



A PATH FORWARD

Support and Healing after Olden Avenue Fire

On September 19, 2025, a horror beyond imagination struck families living along the 1200 block of North Olden Avenue in Trenton. That night, a three-alarm fire tore through seven connected houses. By morning, residents learned the devastating news: the blaze had claimed the life of their neighbor, 18-year-old high school student Joseph Kokulo. Three others were hospitalized, and every home affected had been completely destroyed.

In total, the fire left 22 people homeless. The Red Cross provided hotel vouchers for immediate shelter, but far more support was desperately needed. The City of Trenton's Coordinated Entry Assessment System Center quickly reached out to Mosudi Idowu, Program Director of Rapid Re-Housing for assistance.

TRAINED AND READY TO RESPOND

"The types of services these families needed are exactly the kind of services our Rapid Re-Housing team provides to people in danger of becoming homeless," Idowu explained. "We set the displaced individuals and families up with temporary housing while we help them find a permanent residence. Our case managers also make assessments to ensure families' other needs were addressed."

Using funding from Mercer County, the Rapid Re-Housing team was able to secure housing for nearly all the displaced families within just a few weeks, no small accomplishment given the severe shortage of affordable housing in the region. Working with a trusted network of local landlords, the team found appropriate permanent placements and helped families quickly resettle.

"Only one of the families impacted by this fire had renter's insurance," said Idowu. "The other families needed monetary support for security deposits, furniture, and basic household goods." He also noted that the rents many families had been paying before the fire were far lower than current market rates. "Moving forward, they will need help adjusting to higher rent costs," he added. "We are here for that."

THE COMMUNITY RESPONDS

"In the midst of the darkness and tragedy these families are facing, there is a grace that comes from the community," said Executive Director Marlene Laó-Collins. "These families know they are not alone. There has been a pouring out of love and hope from people who want to help."



A Message from the **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**



Dear Friends,

As we approach the close of our Jubilee Year of Hope, I'm reminded of Pope Leo XIV timeless call to "bring the light of hope to those in darkness." This guiding virtue has illuminated our path throughout the year, inspiring us to walk hand in hand with those burdened by hardship, trauma and uncertainty.

At Catholic Charities, our help knows no bounds. We feed the hungry, shelter the displaced, offer mental health care to the isolated and extend compassion wherever it's needed most. Whether it's a warm meal, a safe place to sleep, a listening ear or a moment of grace, your generosity is the quiet force behind every meal served, every

door opened and every life uplifted. You remind us daily that mercy has no limits, and that love in action can transform even the most difficult circumstances.

As we look ahead, may the spirit of this Jubilee continue to guide us – not just in what we do, but in how we do it: with dignity, compassion and unwavering faith in the human spirit. May we continue to be agents of hope, builders of peace and instruments of healing in a world that longs for light.

With deep gratitude,

Marlene Laó-Collins
Executive Director

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NJAMHAA Honors Marlene Laó-Collins

This October, the New Jersey Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies (NJAMHAA) honored our Executive Director, Marlene Laó-Collins, with its Lifelong Leadership in Serving Vulnerable Populations Award at their Fall Conference, Harvesting Hope: A Vision for Behavioral Health Care.

"I am deeply honored and humbled," Marlene shared. "Our work is only possible through the shared commitment of remarkable colleagues and partners. Every success is a collective one, rooted in compassion and a belief in the dignity of every person."

Marlene's career has long centered on advancing social justice. Before joining Catholic

Charities, she served as Director for Social Concerns at the New Jersey Catholic Conference, shaping policy on homelessness, poverty, health care and immigration. Earlier, she spent a decade in state government improving programs like Medicaid and public assistance to expand care for low-income residents.

In accepting the award, Marlene credited her family's steadfast support – especially the example set by her activist parents and the encouragement of her late husband, sons and in-laws. She also praised her Catholic Charities team as "quiet heroes who show up every day with heart."

NJAMHAA represents more than 160 behavioral health organizations and 61,000 professionals statewide.

