



MERCY CENTER STRATEGIC PLAN

July 1, 2022 through June 30, 2025

Fiscal 2023-2025

The Mercy Center Model

For nearly 40 years, the Mercy Center has faithfully served families of the Greater Asbury Park area. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, has served to highlight the fragile ecosystem that many of our families still find themselves in.¹ Living paycheck to paycheck and working two to three jobs to simply keep food on the table has not been enough. The area remains an impoverished food desert where families continue to suffer double-digit unemployment, historically high costs of living and educational challenges which, if not remedied, will virtually ensure a continued cycle of poverty for our children. According to the 2020 census, 25.8% of the residents of Asbury Park live below the poverty line.² That is more than double the rate in Monmouth County and more than double the rate in New Jersey. Thirty-eight percent of the children of Asbury Park live in poverty.³

The number of people in our area living at or below the federal poverty level is projected to rise in Monmouth County over the next few years. During the pandemic, the number of food insecure children in our area rose from 9.1% in 2018 to 17.6% in 2020, which represents a 93 percent increase.⁴

The vision for Mercy Center is to end generational poverty in the greater Asbury Park area. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty, adults who were poor during childhood are much more likely to be poor as adults and their children likewise impoverished.⁵ This cycle is known as generational poverty. To end generational poverty, Mercy Center has three pillars. First, we solve immediate needs by providing emergency food and expenses through our pantry. Next, we provide individuals and their families professional multi-lingual services through our Family Resource Center to strengthen families with the goal of providing the tools needed to lead full and satisfying lives in an effort to end poverty in their lifetime. Finally, evidence shows that education is the key to truly breaking the cycle of poverty.⁶ Thus, we work to end the cycle by providing

¹ The full History of Mercy Center is attached in Appendix 1

² Asbury Park, Monmouth County, <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/06000US3402501960-asbury-park-citymonmouth-county-nj/> and <https://neighborhoodscout.com/nj/asbury-park/>

³ See Footnote 1

⁴ COVID-19's Impact on Hunger in New Jersey, Community Foodbank of New Jersey, <https://cfbnj.org/covidimpact/>

⁵ Childhood and Intergenerational Poverty: The Long -Term Consequences of Growing Up Poor, National Center for Children in Poverty, <https://nccp.org/publication/childhood-and-intergenerational-poverty/>

⁶ How Does Education Help Children Break the Cycle of Poverty? <https://right2learnfoundation.org/how-does-education-help-children-break-the-cycle-of-poverty/>

young woman with a tuition-free education of excellence. All three pillars work cohesively to end poverty one child and one family at a time.

While much of America is rushing to put the pandemic behind them, the underserved families of our area are not as fortunate. It is against this backdrop that Mercy Center sets out this plan for the next three fiscal years from 2023 through 2025.

The Strategic Planning Process

The strategic planning process began in 2021 but was halted as the height of the pandemic made the future difficult to predict. As Mercy Center searched for, and found, its first lay Executive Director and its first lay Sisters Academy principal, the Board of Trustees launched a process to develop a three-year strategic plan.⁷ In November 2021, the Board and staff leadership conducted a day-long retreat that focused on the five Critical Concerns of the Sisters of Mercy: Earth, Nonviolence, Anti-racism, Women, and Immigration. From the retreat discussion, the Board identified five areas that form the foundation of this Strategic Plan:

1. Increase our reach in the community with emergency and wraparound services, including counseling for children, parents, sexual and domestic violence victims, and education to better support women and families.
2. Become the champion for families of all cultures by building a stronger, more culturally diverse advocacy program for our underserved and marginalized population programs in order to better address issues of immigration and racism.
3. Increase public awareness and understanding of how to end generational poverty and the role Mercy Center can play in eradicating generational poverty by using the template of the five Critical Concerns of the Sisters of Mercy as a guide.
4. Hire, develop, and retain exceptional staff while setting objective data metrics to gauge our success, regularly assess those measures and develop plans to exceed them.
5. Evaluate and develop a set of choices and solutions for improving and enhancing the physical space, infrastructure and technology needs of the organization to reach these goals.

⁷ Founder and Executive Director Sister Carol Henry retired after 38 years. Principal Sister Mary Lou Miller retired after 25 years.

Strategic Plan Approval

The Board of Trustees of Mercy Center will consider the fiscal 2022-2025 strategic plan on June 24, 2022. The Plan represents the commitment of the Board to the Vision, Mission, and Values of Mercy Center. The Board's responsibilities in oversight and governance are an integral part of the plan's success.

