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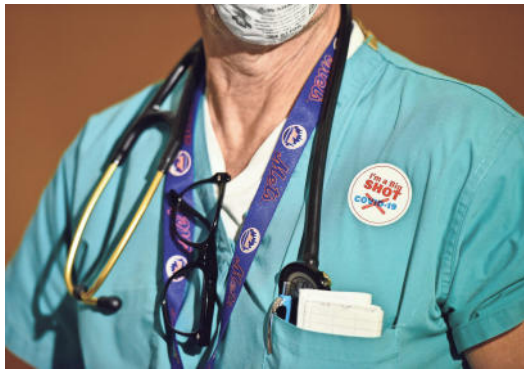
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State COVID-19 hospitalizations surpasses 5,100

NEWS, 9A

Merger between Lunch Break, Family Promise may save lives

Jerry Carino
Asbury Park Press
USA TODAY NETWORK - NEW JERSEY

Christina Lane ran a cleaning business before she fell on hard times, between the pandemic and trying to raise a young son by herself.

"I was living out of my car and in hotels, just really struggling," she said. "I had a lot of trouble with being a single mom and not having any help."

Then she connected with Family Promise of Monmouth County.

"They were literally lifesavers," Lane said. "They helped me with housing. They were there for emotional support. They've literally given me hope again."

Family Promise found Lane and her 4-year-old a

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place to live in Red Bank and also connected her with fellow nonprofit Lunch Break, which helped her repair her car so she could resume working — and provided a life-skills coach for a mentor.

"I was feeling really down and defeated," Lane, 35, said. "They've really helped inspire me to start my cleaning business back up."

Lane's story is an example of the synergy between

See **MERGER**, Page 4A

WEDNESDAY 01.05.22

app

ASBURY PARK PRESS

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

Flu season off to fast start — on top of COVID omicron surge

Lindy Washburn
NorthJersey.com
USA TODAY NETWORK - NEW JERSEY

The flu is rebounding in New Jersey, after historically low rates of influenza during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns and social distancing of last winter. The state is on track for a bad flu season, with infections high across every region, new data from the state Health Department shows.

Confirmed cases of flu in New Jersey have climbed higher at a quicker rate than in previous flu seasons, even compared to pre-pandemic years. Flu vaccination rates across the country are significantly lower than they were last year and more people are traveling and gathering.

Plus, the majority of cases, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control, are of a strain of flu —

See **INFECTIONS**, Page 4A

Brick police develop intensive drug education program



Brick Patrolman Sean Flynn speaks about the dangers of vaping to fifth grade students at the Lanes Mill Elementary School in the township. PHOTOS BY THOMAS P. COSTELLO/ASBURY PARK PRESS

Attorneys: Lodzinski's murder conviction reversal was just

Suzanne Russell
Central Jersey Home News Tribune
USA TODAY NETWORK - NEW JERSEY

Standing in a Middlesex County courtroom on March 16, 2016, attorney Gerald Krovatin told 17 jurors in his opening statement that his client, Michelle Lodzinski, did not "purposely and knowingly" cause the 1991 death of her first born son, Timothy Wiltsey.

Krovatin said Lodzinski was not the monster as she had been portrayed. She was a good mother who loved her son and she had never admitted to anyone — family, friends, police or the FBI — to killing the boy.

See **LODZINSKI**, Page 2A

'AS REAL AS IT GETS'

Nicolas Fernandes
Asbury Park Press
USA TODAY NETWORK - NEW JERSEY

Brick police officers noticed something when they started interviewing drug overdose victims in 2019 — they needed to do more to reach students than just one or two drug prevention classes.

And so the department decided to "get real" with the youth in town: by developing an intensive drug prevention curriculum aimed at students in fifth, seventh, ninth and 11th grades.

"We're going to have a little more of a real conversation in seventh grade, a little bit more of a real conversation in ninth grade and then by junior year it's as real as it gets," Sgt. Jim Kelly said.

These interviews were part of a new initiative called Because We Care, in which officers from the communi-

See **EDUCATION**, Page 5A



A Lanes Mill Elementary School fifth grader's DARE book is shown during Flynn's presentation about the dangers of vaping. More grade levels will be added to the program.

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Merger

Continued from Page 1A

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."

Jerry Carino is community columnist for the Asbury Park Press, focusing on the Jersey Shore's interesting people, inspiring stories and pressing issues. Contact him at jcarino@gannettnj.com.

Infections

Continued from Page 1A

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

Continued from Page 3A

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

Continued from Page 3A

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.