



# UNITED FOR CENTRAL JERSEY COMMUNITY REPORT 2023



United Way of Central Jersey

# A MESSAGE FROM OUR LEADERSHIP

**United Way of Central Jersey (UWCJ) continues our journey to safeguard the welfare and ensure positive outcomes for young children ages 0-5 and their families.** Our support begins before birth and includes family economic security as one of the most important levers to assure healthy development by age three. Economic security includes paid family leave, cash assistance in the form of child tax credits, tax refunds, health insurance, secure and stable housing, nutrition supports as well as other public benefits.

We invite you to review our program initiatives in the pages that follow. **Collectively, our programs directly assisted 10,644 adults, parents and children during 2023.**

**Nurse Family Partnership (NFP)** launched in 2005 and received increased funding from the New Jersey Department of Children and Families, which enabled enrollment of additional first-time low-income mothers. The NFP initiative targets our commitment to support children prior to birth by ensuring a healthy pregnancy, full-term birth and developmental tracking for each child born into the program.

In 2023, we marked the first anniversary of the **Middlesex County Alliance for Child and Family Success**, which helps families with young children navigate their way to stability and opportunity.



Our **Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA)** program continues our mission to improve the financial stability of economically fragile families and individuals. Unlike other VITA programs, UWCJ's program continues year-round to prepare amended and prior year returns, Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN) applications and renewals.



The **Place-Based Initiative**, launched in Jamesburg in 2018, continues to provide resources and support for the parents of the preschoolers enrolled at the JFK Elementary School. In 2023, that included the launch of English as a second language (ESL) classes, the Latino Literacy Project and delivery of weekly food boxes to food-insecure families.



Our **Summer STREAM Stars** program continues to enroll preschool and kindergarten students at JFK identified by their teachers as benefiting from academic attention during the summer in order to be more successful when school resumes in September.



**Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors** returned to active status, empowering low-income Latino parents of children ages 0-5 to not only assume their role as their child's first teacher, but also their education advocates.



**Volunteers from corporations, businesses and the community engaged in hands-on activities** including packing food, conducting a food drive, school supply drive and a holiday gift drive, reading to preschoolers and creating literacy kits for area preschools, child care programs as well as UWCJ's program participants.

We trademarked a new tagline, "**Little Hands, Big Futures**", along with a logo, creating a visual identity for our focus which is supporting young children to ensure their success in life.

During 2024, we look forward to enhancing our support for the families participating in each of our programs as well as unemployed and underemployed parents of young children with **the opening of our Family Financial Opportunity Center (FFOC)**. Using the evidence-based Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) model, our services for families will include a job skills assessment and provision of training leading to certification. Our services also include the search for obtaining and maintaining a job at a family sustaining income, accessing public and community benefits, and increasing financial management knowledge and skills.

**We are grateful for the support** of our individual donors and our corporate benefactors who conduct workplace-giving campaigns or otherwise support us: the United States Departments of Education and Labor, IRS, New Jersey Department of Children and Families, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, PNC Bank Foundation and Provident Bank Foundation, Johnson & Johnson World Headquarters, Citizens Bank and the Middlesex County Board of Commissioners.

Please work with us to ensure that all young children in our community attain better educational outcomes and a healthier, brighter and more successful future.

Call us at **732.247.3727** or visit our website at **www.UWCJ.org**.

*Lawrence P. O'Connell*

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

*Gloria Aftanski*

**Gloria Aftanski**  
President and Chief Professional Officer



# UNITED FOR FINANCIAL STABILITY

## VOLUNTEER INCOME TAX ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (VITA)

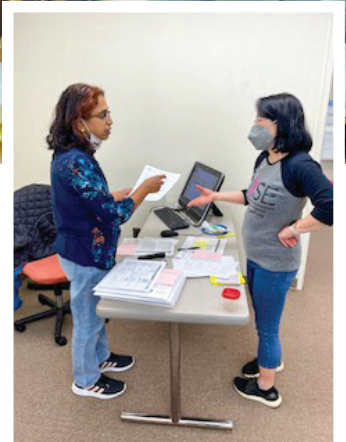


- Volunteers: 165
- Federal & State Returns Including ITINs: 3,606
- Federal & State Refunds: \$2,034,682
- EITC Refunds: \$484,693
- Child Tax Credit: \$375,139

*Taxpayers saved an average of \$250 in tax preparation fees, a value of \$457,250.*



Individuals and families making \$70,000 or less per year can have their taxes filed for free by IRS-certified volunteers through the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program. The volunteer-driven program supports nearly 3,000 individuals in Middlesex County and returns an average of \$2 million dollars in refunds, Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Care credits for residents. VITA volunteers also assist with ITIN applications and renewals.



