple motherhood but also supported me in balancing my personal goals, like pursuing my Bachelor's degree in Spanish and psychology. Her advice, patience, and unwavering belief in me were instrumental in my growth as a mother and an individual.

**Today, my three beautiful babies fill my life with love, laughter and constant adventure.** Despite the initial challenges and fears, I am so grateful for this unique experience of raising triplets.

The United Way's Nurse-Family Partnership program was a lifeline that gave me the tools, knowledge, and confidence to be the best mother I could be. **I am forever thankful for my nurse and this incredible program** that has made such a profound impact on my life and the lives of my children."





# THE MIDDLESEX COUNTY ALLIANCE FOR CHILD AND FAMILY SUCCESS



The Alliance is a community resource helpline that residents can call at 732-724-5437 (KIDS) for help with housing, immigration, child care, benefits and other problems. In 2024, the Alliance team fielded over 1,000 calls. Most Alliance clients are women who have annual incomes below \$29,000; about one-third are undocumented, and about two-thirds are Hispanic.

"I have **peace of mind** now."

"**Thank God for the Alliance** because I called so many other agencies and couldn't get any help..."



## ABRIENDO PUERTAS/ OPENING DOORS



**ABRIENDO PUERTAS/OPENING DOORS** educates and empowers parents to be their child's first teacher and advocate. Parents share their own real life experiences raising children as they discover their important role in their child's school success. Workshops are offered in spring and fall, each consisting of five sessions in English and Spanish.

"I joined the program as a parent. I **graduate from the program as the confident parent of a future scholar.**"

"**Thank you for opening the doors of this program.** We learned so much about how to nourish our children. We feel very confident as mothers."

"Thank you for opening our eyes and minds, **preparing us to help our children be successful** and knowing that we can do it."





# JFK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN JAMESBURG



UWCJ's Family Advocate, who is stationed at JFK, helped over 600 students, their families and community members overcome food, immigration, health, benefits and other issues. United Way provides an in-school food pantry, teaches ESL, translates for parents and helps them understand the school system.

"We thank United Way. Our family is very pleased and appreciates your help."

"Thank you to United Way for all the opportunities and classes they offer to everyone. **And I thank all the people who donate to make these programs work every day.** I invite everyone who can donate to do so."



## SUMMER STREAM STARS



**We are combating summer learning loss among preschool and kindergarten students at JFK.** These students can enroll in a Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, Reading and Mathematics (STREAM) summer program. Students receive home libraries and parents receive STREAM toolkits, so that learning can continue at home. Almost 300 kindergarten and preschool students have been Summer STREAM Stars since this program started in 2022, and all students in those grades receive STREAM materials during the school year.

"We are grateful to have this amazing partnership with Summer STREAM teachers and United Way. **The children continued to grow and have meaningful experiences this summer.**"



## HEALTHY FOOD PROGRAM



**UWCI operates a healthy food pantry for families of students at JFK Elementary School**, hosted at the Jamesburg Elks Club. It is staffed by the United Way Family Advocate and community volunteers. The pantry has been open twice a month since September, providing over 80 households with over 200 children a wide variety of culturally appropriate, nutritious foods. The Replenish Food Bank and a generous grant from the Middlesex County Board of Commissioners contribute food to the pantry, and Plentiful has donated a pantry management system which facilitates scheduling and messaging to participants.



**"Thank you to our generous hosts, the Jamesburg Elks Lodge No. 2180, for their warm welcome and enthusiastic support of United Way's Healthy Food Program."**



## STUFF THE BUS



**Additional support for families with young children comes through UWCI's annual school supply drive, "Stuff the Bus".**

Public and private schools as well as community non-profit organizations, including UWCI's child focused programs, are invited to request backpacks filled with school supplies. Generous area businesses and corporations donate funds or school supplies which are stuffed into backpacks and distributed back to the school, or non-profit. During 2024, backpacks were requested by 14 elementary schools, 5 middle schools, 2 high schools and 2 non-profit organizations. A total of 20 companies and individuals provided the funds to purchase and stuff 450 backpacks.

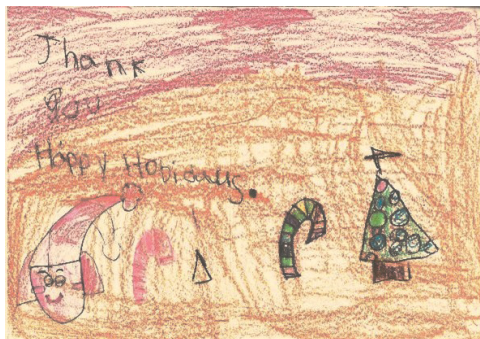


**"As I filled backpacks with school supplies at the United Way of Central Jersey, I smiled with gratitude knowing that my small effort would enable low-income children in our communities to start their school year with the tools they need for academic success."**





## GIFTS OF THE SEASON



**For the past 20 years, UWCI has coordinated the Gifts of the Season program**, which grants the holiday wishes of children affiliated with community non-profit organizations, schools and UWCI's programs. The 2024 program provided gifts for 608 children participating in 27 community non-profit organization programs and 5 UWCI programs. 23 corporations and 5 individuals supported this important initiative.



