



ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

Lunch Break Celebrates Grand Opening of Expanded Facility

On April 25, 2024, Lunch Break celebrated the grand opening of its expanded facility, marking the completion of a \$12 million renovation. At the event, Executive Director Gwendolyn Love addressed volunteers, staff and guests, saying, **"We see you, you matter and you deserve a functional space."** The renovation expands the organization's ability to support those in need. Love emphasized, "We are no longer just a soup kitchen or pantry. We are a community service organization, providing programs to break the cycle of poverty throughout Monmouth County."

The ceremony honored Lunch Break's founder, Norma Todd, with the renaming of the side street where the building stands as Norma Todd Way. Her daughters, Cynthia Todd Takeyama and Coralie Todd expressed pride in their mother's legacy. **The sisters were overwhelmed by just how far Lunch Break had grown from the initial seeds of their mother's mission.**

The 24,000-square-foot newly renovated and expanded facility features a range of exciting additions designed to enhance services and comfort for guests. Highlights include a spacious 2,700-square-foot warehouse with cold storage, a modern conference room, dedicated educational spaces, and a Health and Wellness room. The bright, welcoming Community Kitchen now offers ample dining space and a fully renovated commercial kitchen. The updated Your Choice Pantry includes additional coolers, providing shoppers with more fresh produce and the freedom to select their groceries at their own pace. Clara's Closet, formerly overflowing, has transformed into a well-organized shop where guests can browse and select clothing at no cost. With added space, the Life Skills program has been relocated under the same roof, and the renovation also includes new offices for staff, as well as shower and laundry facilities for guests.

Board of Trustees member Tracey Stewart's husband comedian Jon Stewart summed up the importance of the expansion in a video message, **"Lunch Break is a place where all the needs of the community can be met with warmth, humanity, and dignity. It finally has a building large enough to contain its heart."**

As Gwendolyn Love said, "This is not just a building - it's a place where dignity, compassion and community come together."



“ ———
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————— ”



A Lunch Break Letter of Love

As 2024 draws to a close, we find ourselves reflecting on a year of unprecedented challenges - and remarkable resilience. With our new building up and running in January, we've continued to build and expand our lifeline for our most vulnerable neighbors, serving them with all of the compassion, dignity, and hope they deserve. We couldn't have done it without you.

This year, our community experienced an incredible surge in need. Families who were already struggling to make ends meet faced more obstacles as new families turned to us for help every day. The demand for food, housing, clothing, and life skills training has never been greater. For example, in 2024 our pantry and community dining room have seen 70% and 35% increases over 2023, respectively. We are also seeing more of our community suffering from mental health issues with little to no access to care.

In response, we are meeting these challenges head on by hiring additional staff, developing new solutions to address both the health and housing crises and empowering our youth through programs that build skills and confidence for a brighter future. **It's because of your commitment to our mission that we have the critical resources to provide these services!** Please take the time to read through our newsletter to see how your support is changing lives and how through hard work, our families are achieving success.

As a non-profit, we are bracing ourselves for the challenges that will surely come in 2025, including rising costs of living, affordable housing shortages, inflation and socio-economic uncertainty. We ask for your support to help us finish 2024 strong. With your steadfast partnership, we will continue to grow, adapt, and provide for those who need us most.

Will you join us in making 2025 a year of hope and transformation for our community? Your gift today will make a real and lasting difference.

With gratitude and appreciation,

Gwendolyn O. Love

Gwendolyn O. Love, Executive Director

P.S. Please use the enclosed envelope to donate or scan the QR code for an online gift. Together, we can provide the building blocks for a better, more secure life for those who need it most.



“ ———
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MAKING A DIFFERENCE



YOUR CHOICE PANTRY

23,038 food pick ups (**70%** increase over 2023)



COMMUNITY KITCHEN

94,578 meals served (**35%** increase over 2023)



CLARA'S CLOSET

1,744+ bags of clothing distributed to those in need

17,561 individuals received clothing on an on-need basis

500 people outfitted through the Suit Up for Success Program



YOUTH SERVICES

1,219 toys given to children newborn to 12 years old

284 gift cards provided to teens 13 to 17 years old

961 backpacks distributed to youth



LIFE SKILLS

Our program helps clients grow skills toward economic self sufficiency

Up to **137** people per month attended coaching sessions

69 gained employment



ALLIANCE FOR SUCCESS

49 enrolled high school students

31 volunteer mentors

100% of senior participants were accepted and attended college in the fall of 2024



VOLUNTEERS

2,350 caring volunteers

25,079 volunteer hours dedicated



FAMILY PROMISE OF MONMOUTH COUNTY

We saw an unprecedented demand for housing in 2024

286 families were provided with housing solutions, including permanent housing, diversion and prevention

Welcome New Board Members



(Back left to right) Board Members: J.P. Nicolaïdes, Kevin Chieff, New Board Member Greg Shannahan, Steve Haugenes, New Board Member Stan Lumish, New Board Member Gillian Sahadi, Mark Zill, and Mike Bagnell. (Front left to right) - New Board President, Robin Klein, Lunch Break Executive Director, Gwen Love and New Board Vice President, Tina Pflaster.