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Following the fire, the City of Trenton rallied behind the survivors, organizing a donation drive to supply essentials such as gift cards, food and household goods.

The Princeton Area Community Foundation contacted Catholic Charities to offer assistance and provided a grant from the Eleanor V. Horne Special Community Needs Fund to help cover temporary housing costs for the displaced families.

ADJUSTING AFTER THE LOSS

Yesheily Deleon, along with her mother Rebecca Rodriguez and brother Victor, had lived in their home for nearly five years. “I was at my job when the fire started,” said Yesheily, now a junior at Rider University. “I saw the whole thing unfolding on my phone. It was surreal watching my house burn while I was at work.”

“Most everything in our house was ruined,” she said. “But all of those things can be replaced. It is hard to imagine losing a son. We keep Joseph’s family in our hearts and prayers.” She, her mother and brother have moved into a new apartment in a quiet neighborhood. “We’re adapting, getting there little by little.”

Another resident, Sidney Settles, had lived with her mother in their home for nearly a decade. Sidney wasn’t home at the time of the fire. Her mother, age 67,



▲ Trenton fire devastates a community.
Credit: City of Trenton

suffered second and third degree burns and a broken shoulder blade escaping from the blaze. She was taken to the Temple Burn Center for treatment.

Sidney plans to stay with family for now. She does not want to choose a new home without her mother’s input. “We want to make that decision together,” she said.

WRAPAROUND SUPPORT FOR THE MONTHS AHEAD

“The families impacted by this fire are suffering,” said Idowu. “They all experienced serious trauma. Some are grieving the loss of a family member. Three people sustained injuries. It was important for us to make sure they all knew about Catholic Charities’ Early Intervention Support Services program, which offers behavioral health support to help them cope with grief, loss, depression and anxiety following the fire.”

Idowu also noted that case managers ensured families were connected to Catholic Charities’ food pantry and clothing closet. “We will keep in touch with these families,” he said. “Following their progress and making sure they have everything they need.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION about Rapid Re-Housing, call 609-394-8847.



▲ Program Director of Rapid Re-Housing Mosudi Idowu (left) working with one of the survivors.

BREAKING THE SILENCE

Building a Future

Imagine growing up with a secret so deep and dark, you can't even recognize its shape. All you know is that it makes you feel ashamed and afraid.

At 19, Diana is a sophomore at Monmouth University, pursuing a pre-med degree. She works as a Patient Care Technician at a hospital in Brick and loves the medical field. Her future feels wide open, limitless, even. But life wasn't always so full of promise.

The daughter of immigrants, Diana's early years were marked by hardship. "We were very poor," she recalls, "practically homeless." She remembers visiting food pantries and receiving Easter baskets and Christmas gifts from Catholic Charities during the holidays.

HEAVY WEIGHTS ON TINY SHOULDERS

From a young age, Diana served as her family's translator. "As a child, I was the spokesperson for my parents," she said. Her family lived in a single rented room in a house shared with strangers. The neighborhood was violent, and their home was burglarized.

At just four years old, Diana witnessed a horrific accident – her mother was struck by a car, suffered a broken back and became bedridden. Her father worked double shifts to support the family, leaving Diana unsupervised. During this vulnerable time, an adult male living in the house sexually assaulted her.

Unable to process the trauma, Diana buried the memory. She grew up feeling depressed, withdrawn and fearful. By the time she was nine, Diana had already attempted suicide. Two more attempts followed before she finally received the help she needed.

SECRETS SURFACING

As Diana prepared for her quinceañera, a Latin American tradition celebrating a girl's 15th birthday, she began experiencing nightmares and intense emotional pressure. The buried trauma started to surface. "My parents thought I was insane," she said. "They knew I needed help."



▲ Our Family Growth Program in Monmouth County welcomes clients in a safe, home-like setting for children and families to heal.

A doctor told her parents she was likely mentally ill and recommended psychiatric hospitalization. Thankfully, she wasn't admitted. Instead, Mobile Response Support Services intervened and referred Diana to a therapist who helped her uncover the memory haunting her. The realization was devastating for Diana and her parents, who were overwhelmed with guilt and sorrow.