## FAMILY FINANCIAL OPPORTUNITY CENTER (FFOC)



**Many of your neighbors, even those who have jobs, struggle with monthly expenses** that exceed their income. In fact, 67,000 Middlesex County residents live in poverty. The FFOC, located in Perth Amboy, helps all county residents with one-to-one:

- **Employment counseling** to help find a job
- **Income support** to help find benefits like SNAP, housing subsidies and tax credits
- **Financial coaching** to help with budgeting, credit and financial planning

**FFOC services** also include ESL classes, citizenship application help, and a computer lab.

**"We are now aware about how we spend money, and focus only on what is needed.** My husband is very happy and encourages me not to miss my appointments at United Way's FFOC to continue the process."

**"Thank you for helping me on this journey to find a job. I'm grateful that there is a center like this to support families like mine."**



**Thank you Congressman Pallone, Mayor Caba and Deputy Commissioner Diaz, New Jersey Department of Labor** for joining UWCI for the FFOC's grand opening on May 29, 2024.





# VOLUNTEER INCOME TAX ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (VITA)



**Our program services individuals and families with incomes up to \$75,000.** We also assist persons with limited English proficiency, persons with disabilities, seniors, veterans and ITIN applicants.

**\$2,260,000**

**Total refunds re-invested back into the community** through important working family credits: The Earned Income Tax and the Child Tax to help stabilize the community.

**3,000**

**Clients served** during the 2024 tax filing season.

**\$236,175**

**The value of 200 IRS-certified volunteers donating their most valuable asset – their time** – to save our community's low-to-moderate-income taxpayer on tax filing fees. Our volunteer tax preparers contributed 7,500 hours in service to our clients.

**\$544,000**

**The total filing fees (savings) that remained in wallets** and pockets of low-to-moderate-income tax filers by not having to use a paid preparer.

**"Their demeanor has always been friendly and professional,** leaving me feeling secure that they know what they're doing and my tax filings are in very capable hands."

**"I started with them over 7 years ago and every year I go back because the volunteers there are very professional, respectful of your privacy, accurate with the calculations on my taxes and make you feel like family."**



## IMMIGRATION



**UWCJ continues its longstanding commitment to the network of community-based organizations providing direct services and opportunities to our community's new arrivals.** In 2024, two invaluable initiatives of the Reformed Church of Highland Park and Churches Improving Communities were supported: the Deportation and Immigration Response Equipo (DIRE) helpline and DIRE legal services. DIRE continues to expand with regional service locations to facilitate access to immigrant families facing challenges of assimilation into life in the United States, food and financial insecurity, housing, language, as well as detention, deportation and other immigration-related issues.

**DIRE's helpline is available 24/7** for guidance with immigration crises and long-term support at 1-800-347-3767. During 2024, the helpline received 580 calls.



## MIDDLESEX COUNTY LOCAL FEMA BOARD



**United Way continues to serve the community in administrative support for the Middlesex County Local Board.** Our Phase 41 Award of \$378,077 supported provision of emergency shelter (49.1%), food (23.8%), utility assistance (23.5%) and infant formula and diapers (3.5%). A total of 10,817 individuals received FEMA-funded services.



**Community-based organizations and Middlesex County municipalities are encouraged to visit the National Board website** ([efsp@uww.unitedway.org](mailto:efsp@uww.unitedway.org)) to review eligible services to prepare for submission of an application for future award cycles. Eligible applicant entities may email [pdesiderio@uwcj.org](mailto:pdesiderio@uwcj.org) to request inclusion in future Middlesex County Local Board communications.



## RIDE UNITED



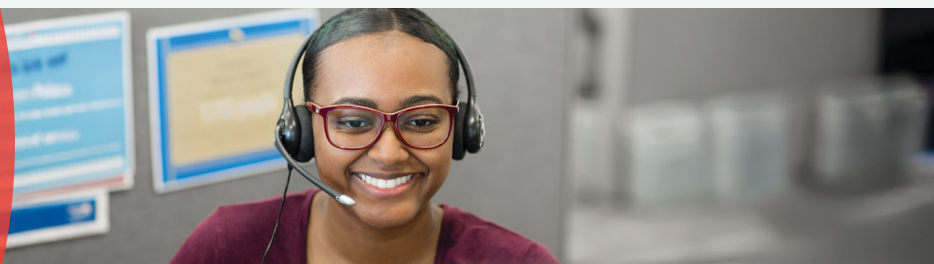
**Launched in July, our Ride United Transportation Access initiative provided no-cost rides** for individuals and families participating in one or more of our services. Lyft transportation is available for participants for the following purposes: health appointments, employment interviews, access to food and food-related benefits, education, legal issues, housing and economic stability needs.