Off the heels of an exciting year and the grand opening of its new facility at 121 Drs. James Parker Blvd. in Red Bank, Lunch Break announces the appointment of new board members and leadership committed to guiding the organization into its next chapter of growth and impact. Lunch Break is poised to reach new heights under this dedicated team.

Joining the Board of Trustees are **Stan Lumish, Gillian Sahadi and Greg Shannahan**. These individuals bring a wealth of experience and a shared passion for community service that will assist Lunch Break in providing vital resources to those in need.

At the helm, **Robin Klein steps into the President** role with **Tina Pflaster acting as Vice President**. These energetic, passionate women will build on Lunch Break's legacy while exploring new growth opportunities. Under their guidance, Lunch Break will continue to expand its programs, deepen its community engagement and strengthen its impact as a vital lifeline for families and individuals facing hardship. Incoming Board President, Robin Klein said, **"It is an honor to lead the amazing Board of Trustees for Lunch Break. Into our forty-first year, Lunch Break has grown into an incredible resource center for our community and beyond. This organization is in my DNA and I appreciate the opportunity of working beside Mrs. Gwendolyn Love, our passionate and meticulous team including staff and volunteers, our donors and everyone who makes it possible to provide more than 22 programs creating life-changing services for our neighbors in need."**

Tina Pflaster expressed her feelings about her new position stating, **"I feel privileged to have been involved with this amazing organization for the past 10 years. Working with the remarkable and visionary Gwen Love along with the dedicated staff and volunteers who serve the community daily with such devotion and compassion truly warms my heart, and I am honored to be a part of it. Most importantly Lunch Break is a place of community and camaraderie. It helps me feel more connected—there's something special about giving back, and it gives more to me than I could ever give."**



**SAVE
THE
DATES!
2025**

February 11th
Valentine's Dinner



March 12th
Golf Experience



March 28th
Night Without A Bed



For more information, email Jill Gwydir at jgwydir@lunchbreak.org

Volunteers Powering the Lunch Break Mission



Our Volunteer Superheroes: Thank You For Saving The Day!

At Lunch Break we often witness volunteers who step up as true superheroes, coming to the rescue when we need them most. These amazing individuals jump into action filling schedule gaps and ensuring that our operations run smoothly. Your dedication and commitment truly make a difference in our community.



Celebrating Our Student Volunteers



This year we were fortunate to have an incredible group of students and we want to recognize their hard work and dedication. These young volunteers stepped up in every way possible--assisting in Your Choice Pantry, organizing in Clara's Closet, making phone calls for our Life Skills program, handling Job Fair check-ins, filling backpacks and managing welcome desk duties. Their efforts were especially invaluable at our Annual Picnic, where they helped ensure the event's success. We are deeply grateful for their contributions and commitment to our mission. Thank you for making a difference in our community!

Life Skills Coaches Make All The Difference

Recently Life Skills was able to make a significant difference for our participant, Reta. She came in with her Life Skills Constant Coach, wanting to boost her employment prospects by improving her computer skills. Life Skills was able to provide her with a new Chromebook that very day. Even more so, her coach, Fred Horney, immediately jumped into action helping her to set up the laptop and began lessons, all before she left with laptop in hand. Thank you Coach Horney for always stepping up to the plate and hitting it out of the park!

A very, very special shoutout of gratitude to our wonderful, amazing, dedicated and committed team of English as a Second Language volunteer instructors, lead by Life Skills coach, Millie Diaz! This stellar group of human beings show up weekly for 33 weeks to help ESL students learn conversational English and improve their communication skills. In turn, the students draw from their instructors' dedication and show up eager to learn every time! This awesome undertaking wouldn't be possible without Millie, Ann C-Walsh, Elizabeth Punzi, Maurice Lampell, and Lydia Jain.

Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!



Birgit Mondesir
Life Skills Program Manager

A Night Honoring Community Superheroes

HEROES FOR HOPE A GALA FOR GOOD



Please scan the QR code to see all our heroes!

