Catholic Charities
DIOCESE OF TRENTON
Serving Burlington, Mercer, Monmouth and Ocean Counties

The SPIRIT

FALL 2026



MOBILE FOOD PANTRY

Brings Fresh, Healthy Food Closer to Trenton Residents

A new Mobile Food Pantry is making it easier for Trenton residents to access fresh, healthy food in the communities where they live. For Lisa, a resident of Conner French Towers, the program has eliminated one of the biggest barriers she faces when grocery shopping – getting to the store without a car.

FOOD ACCESS CHALLENGES

In 2022, the New Jersey Economic Development Authority (NJEDA) identified and ranked 50 Food Desert Communities (FDCs) across the state – communities with limited access to affordable, nutritious food. These predominantly low-income areas often lack convenient access to supermarkets and other sources of fresh, healthy food.

Two Trenton neighborhoods have made the list. Lisa's community ranked sixth, while Trenton's eastern section ranked 11th.

"Living in a food desert isn't just about being inconvenienced," said Arnold Valentin Jr., Director of Community Services. "There are serious health concerns, too. Studies have shown that people living in FDCs face a higher risk of diabetes, cardiovascular disease and obesity, with children being particularly vulnerable."

To help address food insecurity in New Jersey's Food Desert Communities, NJEDA launched a $30 million initiative, Food Equity and Economic Development in New Jersey (FEED NJ). Through this initiative, 73 grants were awarded to organizations working to improve access to nutritious food.

Catholic Charities was one of the recipients of this two-year grant to expand food assistance in Trenton through a mobile food pantry program.

"We were thrilled to be selected," said Valentin. "My team understands how great the need is, and having the opportunity to bring fresh, nutritious food directly to the people who need it most is incredibly rewarding."

PARTNERSHIPS PAVED THE WAY

The program's success is rooted in strong community partnerships and a focus on solutions designed around residents' needs.

"We are trying to put resources into the hands of the experts and support solutions that are designed within communities, so they truly meet the needs of the people being served," said Tara Colton, NJEDA's Chief Economic Security Officer. "Catholic Charities received funding

Pictured: Trenton residents Josephine Seawright and Justine Seawright discovered plenty of fresh produce and even beautiful bouquets of sunflowers at a mobile food pantry stop at Woodrow Wilson Homes. Mobile Pantry Program Coordinator Ricky Beckles sets up the distribution sites and helps visitors find what they need.

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A Message from the **EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

This issue of *The Spirit* focuses on something at the heart of our mission – the power of community partnerships.

The challenges facing families are complex, and no one organization can tackle them alone. That's why we're committed to building strong, meaningful relationships with local organizations that share our dedication to supporting our most vulnerable neighbors. Together, we can coordinate services, share resources and reach people who might otherwise be overlooked.

Your support helps make these partnerships possible. Because of your generosity, we can build lasting relationships, respond quickly when new needs arise and create programs that meet people where they are.

As you read these stories, I hope you'll see the difference your support makes in individual lives and the incredible impact we can have when a community comes together to care for one another.

Thank you for being such an important partner in this work.

With heartfelt thanks,

Marlene Laó-Collins
Executive Director

Catholic Charities
DIOCESE OF TRENTON

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The Spirit is published quarterly by Catholic Charities, Diocese of Trenton's Development and Marketing Department.

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37th Annual Guardian Angel Dinner

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because they proposed a strong idea. We only awarded grants to projects we believed are sustainable, viable and impactful. They not only met the bar, they surpassed it."

"Partnerships are key to the success of this project," said Valentin. "We reached out to the Trenton Housing Authority (THA), and together we established a food pantry at Mayor Donnelly Homes. THA also helped identify two additional locations throughout the city where we can regularly distribute food."

"There are partnerships that look good on paper, and then there are partnerships that change what daily life looks like for a family trying to get by," said Kiya King-Green, Director of Resident and Community Services for THA. "That's what this is. Bringing a pantry directly into the community removes barriers that prevent residents from accessing fresh produce and healthy food."

GIVING RESIDENTS CHOICE AND DIGNITY

Ricky Beckles, Mobile Food Pantry Coordinator and Shania Hamilton-John, Food Pantry Case Manager, spent this spring developing distribution schedules, meeting with vendors and launching a mobile app that allows residents to register and select food items directly from their phones.

"One of our main goals with the mobile pantry is to help residents feel respected, valued and supported when accessing food assistance," said Beckles. "Our mobile pantry allows people to choose foods that make sense for their households. They can select items they know their families will eat and foods that are culturally relevant to them."

