



## FAITH AND PERSEVERANCE Guide Couple to Housing Assistance

◀ Case aide Jordan Nikolatos met Sophia and Eddie at the Burlington food pantry and was happy he could help provide the couple with the ingredients to make nutritious meals.

Sophia and Eddie were sweethearts in their teens. Though their relationship ended, they remained friends. Fast forward to 2013, and the couple reconnected, rekindled their love and decided to marry. “Eddie is my rock,” Sophia said. “We’ve been through so much together.”

In 2018, tragedy struck when a fire destroyed their home in Trenton, leaving them with nothing. The devastation set off a series of hardships: the onset of COVID, financial struggles, health scares and Eddie’s loss of employment due to a disability. “You know the saying, ‘When it rains, it pours,’” Eddie reflected. “Well, after the fire, it kept raining. The floods came, and the levee broke...” He shook his head as he recalled the overwhelming challenges they faced.

### HOMELESSNESS TAKES A TOLL MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY

Finding permanent housing became a constant struggle. Affordable housing in New Jersey is scarce, with the National Low Income Housing Coalition estimating the state needs over 200,000 more affordable units to ease the current crisis. Over the years, the couple found themselves in temporary emergency shelter placements, but none offered lasting stability.

“We stayed in motels and spent many nights sleeping in our car,” Sophia recalled. “It was exhausting. The stress and uncertainty took a toll on us and our marriage.” But despite everything, they had each other. “We promised we would keep pushing and weather this storm together,” she said. And they prayed. “We saw this as a

lesson, something God wanted us to learn. We believe the power of prayer helped us through the hardest times.”

With no kitchen to cook in, they relied on fast food and used phone apps for discounts to save every penny. When Sophia was diagnosed with diabetes, a new worry emerged: how would they keep her insulin cold? Eddie created a makeshift refrigerator with cardboard boxes, plastic bags and ice to keep it cool.

Through it all, Sophia managed to maintain her employment.

### SMALL KINDNESSES KEPT THEM GOING

Sophia’s supervisor was aware of her situation and offered her prayers and understanding when she had to leave early or arrive late. While Sophia worked, Eddie tirelessly searched for help. He traveled from Trenton to Camden, often walking miles from train stops to visit organizations that might help. “I was on every waiting list,” Eddie said. “I was out there every day, rain or shine. The bus drivers got to know me, and some would let me ride for free because they knew I didn’t have money.”

Despite his persistence, Sophia admitted there were moments when she felt ready to give up. In September 2024, they had almost lost hope of ever finding the housing support they so desperately needed. That’s when Eddie visited Catholic Charities’ office in Burlington and met Amanda Grannan, a newly hired Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing Case Manager. The program offers financial assistance, housing search help and case management to ensure stable housing can be maintained.



## A Message from the **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**



Dear Friends,

As Catholics around the globe begin celebrating this Jubilee Year of Hope, Pope Francis' message encourages us to look ahead with a sense of enthusiasm: "In the heart of each person, hope dwells as the desire and expectation of good things to come, despite our not knowing what the future may bring."

Our mission at Catholic Charities is to provide relief and comfort to people who are struggling and living in uncertainty. Reading through this newsletter, you can see the profound impact our team and our services have on the lives of those in need. Whether it's helping a homeless couple find housing, ensuring people have access to mental health services or creating

innovative new programs to reduce gun violence - we are there.

Pope Francis reminds us, "The Christian cannot be satisfied with having hope; he or she must also radiate hope, be a sower of hope." Please know, as a friend to this organization, you are sowing hope. Your support helps families shape better expectations for themselves. By helping neighbors succeed and survive against seemingly insurmountable challenges, you are building resilience in the community.

With heartfelt appreciation,

Marlene Laó-Collins  
Executive Director

Publisher: Jennifer Leip  
Editor: Victoria Cranga  
Writer: Hollis Painting  
Designer: Miroslav Farina

383 West State Street  
Trenton, NJ 08618  
609-394-5181  
CatholicCharitiesTrenton.org

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## **FAITH AND PERSEVERANCE** (cont.)