*The United Way of Central Jersey VITA program is supported by the IRS, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and PNC Bank Foundation and the United Way of Central Jersey Board of Trustees.*

**I just wanted to say thank you** so much to all of the volunteers at the United Way in Milltown. I've been coming to you for a few years now and am always so happy with how quickly and efficiently you get my taxes done...Thank you so much for volunteering your time for families like mine. It means more than you know.

**- VITA CLIENT**



## IMMIGRATION

- Hotline Calls: 750
- Families Assisted Through Hotline: 82 families with 78 children
- Case Management, School and Medical Enrollment: 458
- Families That Received Grocery Boxes and Hot Meals: 85
- Provided Case Management: 256 Afghans and 23 Ukrainians
- General Legal Intake and Consultation: 284
- Long-term housing: 405 families



UWCJ has made a multi-year commitment to Deportation and Immigration Response Equipo (DIRE) Support Services and DIRE Legal Services. DIRE assists immigrant families facing issues related to detention, deportation and other immigration-related circumstances. DIRE operates a hotline available 24/7 for help with immigration crises and long-term support.

DIRE Legal Services was established four years ago, due to the dramatic shortage of legal services for immigrants. DIRE Legal focuses on asylum and detention cases, visas and Special Immigrant Juvenile visas. They are rapidly expanding to meet the needs of Afghan, Haitian and Ukrainian clients.



## FAMILY FINANCIAL OPPORTUNITY CENTER (FFOC) – OPENING MAY 2024

Sometimes a job isn't enough. Even employed families struggle with monthly expenses that exceed their income. A negative monthly cash flow can feel like an uphill battle, leaving families with unpaid bills, utilities, rent and oftentimes leaving families in need of additional assistance.

United Way's Family Financial Opportunity Center (FFOC) will work to increase the economic stability of parents by providing an integrated set of three core services:

- 1 Employment Counseling:** This service includes one-on-one employment counseling, job readiness and placement, and access to education and training.
- 2 Income Support:** This service includes Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, housing subsidies, energy assistance and EITC assistance.
- 3 Financial Coaching:** This service includes creating a financial plan, credit report review, developing a household budget, and connecting to financial institutions and products. The main program components will work together to assist families in leading more sustainable lives.



Additional FFOC resources and services will include: a career closet, a reading corner for children, a community resource coordinator, ESL classes, Skill-up Middlesex, a computer lab, U.S. Citizen application assistance, test preparation and tax services.

*Located at 313 State Street in Perth Amboy and open to all Central Jersey residents, the FFOC is funded through a Congressional Community Project Grant through Congressman Frank Pallone (D-6), the City of Perth Amboy Office of Economic Development, the Middlesex County Human Services Advisory Council, the Provident Bank Foundation, Citizen's Bank and the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs.*

## MIDDLESEX COUNTY LOCAL FEMA BOARD

UWCJ serves as the administrator for the Local Board. In 2023, the Local Board awarded \$350,684 to 8 community-based non-profits to provide emergency shelter, rent, mortgage and utility assistance, served meals, food pantries and diapers and infant formula distribution. The Local Board also received \$1,252,893 from the one-time American Recovery Plan Act that was awarded to 10 community-based non-profits to provide these same services to the community as well for Code Blue Shelters.





- **New and Expecting Moms:** 215
- **Moms With Infants:** 185
- **DCF and ARP Funds:** for food, cribs & transportation
- **Mental Health Consultant:** for the nurses and mothers
- **Mom Life:** parent-run group for alumni and current moms



## UNITED FOR HEALTH

### NURSE-FAMILY PARTNERSHIP (NFP)

The nationally-acclaimed Nurse-Family Partnership specifically targets low-income, first-time pregnant women, providing comprehensive parenting training and education along with a range of other supportive services from the twelfth week of pregnancy through the child's second birthday. The program, which consists of an intensive schedule of home visits by bachelor-level nurses, has proven successful in both the short and long term by ensuring that babies get a healthier start even before birth, by helping mothers take better care of themselves and by helping children grow to adolescence with fewer problem behaviors.