VOLUNTEERS KEEP THE PROGRAM GOING

At each distribution site, Beckles has enlisted volunteers to support food distribution. Lisa stepped forward to help at Conner French Towers. "I'm on the Resident Council because I like to stay involved," she said. "This seemed like a great way to help." She now spreads the word about the program and helps her neighbors register and navigate the mobile app.



▲ Representatives from the New Jersey Economic Development Authority, the Trenton Housing Authority, Mount Carmel Guild, the City of Trenton and program vendors joined Executive Director Marlene Laó-Collins for a ribbon cutting ceremony officially opening the FEED NJ pantry at Mayor Donnelly Homes.

Samuel, who has lived at Conner French Towers for more than 20 years also volunteers. "I deliver food throughout the building," he said. "I take groceries to residents who can't pick them up themselves. This is a wonderful program. I don't have a car, and with gas prices so high, it's difficult to ask someone for a ride to the grocery store."

In addition to Conner French Towers and Mayor Donnelly Homes, the Mobile Food Pantry serves residents at the Puerto Rican Community Center and our Princeton Integrated Behavioral Health office.

A special thank you to our valued project partners City Beef, Crest Paper Products, M. Fellinger Co., Mercer Street Friends, Mount Carmel Guild, Rolling Harvest Food Rescue, Snipes Farm and Education Center and the Trenton Health Team for their support in making this initiative possible.

FOR MORE INFORMATION about the FEED NJ program, visit www.catholiccharitiestrenton.org/feed_nj.

If you're interested in volunteering, please contact Program Director Ricky Beckles at 609–240–5255 or rbeckles@cctrenton.org.

FROM SURVIVAL TO STRENGTH

Meet Alissa

At this year's Guardian Angel Dinner held on September 18, guests witnessed the transformative power of compassion through the courageous story of Alissa, a survivor of domestic abuse who found safety, support and a path to healing. Her journey is deeply personal, yet it reflects the experiences of thousands of individuals and families who turn to Catholic Charities each year in moments of crisis and uncertainty. Alissa's story reminds us that with the right support, hope can take root, lives can be rebuilt and even the most difficult chapters can lead to new beginnings.



▲ Alissa turned her passion for yoga from a way to heal into a successful business. Today she donates some of the proceeds to Providence House.

THIS IS ALISSA'S STORY

Alissa was 15 years old when she entered a relationship that would shape much of her young life. From the outside, it may have looked like a story of young love. Behind closed doors, however, it was a very different reality.

Early in the relationship, Alissa experienced jealousy, controlling behavior and violence. When she tried to end the relationship, she was sexually assaulted and became pregnant.

Young and vulnerable, Alissa felt she had few choices. She went on to have three children while living with the constant challenges of an abusive relationship. To those around her, the situation often appeared normal. Few people knew what she was enduring.

Privately, Alissa faced constant criticism, manipulation and blame. She was repeatedly made to feel responsible for problems she did not cause. The threat of anger and violence was always present, making it difficult to feel safe or secure.

Early on, Alissa considered seeking a restraining order. She went to the police, where a clerk gave her information about Providence House Domestic Violence Services. She read the brochure and thought, "No. That's not what this is." She left without pursuing the restraining order.

Years passed. As her children grew, Alissa's world became smaller. The instability in her life made it difficult to form and maintain friendships. Quietly, she endured the abuse.

Then, an unimaginable tragedy changed everything.

Alissa lost one of her sons in a devastating car accident. During a storm, a tree fell across the road, and he could not stop in time.

Overwhelmed by grief and depression, Alissa withdrew from nearly everything. But in the depths of her grief, she came to a realization that would change the course of her life: nothing could hurt her as deeply as losing her child had hurt her.

That realization gave her the courage to act.

Alissa filed for a restraining order. She contacted Providence House and began individual and group counseling. Her youngest child received counseling there as well.

At Providence House, Alissa began to understand something she had struggled to see for years: she was not alone, and the abuse was not her fault.

In group counseling, she listened to other women share their experiences. Their circumstances were different, but the patterns were familiar: the control, the manipulation, the fear and the violence. Sitting beside a woman who had suffered severe physical abuse, Alissa finally understood, “It’s not just me. It’s not my fault.”

LITTLE BY LITTLE, ALISSA BEGAN REBUILDING HER LIFE

She discovered yoga, which gave her a sense of calm, focus and strength. When she could not afford classes, she traded her time cleaning the studio in exchange for instruction. What began as a way to heal herself eventually became something much greater.