Board of Trustees: Mary Beth Radke, Chair, Mary Catherine Cuff, Vice Chair, Nicole Berry, Maureen Domal, Sr. Rosemary Jeffries, Eugene Garb, Sr. Martha Hanlon, Richard Jursca, Dana Lawrence, Linda Leasor, Mary J. Meehan, Anaika Napolean, Evelyn Quinn, Gerald Radke, Lu-Ann Russell, Thomas Villane.

MERCY CENTER VISION

Guided by the Critical Concerns and Values of the Sisters of Mercy, **it is our vision to alleviate generational poverty in the greater Asbury Park area.**

MERCY CENTER MISSION

Mercy Center's foundation is one of faith; and we place faith at the center of all we do. Our efforts are to nourish the body, mind and spirit through culturally appropriate community interactions focused on the utilization of holistic services provided directly and through partnerships that engage our community to end generational poverty one child and one family at a time. It is the Mission of Mercy Center to provide services, programs, and education in a culturally sensitive manor to:

- Empower people in the Greater Asbury Park area to reach their full potential by providing immediate and comprehensive services and programs to help stabilize their lives;

- Enrich the lives of those we serve by offering opportunities to develop skills and strategies to maintain emotional, economic, and physical well-being; and,

-Educate children so that we can break the cycle of generational poverty one child, one family at a time.

MERCY CENTER VALUES

We are a community committed to living the core values of Respect, Compassion, Service, Justice and Integrity.

Respect: We will promote the acceptance of differences and the dignity of every individual.

Compassion: We will give priority to the sufferings and misfortunes of others.

Service: We will provide holistic, long-term services to the people so as to strengthen family relationships, build successful lives and become agents of change.

Justice: We will advocate for a society in which all people are free to realize their full potential and work toward the achievement the common good.

Integrity: We do all this ethically, justly and honestly.

STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

Set out below are the Strategic Initiatives that define what we will pursue in the next three years. Also, we set out Strategic Enablers, that is, the initiatives we must pursue to successfully execute our plan. Finally, we will provide objective performance metrics that will measure our progress. These metrics will be reported to the Board as a part of our regular Board meeting.

1. Community Outreach

Increase our reach in the community with emergency and wraparound services, including counseling for children, parents, sexual and domestic violence victims, and education to better support women and families.

The underserved population of the greater Asbury Park area will continue to be slow to recover from the COVID pandemic. The greater Asbury Park area lack retail food stores that are readily accessible to residents, i.e. they live in a food desert. They are susceptible to supply-chain issues as they have been and continue to be hit hard by the rising costs of transportation, food, and shelter. The high cost of living is exacerbated by the lack of meaningful employment opportunities in the area brought on by the stubborn unemployment, which is nearly double the

state average, and inflation levels that have not been seen in more than four decades.

We will continue to provide resources and services as we have through our food Pantry, the Family Resource Center and the Sisters Academy. We must also explore any gaps in that service. The clients we have been able to survey are universally satisfied with our services. (See Appendix 3.) Our Community Partner survey shows that while our partners are familiar with our basic services such as the Pantry, we need to communicate to a wider audience the extensive scope of our professional services in the Family Resource Center. (See Appendix 3.) Interestingly, our partners universally support expanding the geographic reach of our wrap around services. (See Appendix 3.) Based on this feedback, we will better address obstacles and remove the barriers that prevent our partners, families and individuals from accessing our services in an expanded service area.

By working collaboratively with our partners in a client-centered approach, we will become a leader in providing immediate emergency services, such as food, rent and utilities assistance, to our neighbors and promoting the overall stability of families with innovative programs that address the long-term impact of generational poverty. Collaborative solutions based on mutual respect and trust will ensure that we accomplish our Vision and Mission.

2. Stronger Advocacy

Become the champion for families of different cultures by providing stronger advocacy for our culturally specific programs in order to more effectively address issues of immigration and racism.

We serve a community that is one of the most diverse in the state. In order to understand better the needs of the community, we have engaged multilingual advocates and licensed social workers. We have also begun an interfaith coalition to address issues of domestic violence and sexual assault. As such, Mercy Center is well positioned to reach the “shadow population,” such as undocumented and underserved persons and, in doing so, provide these groups the support and skills they need to rise above the poverty level. Mercy Center will be the voice for these families not only to serve the family, but also to raise awareness of their existence to the mainstream public.

Our community partner survey had a disappointing response rate, despite our efforts at outreach. (See Appendix 3.) One possible way to view this result is that partners in our community are not aware of our efforts or not aware of us generally.

We will open our doors to all persons in need of help and we will engage our community faith leaders, social service leaders and public servants to provide that help. We will build a hub to serve the needs of our clients that reflects the Vision, Mission and Values of the Mercy Center.

3. Expand Public Awareness

Increase public awareness and understanding of generational poverty and the role of Mercy Center in addressing it based on the five of the Critical Concerns of the Sisters of Mercy.