Amanda was able to temporarily place them in a motel, and within a month, they were signing a lease for a new apartment. They also received food, clothing and household items from the agency's food pantry.

"I was a little overwhelmed at first," Amanda admitted. She wasted no time. "Amanda didn't leave any stone unturned," Eddie said. "Even though she was new to the job, she worked like she'd been doing it for years. She knew so much about other community resources, and she followed through on everything she said she would—and then some."

After they moved in, Amanda presented the couple with a Welcome Home Basket, complete with pots, pans and bedding.

"Ms. Grannan and the whole team at Catholic Charities are like angels to us," Sophia said. "Now, I go to work rested, and when I come home, I can enjoy a warm, healthy meal. Eddie and I know how hard it is for so many people facing homelessness, and our message to them is: 'Never give up. Keep reaching out.'"

**FOR INFORMATION** on Homelessness Prevention and Rapid Re-Housing programs: Burlington County 856-764-6940; Mercer County 609-394-8847; Ocean County 732-363-5322.

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# BEHAVIORAL HEALTH PLUS

## Counseling Services and Beyond

Lydia, a student at Princeton University, was struggling with her mental health when she discovered Princeton Integrated Behavioral Health (PIBH) through University Health Services. Located in the Department of Health building on Monument Drive, PIBH became a lifeline. “I found PIBH at a time when I was in critical need of help. I was at rock bottom,” she shared.

“We’re here to listen,” said Rebecca Turnbull, Clinical Program Supervisor. “PIBH is open to everyone and offers non-judgmental counseling in a comfortable environment. As a program of Catholic Charities, we also connect individuals to additional services, including food, clothing, housing and comprehensive outpatient mental health care.”

Lydia expressed her gratitude, saying, “Rebecca is incredibly down-to-earth and approachable. Her genuine energy makes it easy to open up. She listens attentively and provides a well-rounded perspective on my struggles. She doesn’t just tell me what I want to hear — she’s honest about what I need to hear. She’s helping me become a better version of myself, and I’m so thankful.”

PIBH’s services are available to individuals aged 12 and older. No appointment is necessary, and they accept Medicaid and all insurance plans. As a Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinic, PIBH also welcomes individuals without insurance. “I’m deeply grateful for this grant that allows me to receive therapy. It feels like a miracle to access quality mental health care without the burden of cost,” Lydia said.

### ACCESSIBLE BEHAVIORAL HEALTH

“PIBH offers access to psychiatrists and licensed clinicians who specialize in treating anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, gambling addiction, bipolar disorder, substance use disorder and more,” explained Rebecca. She urges individuals to seek



▲ At Princeton Integrated Behavioral Health, clinicians, like Rebecca Turnbull, meet with people seeking help with their mental health in a welcoming environment.

help early when they notice signs of mental distress. “Addressing issues right away can prevent conditions from worsening. We’re here to help people find coping strategies and manage their mental health.”

Jim, who is attending couples counseling with his wife, reached out to PIBH when individual therapy was recommended. “PIBH is fantastic—convenient and staffed with wonderful people. I enjoy working with Rebecca because she’s so encouraging and uplifting. I truly feel like I’m making progress.”

“Mental health is a vital part of overall well-being,” said Chief Nurse Executive Dr. Lisa Merritt. “At PIBH, we eliminate barriers to mental health and addiction services while connecting individuals to necessary medical, housing and food support. We’re fortunate to offer many of these wraparound services through Catholic Charities—all in one place.”

**If you or someone you know needs help, call 800-360-7711. The office is open Monday and Wednesday from 8:30 am to 8 pm, and Tuesday, Thursday and Friday from 8:30 am to 5 pm. Walk-ins are welcome.**



# HELPING SENIORS AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

## Access Cost Savings



The Community Services team is proud to be collaborating with the New Jersey Department of Human Services' Division of Aging Services on a program to benefit low-income seniors and individuals with disabilities. The team has been tasked with getting the word out about the NJSave application, which helps individuals access savings on prescriptions, Medicare premiums, utilities and more. The team will also provide assistance to those who need help completing the application.