*Nurse-Family Partnership is supported by The New Jersey Department of Children and Family Services, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Johnson & Johnson World Headquarters, The PNC Bank Foundation, The VNA Health Group and The United Way of Central Jersey Board of Trustees.*

In March 2020, amidst a whirlwind of challenges, I discovered I was pregnant, faced a breakup, and confronted the onset of COVID-19 lockdowns, instilling a new sense of fear. With minimal support and the added news of acceptance into the University Of Scranton for my Masters in Human Resources Management, it felt like an overwhelming wave crashing over me. **However, with the invaluable assistance of my nurse from Nurse-Family Partnership, Kemba, I not only persevered but flourished.** Despite parental reservations about proceeding with the pregnancy due to my unmarried status, I followed my heart, and it turned out to be the most rewarding decision of my life.

Thanks to Kemba's unwavering support, I navigated through those tumultuous times. Today, my daughter is a vibrant three-year old, brimming with humor, intelligence and joy. Simultaneously, I've embarked on a fulfilling career path as a Talent Sourcing & Acquisition Specialist/ Human Resources. In this role, I am responsible for sourcing and recruiting candidates for various positions within our company. Additionally, I serve as a parent leader for Nurse Family Partnership, where I have the privilege to advocate for others and impart my own experiences.

**- NFP CLIENT**

# UNITED FOR EDUCATION

## PLACE-BASED INITIATIVE AT JFK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN JAMESBURG

United Way of Central Jersey leads John F. Kennedy Elementary School's Early Childhood Council's long-term strategy to best address the early education and development needs of preschool students and their families. Our United Way Family Advocate stationed at JFK has an active caseload of families with a wide range of education, development, health, immigration, transportation and government entitlement hurdles.

*This initiative is supported by The PNC Bank Foundation and the United Way of Central Jersey Board of Trustees.*



- 600+ families served
- Established an in-house food pantry & provided weekly food bags
- Co-facilitated an Abriendo Puertas class for parents at JFK
- Taught ESL Class
- Translations for parents
- Referrals to the Alliance, The Latino Family Literacy Project





## ABRIENDO PUERTAS/OPENING DOORS

Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors is an evidence-based program created in collaboration with Latino parents for Latino parents with children ages 0-5. This national parental education model focuses on educating and empowering parents to be not only their child's first teacher but also their education advocates as the child progresses through school.

The free, comprehensive training program takes place during interactive weekly sessions. The program draws from real-life experiences, includes data about local schools and helps parents to understand their important role in their child's long-term development and academic success.

*Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors is supported by the PNC Bank Foundation and the United Way of Central Jersey Board of Trustees.*



- Two cohorts (spring and fall) attended a series of 5 workshops
- Classes held in Spanish; all instructional materials are in Spanish



I have 6 children and the youngest is just a few months old. So, I didn't know if I could commit to attending all 5 weeks of Abriendo Puertas workshops. But, I was able to come to each session, and I brought my youngest child with me. I graduated from the program and I'm very proud of my accomplishment. I now know that I am my children's first teacher. **Most important, I have the power to come out of the shadows and use my voice to advocate for them and set goals for their future.**

**- ABRIENDO PUERTAS CLIENT**



I was referred to the Alliance because my family was about to become homeless. My Alliance case manager also told me about the Abriendo Puertas program. I enrolled in the program to learn how to help my young children succeed in school. **I also learned that I can be an advocate for my children and myself.** Thank you to the Alliance and UWCJ!

**- ABRIENDO PUERTAS CLIENT**

## SUMMER STEAM STARS

We are combating summer learning loss at John F. Kennedy Elementary School in Jamesburg. Our Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Mathematics (STEAM) Stars – preschool and kindergarten students – attended classes in math, science, technology, reading and related subjects. The learning continues at home with tool kits shared with their parents.

*The Summer STEAM Stars program receives community project funding secured by Congresswoman Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-12).*



- Summer STEAM classes for 60 preschool and 16 kindergarten students at JFK Elementary School in Jamesburg
- UWCJ-facilitated Latino Family Literacy Project/ESL Classes: 10 students took part in 10 sessions
- Students also participated in an after-school program, weekly physical education and soccer classes
- Home libraries were provided for preschoolers and kindergarteners





## UNITED FOR FAMILIES

### MIDDLESEX COUNTY ALLIANCE FOR CHILD AND FAMILY SUCCESS

The Middlesex County Alliance for Child & Family Success is a community resource that creates pathways for families with young children to obtain the resources and support needed to have prosperous lives.

Primary service requests in 2023 included 46% for housing and 25% for food, health and safety support.

The Alliance is supported by The UWCJ Board of Trustees, Middlesex County Human Services Advisory Council and The PNC Bank Foundation.