On Friday, November 1st, Lunch Break hosted its "Heroes for Hope: A Gala for Good," at TillingHouse at Suneagles in Eatontown, NJ. This year's event featured a captivating superhero theme, celebrating the extraordinary community heroes who have made significant contributions to improving the lives of others.

Gwendolyn Love, Executive Director of Lunch Break, expressed her excitement for the evening, sharing, "We were thrilled to host this year's 'Heroes for Hope' gala. The fun and creative superhero theme highlighted the unwavering dedication of our superhero partners. It's a wonderful opportunity to celebrate those who tirelessly work to make a difference in our community."

The gala honored three distinguished organizations with prestigious awards while introducing a new annual Staff Health and Wellness Recognition Award to a current staff member in honor of long-time Lunch Break supporter Caroline Huber. Made possible by the Stone Foundation, the award acknowledges the uniquely challenging role non-profit employees play in service to others and provides the recipient an opportunity to focus on an aspect of their own physical and mental well-being. Tammy Pack, Warehouse Coordinator, who has served our Lunch Break community for 16 years with love and compassion, won the award!

Fulfill received the Norma Todd Service Award; Monmouth County SPCA received the Heart to Hand Award and Brookdale Community College received the Platinum Partner Award; all in recognition of their partnerships not only with Lunch Break, but also for their good work on behalf of the community at large. Special thanks to all of our sponsors, auction donors, attendees, and special contributors for making the evening such a wonderful success! Scan the QR code to access the event journal.



Alliance For Success Students See Opportunities



A Program Continuing To Flourish

Alliance for Success is going strong in its fourth year, helping participating students gain insights and experiences that enable them to choose a path beyond high school. Currently, the program has 33 seniors and 11 juniors from Red Bank Regional High School. Through individualized mentoring, workshops on SAT/ACT preparation, FAFSA application support, local internships, and assistance with both college and career exploration, AFS's students are flourishing under the guidance and direction of coordinator Renee Lehrman.

Consider Being A Mentor

The program also benefits from the tireless dedication of local mentors who commit many hours of their time to support these students on their journey to adulthood. The Alliance For Success mentors engage in one-on-one sessions twice a month with their student for the entirety of the two year program. In these sessions, mentors provide insight and support for students, some of whom may be the first of their family to attend college.

Every year the success of the program brings more and more students and so our need for mentors expands as well. If you or someone you know is interested in becoming a mentor or supporting Alliance For Success in any way, please reach out to Renee Lehrman at rlehrman@lunchbreak.com.

A Standing Ovation For A Mother's Strength

My name is Hyiesha, and I am a mother of three wonderful children: a 7 year old boy, an 8 year old boy, and a 15 year old daughter. I came to Lunch Break's Family Promise after leaving a domestic violence situation. I began trying to rebuild my life and home without my abusive partner. Unfortunately, I fell short of income and resources, and I refused to return to an abusive environment. This eventually led my children and me to experience uncertainty about our future and homelessness for the first time in our lives.

I am incredibly grateful to Lunch Break's Family Promise for everything they have provided for my family. First and foremost, the organization offered us a safe place to stay during a time of our greatest need. Emotionally, I felt insecure and unstable. I was concerned for my children, who were struggling with the stress of our situation, and I was in fear of what our future would hold. Despite the uncertainty, I prayed that with the help of Family Promise, I could make it out of my situation and create a better life for us. The stability and support I received allowed me to focus on my own personal growth. Little by little I was able to address issues that were holding us back.

During my time in the program, I received intensive case management and counseling. I learned valuable life skills such as budgeting and saving and, most importantly, started learning how to love myself again. In working on these things it gave me the tools to be a better mom for my trio. Throughout the program, we were provided with nightly meals during the week, which eased my burden, especially on those nights when I worked my second job. My children had the fantastic opportunity to attend a sleep-away camp during the summer, which they thoroughly enjoyed. They have benefited from many other wonderful experiences through Lunch Break's Family Promise program as well. During the holiday season, my children were able to celebrate one of the best Christmases they have had in a very long time, thanks to the generosity of donors, the amazing staff, and the volunteers.

I am feeling a bit nervous now because my time with this wonderful program is coming to an end. I am currently working with Lunch Break's Family Promise team to find a permanent home for myself and my children. My prayer is that our next home will be a safe and stable environment, where my children will be in a great school district where they thrive, and are being prepared for success in the future. This program has been a positive light in our lives and has provided us with the tools to continue on our journey toward a safe and stable home. The tutelage and aid of Lunch Break Family Promise have been transformative. We will always be thankful, and we will always be family.



Family Promise Director, Memone Christian with Gala Honoree Hyiesha



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Thank you for your support!
We couldn't do what we do without you!