Her family reported the crime, and Diana had to recount her trauma to police and detectives. Her abuser had fled the country. "I had to talk about it every week, for weeks," she said. Despite therapy, Diana still felt the abuse was her fault.

THE JOURNEY TO WELLNESS

That's when Diana was referred to the Family Growth Program in Monmouth County, funded by the NJ Division of Child Protection and Permanency. The program offers specialized counseling for children who have experienced abuse, as well as support for their families.

Diana began working with clinician Sandy Ludena. "I connected with Sandy, and I think she saved my life," Diana said. "For the first three sessions, I just cried. I couldn't get the words out. Sandy comforted me."

Sandy recommended Diana see a psychiatrist, who prescribed an antidepressant. Though hesitant, Diana agreed. "I thought medication was bad, but I took it. I went from being hysterical to being able to talk about what happened," she said. She stayed on the medication for about a year and began processing her trauma. For over three and a half

HALF A CENTURY

of Strengthening Families in Mercer County

In 1975, family violence was rarely acknowledged, leaving countless children to suffer in silence. Over the last 50 years, advocacy and innovation have transformed that reality – and Catholic Charities, Diocese of Trenton has been at the forefront of that change.

“Fifty years ago, talking openly about family violence was radical,” said Mary Pettrow, Director of Children & Family Services. “Creating a place where children could find safety and hope was nothing short of revolutionary.”

This year marks the 50th Anniversary of Family Growth (FG) in Mercer County. On November 17, the FG team joined NJ Department of Children & Families Commissioner Christine Norbut Beyer, former staff



▲ Executive Director Marlene Laó-Collins (right) with the family of the late Ron Gering, former Director of Children & Family Services



▲ New Jersey Department of Children and Families Commissioner Christine Norbut Beyer (left) and Director of Children & Family Services Mary Pettrow

and the family of first Director Ron Gering to honor this milestone.

For decades, FG has delivered specialized treatment for children and families impacted by abuse, violence and neglect – helping thousands reclaim stability and peace.

“FG has been a beacon for families navigating the darkest chapters of their lives,” said Executive Director Marlene Laó-Collins. “Their resilience is why this work matters.”

Commissioner Beyer, who began her career with Catholic Charities, reflected on years spent helping families rebuild. “This program represents a gold standard in partnership,” she said. “No single agency can meet all needs – it takes all of us working together.”

“Violence may take new forms,” Pettrow added, “but so will our solutions. Our responsibility is to keep evolving and leading with courage and compassion.”

The impact of FG reaches far beyond any single moment. “Every child who learns they are worthy of safety becomes an adult who can build a safe home,” Pettrow said. “That is how communities are transformed.”

years, Diana and Sandy worked together. “I can’t believe the progress we’ve made.”

“I’m truly proud of the young woman she’s become,” said Sandy. “She faced so many doubts and moments of lost hope. Every time she reached a milestone, she’d say, ‘I never thought I’d make it this far.’ Seeing her now is proof that her hard work and determination paid off.”

Diana’s parents also received counseling. “When I told my father, ‘I don’t want to give that person control over our family,’ that’s when they agreed to go to therapy too,” she said. “We can’t change the past, but we can change how we move forward.”

A VOICE FOR OTHERS

Diana knows abuse is more common than people realize, and that many victims are too afraid to speak up. Her goal is to help others understand that therapy can be a powerful and positive tool for healing. “There’s no other way to deal with something like this than to be open,” she said. “I had a bad understanding of therapy. Now I know therapy works – and life gets better.”

FOR MORE INFORMATION about Family Growth in Mercer, Monmouth and Ocean counties, call 800-360-7711.

CHANGING LIVES THROUGH LANGUAGE

One Class at a Time



Every Thursday, volunteer John Cleary stands at the front of a classroom at El Centro in Trenton, helping people learn English. The number of students may vary, but John is always there, ready to teach. El Centro, a program of Children and Family Services, supports Mercer County's Latino community.