Total Calls 2023: 449

Calls from Families With Children Ages 0-5: 110

Number of Children: 113

Callers from Families With Children Ages 0-5

Who Were Assisted by the Alliance:

- 98 women
- 75 had annual incomes below \$29,000
- 19 reside in Perth Amboy
- 17 reside in New Brunswick
- 39 were undocumented



I struggled to find reliable child care for my 4-year-old grandchild. **When I called the Alliance, Janet quickly found daycare and aftercare for him,** and then she helped me enroll him in kindergarten. Many thanks to the Alliance for everything they've done for our family.

- ALLIANCE CLIENT

I have 2 children under the age of 5. My husband was the sole supporter of our family until he was struck by COVID-19 and became wheelchair-bound. He then lost the job he'd held for 20 years and we lost our home. The case manager carefully listened to my problem and connected me with help finding housing, food and health insurance. The Alliance also helped us obtain medical equipment for my husband, and basic household items for our new apartment. **Thanks to the Alliance, we have a secure, safe place to live and my family is thriving.**

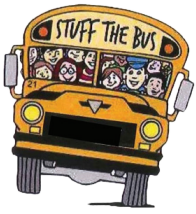
- ALLIANCE CLIENT



## LEADERSHIP, PARTNERS AND ENGAGEMENT

### WOMEN UNITED

Women United is a global growing force of 70,000+ women dedicated to lifting up communities, creating lasting change and building a world of opportunity by bringing people together and solving community-wide problems. In 2023, UWCJ's Women United hosted the non-partisan 4th Annual Legislative Breakfast with Federal, State and local elected officials. They also participated in Gifts of the Season, read to young children and hosted a membership "paint & sip" event.



## STUFF THE BUS

23 area schools received much-needed school supplies and back-to-school kits valued at \$9,510.



## GIFTS OF THE SEASON

The 2023 holiday season was made brighter for 631 children who received donated gifts valued at \$129,340.



## VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT



Groups of volunteers, many from area corporations, participated in reading to school children as well as packaging food, literacy kits, new mom kits, diaper packs and more!

Combined with UWCJ Board and Committee members, VITA volunteers and Women United, **volunteers provided over 6,774 hours of service** in 2023 with a value of \$229,079.

## COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES & MEMBERSHIPS

United Way staff actively participate in a number of coalitions, committees and councils that represent and serve the community. In 2023, these included:

- New Jersey Department of Children and Families Universal Newborn Home Visiting Advisory Council
- Middlesex County Human Services Advisory Council (HSAC)
  - HSAC Executive Committee
  - HSAC Planning Committee
  - HSAC Child Care Committee
- Middlesex County Workforce Development Board (WDB)
  - WDB Executive Committee
  - WDB Literacy Committee
- New Brunswick Tomorrow (NBT) Board of Trustees
  - NBT Executive and Finance Committees
- ACNJ Think Babies Workgroups:
  - Home Visiting
  - Child Care
- Family Success Institute (FSI) Board of Directors
  - FSI Learning Community
- New Jersey Early Care and Education Alliance
- Coming Home of Middlesex:
  - Payroll Processing and HR
  - Financial Consulting
- Established a relationship with the Mexican Consulate
- Jamesburg Early Education Advisory Council
- New Jersey Statewide Student Support Services Advisory Council
- NJ United Way VITA
- Middlesex County NJ VITA Coalition

## BOARD OF TRUSTEES

### Officers

Lawrence P. O'Connell, Chair, Chief Volunteer Officer  
 Lee F. Livingston, First Vice Chair  
 Sol Heckelman, Vice Chair, Community Impact  
 Gary Karlin, Treasurer

### Board Members

Sharletta Everett	Thomas S. McDonough
Lauren Gokhale	Giselle Mudge
Muriel Grimmett	Charko Patterson
Ainsworth Kiffin	Stu Schwartz
Rev. Dr. Michael Wilkerson Leach	Maurice Williams
Carmen F. Maietta	Chris Van der Stad



**Abriendo Puertas**  
**Opening Doors**

**FAMILY FINANCIAL**  
**OPPORTUNITY CENTER**

**JAMESBURG PLACE**  
**BASED INITIATIVE**

**MIDDLESEX COUNTY ALLIANCE**  
**FOR CHILD AND FAMILY SUCCESS**



**SUMMER STREAM**  
**STARS**



**UNITED WAY OF CENTRAL JERSEY**  
**WOMEN UNITED**



Little Hands, Big Futures



United Way of Central Jersey