

## Lunch Break

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James Parker Blvd., to accommodate its growing programs and services. As part of its recent \$12 million capital campaign, the center will increase its footprint by some 8,000-plus square feet, expand its warehouse, gathering spaces and permanent home for its Life Skills Center, among other improvements. The goal is to break ground on the project sometime in 2022. "We knew this was the right time to bring the two organizations together," said Gwendolyn Love, Lunch Break executive director. "So many of the people we encounter need an escape from the heat and cold; somewhere they can shower and sleep. They are alone and, often, forgotten on the streets. It's heartbreaking."

She added that the pandemic helped the nonprofit reevaluate the ways in which it provided some of its resources. A merger just made sense, she said.

"These families are in crisis and it was just a good time — a time that we had to stop and look at a lot of things and

other initiatives that we have going on at Lunch Break," Love said. "COVID just really allowed us to take a step back to look at what we were doing and say, what services do we want to provide and how can we be of more

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service with families? The timing was just perfect."

While the merging of these two organizations is new, their working relationship is not. For some time, Lunch Break and FPMC have shared resources and clients to

offer them a series of financial, employment, food and clothing services.

"We would rely on them as a community partner to help us with people and oftentimes, they'd send us their own clients who needed life skills training or food assistance or financial assistance or clothing," said Ellen McCarthy, communications and public relations coordinator with Lunch Break.

McCarthy noted that, as part of the merger, Family Promise will fall under Lunch Break's network of programs but FPMC will continue operating in Oceanport and will do so "for the foreseeable future." Staffing will remain the same as well and the two nonprofit's board members will work together.

"Over the past two years, Family Promise has seen a dramatic increase in need among the most vulnerable families in our community coupled with a more challenging and complicated service model. I am thrilled to be a part of this team of innovators that identified an opportunity to more efficiently and effectively serve our community by reducing duplication of services and sharing resources," said Family Promise board president Jessica Stepanski. "Together, we are better and stronger."

## Coronavirus Surge

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leading to hospitalization figures we have not seen in well over a year," Gov. Phil Murphy said Monday at his regular pandemic media briefing, his first since returning from a family vacation to Costa Rica. First lady Tammy Murphy is among those who recently tested positive for COVID-19, he said, although she has not experienced symptoms, and other family members have not been infected.

To help reduce community spread, Murphy announced that he and legislative leaders have agreed to a three-month extension of emergency powers that enable the state to continue to provide COVID-19 vaccines and testing and maintain other public health precautions, like the masking requirement for schools and child-care settings. Two months ago, Murphy suggested that the controversial school mask mandate could be lifted before it was set to expire on Jan. 11, but infections among students and teachers have shot up in recent weeks. The state is also taking steps to beef up COVID-19 testing in school settings.

### 'KEEP OUR SCHOOLS SAFE'

"No one wants to see our kids' smiles more than we do, but this is what is necessary now to keep our schools safe," Murphy said Monday. "With the exponential surge in our numbers, it would be the height of irresponsibility to lift these basic public health requirements at this time. I will not let that happen."

As of 5 p.m. Monday, 806 schools reported being closed due to COVID-related concerns. That is 30% of the 2,679 public schools, public charter/renaissance schools, and approved private schools for students with disabilities

that the Department of Education is monitoring.

State health commissioner Judy Persichilli said the most recent DOH pandemic modeling suggests that hospitalizations will continue to rise for another 10 days, although the steep increase suggests they could also crest sooner. The model predicts between 6,000 and 9,000 New Jerseyans could require hospital care by the end of next week, which would surpass the previous peak of 8,000 patients recorded in April 2020. "Hopefully that trajectory comes down as fast as it is going up," Persichilli said.

To help the state's 72 acute care hospitals address the current shortages — and prepare for weeks to come — the Murphy administration asked the Federal Emergency Management Agency to provide additional medical personnel for hospitals, officials said. The state is also seeking help from the New Jersey National Guard to supplement the workforce at nursing homes, which are also struggling with staffing concerns, Persichilli said. It was not clear how soon these "strike teams" could be in place.

Capacity within hospital emergency rooms has also been tested by a rush of people seeking COVID-19 testing, which has become hard to find in some areas, Persichilli noted.

"The emergency rooms are not COVID testing sites," she said Monday, urging people to visit the state website to find a better option. The state is also re-deploying emergency medical responders to serve at testing sites, she said, so nurses can return to hospital duty.

### ELECTIVE SURGERIES

The state is not currently considering suspending elective surgery options — something it did early in the pandemic to increase capacity — as hospitals are making these decisions on their own, Murphy said. "Obviously we reserve all options, but that is happening as we speak," Murphy said. Persichilli explained that hospital leaders meet with

their teams several times a day to assess staffing levels, the number of open beds and other capacity questions, including whether to temporarily halt elective or less-urgent surgeries. If resources are limited, hospitals can shift into crisis mode to extend staff hours or increase the number of patients under their care, she said. The health department is in regular contact with hospital leadership, she added, and has told them to expect at least 30% of their workforce will be out sick in the coming weeks.

One option not on the Murphy administration's list this time is the creation of field medical hospitals, three of which were set up during the pandemic's first wave in March 2020. With help from the U.S. Army and other agencies, the state created pop-up hospitals in Atlantic City, Edison and East Rutherford, which — along with converted spaces at existing hospitals — gave New Jersey an additional 2,000 beds. But the facilities treated few patients and created other challenges, officials said Monday.

Persichilli said the big obstacle was securing sufficient staff to operate these field sites, which were located within convention centers and overseen by hospitals that function as regional trauma centers. This time, the state will focus on building capacity near or on existing hospital campuses, "allowing us to manage the volume of patients more effectively and efficiently," she said.

State Police Superintendent Pat Callahan said these workforce and capacity questions are now his primary concern and the focus of conversations he has almost hourly with state agencies and local officials. Hospitals are eager for assistance from the 15-member FEMA "strike teams," he said, and New Jersey has asked federal officials to deploy 10 teams to assist here. "We can set up all the beds we want, but if we don't have the medical staff to go out there and take care of people, it is really going to be all for naught," he said.

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