There is no easy way to end generational poverty. We address this challenge through three strategic pillars of service: we meet immediate needs, we provide holistic services and finally we provide educational opportunities to break the cycle of generational poverty. Each of these three pillars must work together seamlessly if we are to be successful. In interviewing the staff in September, it became clear that the entire staff needs to work on understanding the interrelationship between the three pillars and that all three are critical to our success. (See Appendix 4 at p. 23, 2-5.). Thus, we will ensure that each of our three pillars work collaboratively to complement, supplement and enhance the services provided by the other.

We must jointly expand our efforts to reach other families in our community by opening the school to other outside programs and students from other religious affiliations.⁸ In addition, we should partner with others to explore providing educational opportunities to young boys in a *co-institutional* setting (not *coeducational*). In this way, we will have the best chance of addressing each of the five critical concerns of the Sisters of Mercy.

As to the wrap-around services provided by the FRC, we will continue to address those services as set out in Strategic Initiative 2 above. And, we will ensure that each pillar works with the other to achieve our vision.

⁸ With full consideration to our Vision and Mission as well as logistics such as cost, insurance and security.

Recently, the Board approved an expansion of the Sisters Academy to include fourth graders under the auspices of and consistent with the mission of the Sisters of Mercy. This expansion will allow us to enroll children from the public school at the time they switch to the middle school in the Asbury Park school system; that is, the fourth grade. We will recruit a more diverse student body to bring enrollment more in line with the diversity of the community as reflected by the 2020 Census data.⁹

We will endeavor to ensure our work at the elementary school level continues through high school with mentoring program and lending assistance financially as best we can.

STRATEGIC ENABLERS

Having set out what we plan to do over the next three years, we must now address what we need to execute the plan. These “enablers” will be critical to our success.

1. Human Resources

Hire, develop and retain our exceptional staff with objective measures of our success, regular assessment of those measures and exceed them, including a regular review of compensation.

The dedication and leadership of our qualified staff is the key to our success. Our need for multilingual professionals is rising as the qualified labor pool diminishes. In the last few years, the labor pool in general has become accustomed to flexible work schedules, higher salaries and better benefits.

In today’s labor market, we must, at the very least, meet the market demands in order to hire qualified, reliable employees. Our conversations with staff and anonymous staff surveys have confirmed the need to be more vigilant in setting goals, reviews, cost of living increases and daily work conditions such as hours and physical environment. We will conduct a full review of staff turnover, salaries, benefits and conditions of employment. We will transition to providing competitive benefits, diversity, as well as talent development through professional growth opportunities.

⁹ <https://www.neighborhoodscout.com/nj/asbury-park>, Race & Ethnic Diversity.

We must continually measure performance and morale among staff. Each member of the staff has a stressful job regardless of the position at Mercy Center. COVID has taken an additional toll on all of our employees. Staff morale, including length of work days, schedules, professional development and programming, must be key areas of emphasis over the next three years.

As a corollary to recruiting and maintaining qualified staff, we must develop a long term financial plan that takes into account the resources needed to support our proposed growth in services, human resources and space requirements. We will create a short-term plan that recognizes near-term cash requirements for the current budget; a mid-range plan that allows for competitive wages and new programming; and a long- term sustainability plan in the form of a capital and endowment campaign.

Financial stability goes hand in hand with an external outreach plan. Similar to the budget, our external outreach must include current, mid-range and long- term plans to ensure that our entire community, including the underserved, our partners and our donors, are aware of who we are and what we do. This is not simply a social media campaign, but includes the Board, staff, and volunteers to serve as our ambassadors.

2. Physical space enhancement

Evaluate, develop options and solve for the lack of physical space, infrastructure and technology.

In its infancy, Mercy Center operated out of the trunk of a car. Emergency food was distributed directly to those who needed it most in Asbury Park. In 1986, with a loan from the Sisters of Mercy, 1106 Main Street was purchased and Mercy Center's Emergency Center was established. In 1991, 1108 Main Street was purchased, renovated and opened as the permanent home for the Family Resource Center. In 2001, Mercy Center purchased its final property on Main Street and constructed a new two-story building to house the food pantry, offices and a conference room.

Over the years, the need in the Greater Asbury Park area has continued to grow. COVID 19 has had a devastating effect on families here and they will feel the impact of COVID, unemployment, and escalating costs of living for years to

come. Recent efforts to expand the pantry capacity has resulted in triple-digit increases in service to families in the community.