Today, Alissa owns her own yoga studio.

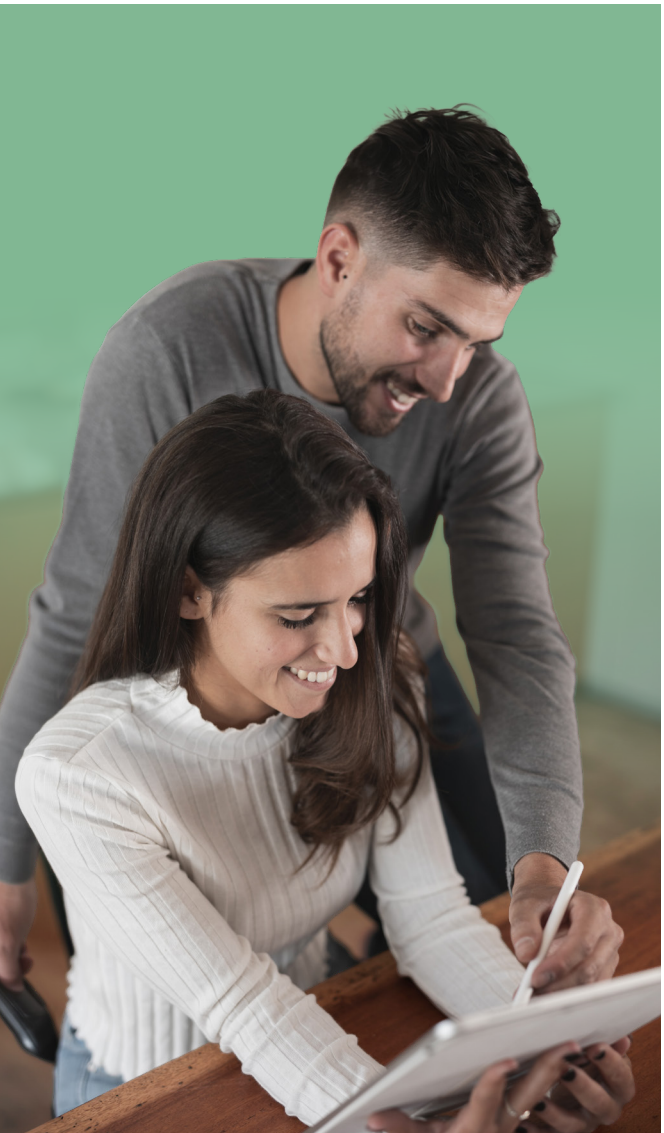
She has created more than a business. She has created a community, a place where people can find connection, encouragement and strength. And she has chosen to use that community to help others. Each week, proceeds from one of her classes are donated to charitable causes, including Providence House.

Alissa once believed she had no way out. Today, she is not only living a life of her own choosing, she is helping others find their own strength.

Her story is a powerful reminder of what can happen when someone is given support, safety and encouragement to believe in a different future.

FOR MORE INFORMATION about Providence House Domestic Violence Services, call 732–244–8259 in Ocean County or 609–871–7551 in Burlington County.

Good News for Charitable Giving



A new federal tax deduction gives more people an opportunity to benefit from their generosity while receiving a tax benefit. Taxpayers who take the standard deduction can now deduct cash gifts to qualified charities, up to $1,000 for individuals and $2,000 for married filing jointly.

For many donors, this is a significant change. Previously, taxpayers generally needed to itemize their deductions to claim a federal charitable deduction. Now, people who take the standard deduction may also have an opportunity to receive a federal tax benefit for their charitable giving.

For nonprofits like ours, this is welcome news. By extending a tax incentive to a wider audience, this new provision encourages charitable support and makes giving more attainable for families. Whether it’s a first-time gift or continued support from longtime donors, every contribution helps strengthen our mission and expand our impact.

We are excited about the possibilities this change brings. It creates an opportunity for more people to join our community of supporters, invest in causes they care about and make a meaningful difference. Together, we can continue building a stronger future for those we serve.

Please consult your tax advisor regarding your individual circumstances and eligibility. Tax rules and limitations apply.

NATIONAL EXHIBIT

Brings Stories of Hope and Service to Life in Freehold



▲ Large screens displayed videos from 42 of Catholic Charities' storytellers, sharing one experience during their service that made an impact on them.