**Ride United**  
A free, local transportation program



211

NJ 211

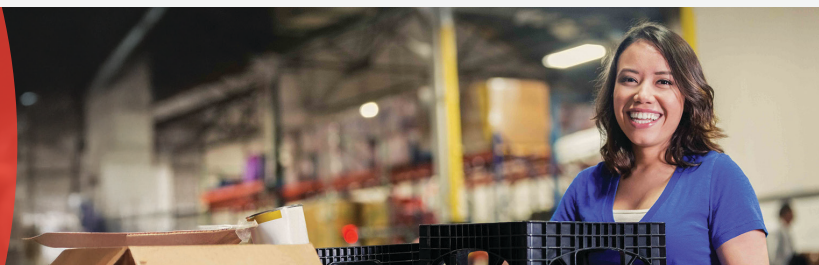


**United Ways of New Jersey created and continue to financially support NJ 211, our state's 24/7/365 multi-lingual helpline.** United Way of Central Jersey also supports the availability of NJ 211 information and referral services for residents of our service area. During 2024, NJ 211 received a total of 321,828 contacts from state residents. In Middlesex County, 12,128 residents outreached to NJ 211 with a total of 28,156 unique contacts, representing 8.7% of total state contacts. Our county's callers were primarily English-speaking women. The top 5 requests for resources for our county were:

- **Utility Assistance** - 28,000 requests
- **Housing-Related Assistance** - 8,108 requests
- **Housing Expense Assistance** - 5,865 requests
- **Benefit Screening** - 5,470 requests
- **Basic Information and Referral** - 5,305 requests



## VOLUNTEER HEROES



**United Way's programs and participants benefit from the commitment to serve others demonstrated on a daily basis by volunteers:**

- Our **Nurse-Family Partnership** program's Parent Leaders
- Our **Jamesburg Healthy Food** program volunteer pantry staff
- **Members of the Board of Trustees** who meet monthly as a Board, with many also serving as members of the Finance, Resource Development, Immigration and Governance Committees, as well as spending time with parents in the Jamesburg ESL classes
- **Members of Women United**, our women's leadership group, who friend-raise throughout the year and coordinate the annual Legislative Breakfast
- **Corporate volunteers** who coordinate donations to the annual school supply drive, Stuff the Bus, and graciously provide holiday gifts for vulnerable children participating in UWCJ and community partner programs and volunteer as readers in preschool and elementary school classrooms
- Our **IRS-certified volunteer federal and state tax return preparers**

**A conservative estimate of total volunteer hours** serving the community is 8,311, valued at \$295,040.

**"I enjoy the camaraderie among the VITA volunteers at United Way!** Community tax volunteering not only keeps me occupied, but it also keeps me updated with the changes in tax laws that is helpful to serve the community well. I get to see firsthand the impact of my time in helping families save on tax filing fees, and the gratitude expressed after reviewing the outcomes of returns with clients is priceless!"

**"Just a small way of 'paying forward' to those in need in the community** as an expression of my gratitude for the opportunities I had when I was very young. Opportunities such as to always have food on the table, access to comprehensive healthcare and a great educational system, which makes all the difference in the world to a child to be able to grow into a self-sustaining adult."





# JUNE 6TH UNITED WAY LEGISLATIVE BREAKFAST



**Deputy Assembly Speaker Yvonne Lopez** receives UWCI's inaugural "Heart of the Community" Award in recognition of her consistent advocacy on behalf of young children.



**Early childhood panelists** W. Steven Barnett, Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin, Deputy Speaker Yvonne Lopez and Outreach Director Jael Davis for Congressman Pallone (District 6)



## PROGRAM INVESTORS



United States Department of  
Labor



United States Department of  
Education



Internal Revenue Service



New Jersey Department of  
Children and Families



New Jersey Department of  
Community Affairs



Middlesex County Board of  
Commissioners



Johnson & Johnson



Perth Amboy Office of  
Economic and Community  
Development



Woodbridge Township



The Robert Wood Johnson  
Foundation



Flagstar Foundation



PNC Bank Foundation



Provident Bank Foundation



Social Finance



Citizens Bank



Royal Business Bank



VNA Health Group



United Way of Central Jersey  
Board of Trustees



United Way Worldwide

Thank you to all  
of our program  
investors for your  
support!



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