The survey of the Board and staff shows that 51.51% believe the layout and/or the condition of the Mercy Center Building are a weakness with another 15.15% indicating they did not have enough information to make an informed decision on the issue. (See Appendix 5 at p. 29.)¹⁰

In December 2021, the Mercy Center had a Capital Needs Audit performed on the buildings, which found that “the property has substantive capital needs in the coming year [with] a number of systems and components [that] are at or approaching the end of their useful lives”. (See Appendix 6 at p. 39.) The Audit recommends an initial infusion of cash of \$475,000 in year one. That figure alone, in addition to the rising demand for services and space for services, calls for an evaluation of, and a long-term solution for, our space challenges.

We will reimagine our space both physically and spiritually in the tradition of the Sisters of Mercy’s commitment to hospitality and stigma-free service to those in need. We need to make an informed recommendation to the Board with respect to meeting the needs of the community Mercy Center serves. The choices are straightforward: renovate, move or rebuild.

The Board has already approved a capital needs audit for the Sisters Academy building and that audit will be conducted in September with the results presented to the Board by December. Recommendations for any changes will be addressed at that time.

3. Improving Financial Profile

Mercy Center must improve its financial planning capabilities. Going forward, we will project out a three-year plan including a balanced budget in each of the three years based on sound financial planning principals. To do this, Mercy Center will conduct a top to bottom review of the efficacy of our programs to ensure programs are directly tied to our vision and mission. The staff will then position Mercy Center to accomplish the initiatives with a short term, mid-term and three-year

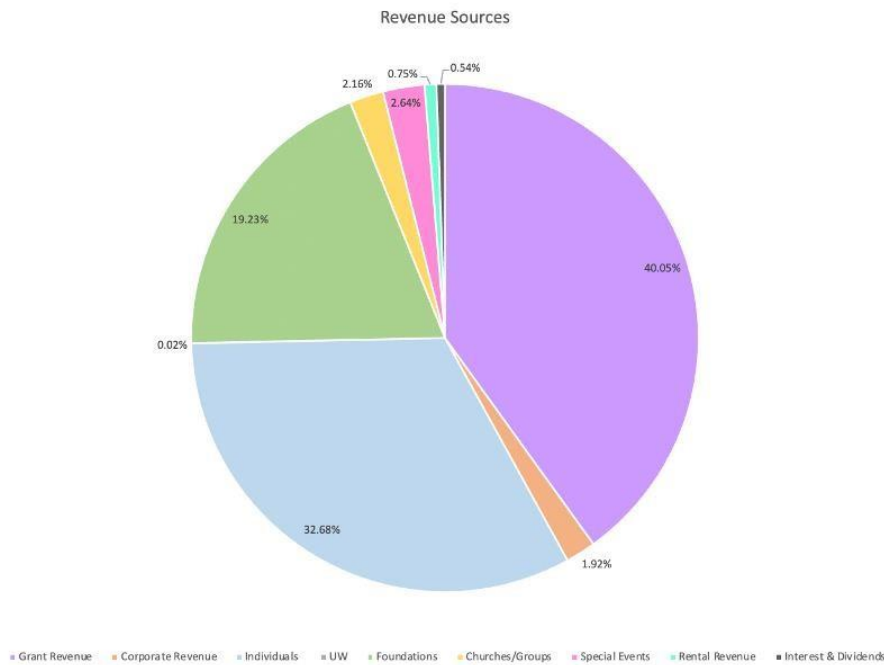
¹⁰ Of the remaining 33.34%, 21.2% did not believe the buildings were a strength or a weakness. Nine percent believed the building a strength and 3.03 believed the building to be our greatest strength,

Development strategy that supports the successful completion of the three-year plan.

4. Expanded Donor Strategy

The question of financial stability has been a constant conversation at Board meetings. Mercy Center has been fortunate in the last year with COVID donations and with added sources of government contracts. While it is too early for us to project our monthly average revenue needs under this plan, a conservative estimate is \$200,000/month on average. We must have a strategy to meet that need.

Currently, Mercy Center revenue comes from a mix of sources:



It is obvious that we rely heavily on state grant revenue for some of our programs. Given the year-to-year uncertainty of those contracts, we must improve and diversify our funding sources. We will always be a responsible steward of funds: however, in order to afford the initiatives envisioned for the next three years, we must expand the focus on new and expanded revenue from

individual and corporate donors, capitalize on grants, actively seek out third party fundraisers, such as the St. Gabriel's event that resulted in food and funds raised but required no Mercy Center staff, and aggressively market all special events.

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Conclusion

This strategic plan will guide the staff and the Board over the next three years. Following the Appendices is the preliminary tactical plan we use to measure our success in reaching the goals of the Strategic Plan. That plan will be supported by a timetable, metrics to measure success and a financial plan once the Strategic Plan has been approved by the Board at the April meeting. The final Strategic Plan including the Strategy, the tactical and financial plan will be presented to the Board for final approval in June. Note that the Strategic Plan is an internal document. A Plan summary will be developed from the final document that can be shared with the public.