When the 53-foot mobile People of Hope Museum pulled in at the Co-Cathedral of St. Robert Bellarmine in Freehold this June, more than 200 visitors stepped aboard to experience the impact of Catholic Charities' work up close.

Created by Catholic Charities USA, the museum uses interactive exhibits, first-person stories and multimedia experiences to showcase the impact of Catholic Charities agencies across the country and highlight the many ways they serve people in need. The traveling exhibit offers visitors a thoughtful, firsthand look at why this work matters and how faith and compassion inspire people to help their neighbors.

"We were blessed to have the opportunity to host this extraordinary museum and share its message of hope, faith and service with our community," said Jennifer Leip, Director of Development and Marketing. "It's a powerful and inspiring celebration of service to others. One of the highlights for us was seeing two members of our own team featured among the 42 stories, sharing their personal experiences and the meaningful impact of their work."

WATCHING OUR TEAM SHINE

Arnold Valentin, Jr., Director of Community Services, shared the story of helping a young woman from Liberia who came to the United States for cancer treatment. His experience supporting her reaffirmed his belief in the importance of being there for people during some of the most challenging moments of their lives.

Mary Pettrow, Director of Children and Family Services, shared a heartfelt story that illustrates the lasting impact of the support provided by Catholic Charities. Twenty years ago, while working as a case manager at Providence House Domestic Violence Services, Mary worked with a young man who had experienced domestic violence. Years later, she encountered him as an adult, thriving and living a life free from violence. The experience was a profound reminder of the lasting difference Mary and her colleagues have made in the lives of those they serve.

WHY OUR SERVICES MATTER

The museum also explores the realities of poverty and the challenges facing communities today.

"In addition to the insightful stories shared by Catholic Charities employees and volunteers, the museum addresses the issue of poverty," said Leip. "One exhibit highlighted New Jersey specific data on childhood poverty, homelessness and food insecurity. Seeing these statistics presented is a profound reminder of the challenges so many individuals and families face and the critical role Catholic Charities plays in helping meet those needs."

Through an interactive poverty simulator, visitors were invited to experience the difficult choices faced by individuals and families living with limited resources. An audio library offered excerpts

from books exploring poverty, social isolation, bridgebuilding and community action, providing additional opportunities for reflection and connection. The museum also invited visitors to become part of the experience by sharing their own stories of hope and service in a special recording studio.

The People of Hope Museum launched in March and will travel across the country over the next two and a half years, making more than 150 stops along the way. The initiative is made possible by a grant from Lilly Endowment Inc. through an invitational round of its National Storytelling Initiative on Christian Faith and Life.

FOR MORE INFORMATION about The People of Hope Museum, visit https://peopleofhope.us



▲ Last summer, Arnold Valentin, Jr. and Mary Pettrow traveled to Alexandria, Va. to record their stories of hope. This summer, they were able to host the People of Hope exhibit in Freehold. A proud moment for both Service Area Directors.

When Crisis Hit, Our Community Stepped Forward

A powerful storm caused a partial roof collapse at BJ's Wholesale Club in Ocean Township, sending water and debris into the building while more than 27 people were inside. Emergency crews, including the Monmouth County Sheriff's Office Drone Team and New Jersey Urban Search and Rescue K-9 units, rushed to the scene. Officials determined that roughly 20% of the structure had collapsed. Severe flooding throughout the region added another challenge, making roads and travel conditions extremely dangerous.

But even in the middle of chaos, something remarkable happened.

Within hours of the collapse, our food pantry, a partnership between Catholic Charities, Diocese of Trenton and Seeds of Service, reached out with one simple question: How can we help? The answer came quickly: Can you pick up the food before it goes to waste?



What happened next was a powerful demonstration of what community looks like in action.

Our team quickly went to work, calling on trusted partners who never hesitate to step up. Fulfill NJ, Knights of Columbus, U-Haul, Bob's Plaza Movers and Penske Trucking joined forces with our staff and volunteers to make it happen. Together, we arrived with six trucks and loaded hundreds of pallets of fresh produce, meat, baked goods and essential groceries, food that otherwise would have gone to waste.

Thanks to this rapid, coordinated effort, the food pantry was able to distribute these items to hundreds of families across Ocean County in the days that followed. At a moment when many in our community were already struggling with flooding, power outages and transportation challenges, this unexpected donation became a much-needed lifeline.

This reminds us that even in moments of crisis, compassion and collaboration can rise just as quickly as the storm. We are deeply proud of our team, our partners and every volunteer who answered the call. Their dedication reflects the very best of public service and the very heart of our mission.

Catholic Charities
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