

Merger

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Family Promise and Lunch Break, which now is going to the next level. On Monday the nonprofits announced a merger, with Family Promise moving under Lunch Break's umbrella.

"It made sense because we were already working together," Lunch Break Executive Director Gwen Love said.

For Family Promise, the timing could not have been better.

'You really have to band together'

Family Promise was founded in 1986 in Union County, grew branches in every New Jersey county and has spread to other states as well. It's an interfaith network of churches that provides a 90-day lifeline to help struggling, home-insecure families get back on their feet until a permanent housing solution can be found.

Until the pandemic struck in 2020, here's how it worked in Monmouth County: a rotation of churches housed and fed families overnight. By day the families were headquartered at a day center — a house that provides computers, showers, a laundry room, a kitchen, a locker room, a play area for kids and transportation to and from the children's schools.

COVID changed all that. With everything locked down, Family Promise pivoted to putting families up in motels. As unemployment and critical illnesses ballooned, so did the number of families who were in crisis.

"Trying to get someone stable housing isn't just finding an apartment to move into," Family Promise program director Lenore Gibson said. "It's the bigger picture — the furniture, the food, learning how to pay your rent, getting programs involved like utility assistance."

These are areas of expertise for Lunch Break, which began as a soup kitchen and pantry in Red Bank before expanding to encompass a range of social services — pretty much everything



Volunteers prepare to serve brunch during Lunch Break soup kitchen's Christmas brunch in Red Bank in 2019. ASBURY PARK PRESS FILE

except housing.

"Now it's more of a well-rounded service all wrapped into one," Gibson said.

This was the vision of Christine Carter Love (no relation to Lunch Break's Gwen Love), who was Family Promise's executive director from 2018 to 2020 and initiated the merger with Lunch Break. Her epiphany occurred in December 2019, when she worked with Lunch Break to help a homeless family find housing, gain employment and, thanks to a free Hyundai Sonata donated by Sansone Jr.'s 66 Automall in Neptune, acquire a much-needed mode of transportation.

"It's timely and it's innovative," Carter Love said of the merger. "Especially in Monmouth County during these unprecedented times, you really have to band together and leverage."

As the need grew, so did Family Promise's reach. It's now helping 20 families, a record number.

"We've widened our net so much, and with the help of Lunch Break hopefully we'll be able to sustain that," Gibson said.

Gibson and one case manager comprise the entire staff.

"I do the marketing, the (annual fundraising) gala, the billing, the website," Gibson said. "This (merger) will allow me more time to be engaged with our clients."

How it will work

Although Family Promise of Monmouth County retains its name, it is now a program under the Lunch Break umbrella. That has a practical benefit for clients.

"These families had to go from one agency to another, filling out similar paperwork," Lunch Break's Love said. "Why not streamline the process for folks in crisis, make it easier for them? The goal is one point of entry."

That will start in April. For now, the intake processes are separate.

Donations will flow through Lunch Break but can be earmarked for Family Promise.

In 2019 Family Promise opened new day center — a 2,800-square-foot building on a two-acre plot at the old Fort Monmouth property in Oceanport. That remains in use as the program's headquarters and a place for its families to go



Lunch Break Board President Philip Antoon, left, and Family Promise of Monmouth County Board President Jessica Stepanski sign a ceremonial document incorporating Family Promise into the Lunch Break network of programs. PROVIDED BY LUNCH BREAK

for food, laundry and case-management needs.

And Family Promise's network of churches remains involved. Instead of providing housing, churches are "adopting" the program on a monthly basis. That includes providing gift cards and material donations like diapers, plus 25 meals per week and an optional monetary donation.

Gwen Love acknowledged that taking on a housing component adds "a challenge" for Lunch Break. In the past, her staff would issue referrals.

"But in these times," she said. "We should constantly be about making it easier for those who are in crisis."

Carter Love, who is now executive director of a recovery treatment facility in Georgia, is cheering the merger from afar.

"Lunch Break had a piece that Family Promise needed and Family Promise had a piece that Lunch Break needed, so to hear it's actually happening, it warms my heart," she said. "I know they're going to do phenomenal work together. I'll put my money where my mouth is and send a donation."

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Infections

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H3N2 — that typically leads to more hospitalizations and deaths.