"Inflation and rising costs pose significant challenges for those living on fixed incomes," said Arnold Valentin, Director of Community Services. "We're committed to informing seniors and individuals with disabilities about the cost-saving opportunities available and providing the support they need to access these essential programs."

If you or someone you know could benefit from assistance, contact the Senior Save Navigators at 856-764-6940 or [NJSave@cctrenton.org](mailto:NJSave@cctrenton.org).

To maximize outreach, a dedicated team of Navigators has been hired to raise awareness about NJSave and assist those in need. The single NJSave application streamlines enrollment for a range of programs, including:

- Pharmaceutical Assistance to the Aged and Disabled (PAAD)
- Senior Gold Prescription Discount Program
- Lifeline Utility Assistance Program
- Medicare Savings Programs
- Medicare Part D's Low-Income Subsidy
- Hearing Aid Assistance to the Aged and Disabled Program



NEW JERSEY HUMAN SERVICES



# MAKE A POSITIVE IMPACT

in Our Community

For individuals interested in giving back to their communities, Catholic Charities, Diocese of Trenton offers a wide variety of volunteer opportunities.

## DOMESTIC VIOLENCE RESPONSE TEAMS

Providence House provides domestic violence services in Burlington and Ocean counties, there is a need for people to join the Domestic Violence Response Teams (DVRT). These teams are comprised of specially trained volunteers who respond directly to police stations or hospitals to talk to survivors after an incident of domestic violence.

No prior experience is needed and volunteers receive 40 hours of free DVRT training. Individuals must be 18 years old or older, have a valid driver's license with access to transportation and have no criminal history.

**In Burlington County, a training will begin on March 22. Anyone interested in joining the team should call 856-824-0599 or email DVRT-PHB@cctrenton.org.**



## FOOD PANTRY ASSISTANCE

Catholic Charities operates food pantries in Burlington, Ocean and Mercer counties. Volunteers are needed to help organize donations and stock shelves.

**Anyone interested in volunteering at a food pantry should call:**

**Burlington County: 856-764-6940**  
**Mercer County: 609-394-8847**  
**Ocean County: 732-363-5322**

## FIX-IT VOLUNTEERS

In Ocean County, the Community Services team has partnered with the Ocean County Board of Commissioners to help seniors and adults with disabilities living in Ocean County with maintenance around their homes.

Volunteers are needed to perform tasks like:

- Installing grab bars and safety rails
- Minor electrical, carpentry or plumbing repairs
- Changing storm doors and windows
- Replacing light bulbs and smoke/CO detectors
- Installing curtain/drapery hardware
- Performing seasonal outside jobs

**For more information about becoming a Fix-It volunteer, call 732-363-5322 x3223.**



## JOIN A COUNTY BOARD

In each county within the diocese, a team of Ambassadors assist with fundraising and increasing awareness of the lifesaving services Catholic Charities provides. Ambassadors meet quarterly, share professional expertise and help facilitate connections within the community.

**For more information on becoming an Ambassador, contact [hpainting@cctrenton.org](mailto:hpainting@cctrenton.org) or call 609-394-5181 x1159.**

# BREAKING THE CYCLE

## Strengthening Mercer County's Fight Against Gun Violence

Early in January, New Jersey officials announced a 16 percent decrease in gun injuries in 2024 compared to 2023, along with a 20 percent reduction in gun-related fatalities.

"We are extremely encouraged by the decline in gun violence statistics over the past year," said Mary Pettrow, Director of Children and Family Services. "At Catholic Charities, we have been actively involved in the hospital-based violence intervention program since 2020 and have received funding through the Victim's Assistance Grant to specifically address gun violence in Mercer County for the past 18 months."