"John is someone we can really count on," said Roberto Hernandez, Program Director at El Centro. "He's kind of like the Post Office here in rain, snow or shine. Ready to go. And he's been doing this for almost 20 years."

A mathematician in his professional life, John worked in Philadelphia as an actuary for a consulting firm that created pension plans. When he retired, he looked for ways to "keep off the couch." He began volunteering with Meals on Wheels and trained as an English as a Second Language (ESL) instructor with the Literacy Volunteers of Mercer County. Eventually, John found his way to El Centro, where students were plentiful.

"Teaching seemed like something I might enjoy doing," he said. Some weeks there are only two or three students; other weeks the classroom is filled with 20. "The students are all at different levels," John explained. "Some don't understand English at all, and some are pretty far along. I work with them where they are."

John bases his classes on an ESL workbook but enriches lessons with practical information. A unit on the library, for example, becomes a discussion about the services available there. He also explains cultural references and answers questions as they

arise. "John really thinks about his lessons and the everyday use of language. He includes practical information about the way things work in the United States," said Hernandez. "Many of his students go on to take citizenship classes here, so he incorporates a little history and civics too."

After nearly two decades of volunteering, John has taught multiple generations of families. "He has actually taught the children of former students," said Hernandez. "The students call him Abuelo, which means grandfather, that gives you an idea of the affection they have for him."

"John is a really good guy, and he's so dedicated to this community," Hernandez added. "I think he likes the atmosphere here. It may be one of the reasons he keeps coming back. He knows he's part of our family."

If you'd like to make a difference like John, El Centro welcomes new volunteers. New students are also welcome. Evening classes are offered Monday through Friday. Classes are free and open to all.



▲ John is affectionately known as Abuelo, which means grandfather in Spanish.

FOR MORE INFORMATION about ESL or Citizenship classes at El Centro, call 609-394-2056.

To learn about volunteering with Catholic Charities, contact Tracy Gillespie at tgillespie@cctrenton.org or call 609-394-5181 x1126.

CELEBRATING 36 YEARS OF HOPE AND COMMUNITY

On September 18th, we proudly marked the 36th Anniversary of the Guardian Angel Dinner Dance (GADD) a night overflowing with joy, generosity and the unbreakable spirit of community. More than 200 guests gathered to honor our extraordinary community partners and the countless individuals whose lives have been uplifted through our services.



▲ (from left) Executive Director Marlene Laó-Collins, Client Achievement Awardee Jason, Light of Hope Awardee Deborah Price of The Rotary Club of West Jersey, Bishop David M. O’Connell, Richard J. Hughes Humanitarian Awardee Brenda Rascher, Light of Hope Awardee Gerard St-Cyr, Board of Trustees Chair Michael W. Herbert

From the bottom of our hearts, thank you for standing with us and making a difference where it matters most. Together, we ignite hope and possibility for every life we touch.

Thanks to the unwavering support of our sponsors, donors and friends, this signature event raised nearly \$200,000 to sustain lifesaving programs across Burlington, Mercer, Monmouth and Ocean counties. Your compassion fuels our mission and transforms lives every day.

The 50/50 raffle reached a new milestone, bringing in over \$36,000. We extend heartfelt gratitude to everyone who contributed to this year’s Donate Now initiative. Our goal was to raise \$10,000 to provide families affected by domestic violence in our Safe Houses with comforting essentials: locking storage cabinets, televisions for family time, gaming systems for play and computers to restore a sense of normalcy. We raised an inspiring \$6,000, every dollar will enhance the daily lives of families who have endured crisis, helping us create safe, healing spaces filled with hope and dignity.





383 West State Street
Trenton, NJ 08618

See how we
make a difference.
Ask Siri to take you
to Catholic Charities,
Diocese of Trenton —
no typing required.



In a year marked by uncertainty for so many families,
your support has been unwavering.

Thank you for standing with us and giving hope to
those who need it most.