The combination — along with an unprecedented surge in coronavirus patients due to the omicron variant — is causing health officials to urge the public to get vaccinated against both the flu and COVID-19.

"Influenza activity is high statewide," the state report for the week ending on Dec. 25 said. "Emergency Department visits and outpatient provider visits associated with influenza-like illness are higher than last week and higher than this same week last year."

So far, 6,079 cases have been reported in New Jersey since the flu season began in October. But many people do not seek medical care or get tested for the

flu. More cases of flu were reported nationwide in a single week in December than in all of the last flu season. Flu activity is usually highest in December and January.

Rowan University in Glassboro was an early indicator of the coming flu season, when an outbreak there in November sickened more than 100 people. Other outbreaks have been reported on college campuses nationally. And seven outbreaks have been reported in New Jersey's long-term care facilities.

Other areas with high or very high levels of flu activity are New Mexico, Kansas, North Dakota, Indiana, Tennessee, Georgia and the District of Columbia.

While no children in New Jersey have died of the flu this year, two pediatric deaths nationwide were reported by the CDC this week. Adult influenza deaths are not reported weekly. Over the last decade, 1,100 to 1,400 deaths due to in-

fluenza or pneumonia have been reported annually in the state.

That is a far lower death toll than COVID-19 — which stands at nearly 29,000 in New Jersey since the pandemic began in March 2020 — but influenza patients are an added burden on the health care system as it struggles to cope with the tidal wave of coronavirus patients and sidelining of hospital staff who are getting sick themselves with COVID.

"The flu vaccine is safe and effective, and can be given alongside other routine immunizations and the COVID-19 vaccine," a statement from the Health Department said. "Flu vaccines are offered in many locations including doctor's offices, clinics, health departments, urgent care centers and pharmacies."

Nationwide, flu vaccinations are down 23% compared to last year, according to federal data from Nov. 27, the most recent available. Health officials stress that it is not too late to get a flu

shot, and that vaccines for both COVID and influenza may be given at the same time.

In New Jersey, flu vaccines are recommended for everyone 6 months old and older. Hospital employees are required to get an annual flu shot, under a law enacted last year.

Those at greatest risk for serious illness from the flu are:

- Children younger than 5, and especially those younger than 2 years old
- People 65 and older
- Pregnant people up to two weeks after the end of pregnancy
- American Indians and Alaskan Natives
- People with medical conditions such as asthma, heart disease, and diabetes.

To find a flu vaccine, visit <https://www.vaccines.gov/find-vaccines/>
Email: washburn@northjersey.com
Twitter: @lindywa

Bagels

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struggle."

Glasser and Schwartz, who bought the bagel shop from its original owners in 2008, announced on social media this week that Eli's Hot Bagels had closed.

"Eli's Hot Bagels in Aberdeen is per-

manently closed," reads the post, which quickly drew reactions from longtime customers of the shop, which opened in 1974. "As with all small businesses during the pandemic, it has been a struggle."

Prior to the pandemic, Glasser said he and Schwartz were in the middle of a deal to sell the bagel shop to a new owner.

"We had it pretty much sold," he said. "Then COVID hit."

Glasser explained that the store's wholesale business did not return to its pre-pandemic performance, which along with rising lease costs this year factored into the closing.

The store space, along with others in Aberdeen Townsquare Shopping Center on Route 34, are owned by Old Bridge-based NBN Realty.

Eli's Hot Bagels in Freehold Township, owned by family members of the original owners of the Aberdeen store, remains open.

Sarah Griesemer joined the USA TODAY NETWORK New Jersey in 2003 and has been writing all things food since 2014. Send restaurant tips to sgriesemer@gannettnj.com.



Eli's Hot Bagels in Aberdeen has closed after decades. FILE

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Theft

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information about the incident to contact Keyport Detective Robert Hassmiller at rhassmiller@keyportpd.org or at 732-739-5151.

Thieves around the country are capitalizing on the precious metals in the

catalytic converter, whose prices have skyrocketed during the pandemic.

Torres said that Keyport detectives are contacting surrounding towns for any similar incidents that may match up with the Dec. 31 attempted theft and officer assault.

Ken Serrano covers crime, breaking news, investigations and local issues. Reach him at kserrano@gannettnj.com.