### EFFECTS BEYOND PHYSICAL INJURY

"Our team knows all too well the devastating consequences violent crime has on survivors, their families and the community," said Pettrow. "Long-term effects can include PTSD, substance use, depression, anxiety, poor performance in school or work and an increased risk of self-harm or suicidal thoughts."

"We also know that access to trauma-informed mental health services and community support can make a meaningful difference," she added. "That's why we were thrilled to learn this January that we have received funding from the Office of the Attorney General to continue our work in breaking the cycle of gun violence in Mercer County. The new Community-Based Violence Intervention Program funding will allow us to build on our current efforts."

The \$500,000 grant will be overseen by Associate Service Area Director Caryn Hirsch and will be focused primarily in Trenton. Data shows that urban areas report higher incidents of gun crimes; in 2023, of the 353 gun-related crimes committed in Mercer County, 78 percent occurred within the City of Trenton.

### VIOLENCE PREVENTION THROUGH VOICES MERCER COUNTY

The new program, **V**iolence Prevention through **C**ommunity **O**utreach, **I**ntervention, **C**ommunity



▲ Associate Service Area Director Caryn Hirsch oversees VOICES in Mercer County.

**C**ohesion, and **E**ducation to Promote **S**afety (VOICES) of Mercer County, will consist of two key components:

### TIER ONE: COMMUNITY-WIDE AWARENESS AND EDUCATION

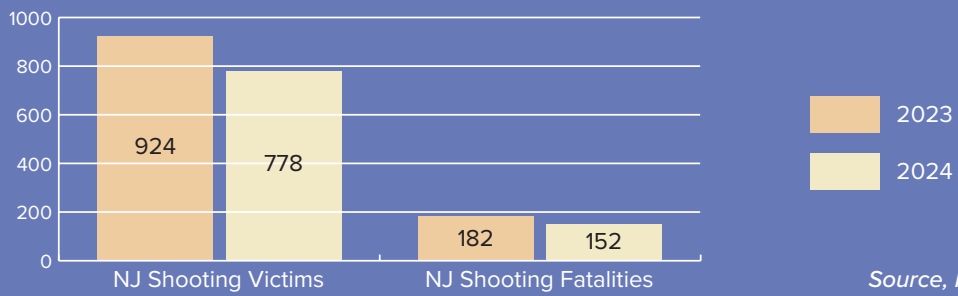
This broader effort will include education and awareness campaigns utilizing social media, concentrating on outreach, and collaboration with local partners, including schools. The goal is to foster a community-wide dialogue to shift attitudes and norms surrounding gun violence.

### COUNTING ON YOUTH TO LEAD THE WAY

"We believe the community is highly responsive when you show up for their children," said Hirsch. "Our outreach in schools and community spaces aims to educate elementary-aged children about gangs and gun violence, with the hope that this message will resonate with parents and older siblings as well. We want to get parents involved as much as possible."

Additionally, the first tier will focus on developing a community toolkit designed to support neighborhoods in the aftermath of a shooting or traumatic event. "We want to create a community handbook that churches, schools and organizations can use to facilitate healing after violent incidents," said Hirsch. The handbook will include resources for crisis intervention, debriefing and coping with loss.





Source, NJ State Police

## TIER TWO: TARGETED SUPPORT FOR HIGH-RISK POPULATIONS

This component will focus on individuals and families at an elevated risk of being affected by gun violence, including:

- Family members of gun violence victims or survivors
- Families residing in gang-affiliated neighborhoods


By working in schools, within the court system, and at El Centro, a Children and Family Services program located in Trenton, the team will use screening tools

such as the Adverse Childhood Experience Scale (ACES) and the Pediatric ACES and Related Life Events Screener (PEARLS) to identify those who are most at risk. These individuals will receive referrals to counseling and other wraparound services aimed at reducing risk factors.


“We want to give the community, especially parents, the tools and resources they need to help keep their children safe,” said Hirsch. “No parent should ever have to lose a child to community violence.”

**FOR INFORMATION** on VOICES, please call 609-394-5157.

# Save the Date









## A Very Brady MYSTERY





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