



MERCY CENTER STRATEGIC PLAN

July 1, 2025 through June 30, 2028

Fiscal 2026-2028

Mercy Center Strategic Plan 2026-2028: Embracing Growth, Expanding Impact

Mercy Center's mission to serve those in need has never been more critical. Building upon the foundation laid by our previous strategic plan, this 2026-2028 fiscal year plan addresses the stark reality of a triple-digit increase in demand for our services. This surge underscores both the vital role Mercy Center plays in our community and the urgent need to expand our reach and deepen our impact. This plan outlines a bold vision for the future, one that not only enhances existing programs but also strategically builds and expands services to meet this escalating need. It represents a commitment to not just meeting the present challenges, but proactively shaping a future where all those who turn to Mercy Center find hope and support.

Mercy Center Model and Serving the Poor

For more than 40 years, the Mercy Center has faithfully served families of the Greater Asbury Park area.¹ The Vision for Mercy Center is to end generational poverty. 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.² 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 ["FRC"] 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.³ Thus, we work to end the cycle by providing young women with a tuition-free education. All three pillars work together to end poverty one child and one family at a time.

The COVID-19 pandemic served to highlight the fragile ecosystem in which many of our families live in. We see these conditions continue to worsen post-COVID as

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

² 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/>

³ How Does Education Help Children Break the Cycle of Poverty? <https://right2learnfoundation.org/how-does-education-help-children-break-the-cycle-of-poverty/>

the result of spiraling inflation. Living paycheck to paycheck and working two to three jobs to simply keep food on the table is not 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 their children.

According to the 2020 census, 25.8 percent of the residents of Asbury Park live below the poverty line.⁴ 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.⁵

According to the annual survey conducted by the Department of Education, Asbury Park public schools continue to score dead last in the State of New Jersey in math and language arts in elementary school and, not surprisingly, continues through high school.⁶ High School four and five-year completion rate still ranks among the worst in the state. The failure to educate our children virtually ensures our families will continue to be trapped in generational cycle of poverty.⁷

In the 2023-2025 Strategic Plan, we sought to move people out of the poverty of the COVID years and on to full and satisfying lives. The seven areas we strove to improve in were:

1. **Expanding Service capacity.** 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. **Enhancing Program Effectiveness.** 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. **Promoting Advocacy and Awareness.** Increase public awareness and understanding of how to end generational poverty and expand the role

⁴ Asbury Park, Monmouth County, <https://censusreporter.org/profiles/06000US3402501960-asbury-park-city-monmouth-county-nj/> and <https://neighborhoodscout.com/nj/asbury-park/>

⁵ See Footnote 4

⁶ [N.J. school test scores revealed for 2024. Look up how students did in your district. - nj.com](#)

⁷ See Footnote 3

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. **Cultivating a Culture of Excellence.** 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. Examine and revise current organizational structure for best practices.
5. **Investing in Infrastructure and Technology.** Finalize and execute our plan for enhancing the physical space, infrastructure and technology needs of the organization.
6. **Securing Sustainable Funding.** Diversifying our funding streams and implementing robust fundraising strategies are crucial to ensuring the long-term sustainability of Mercy Center and the ability to meet the growing needs of the community.
7. **Expanded Donor Strategy.**

As we evaluated our last three years, we have been surprised and gratified to see a triple-digit *increase* in our reach both in the Pantry and in our work at the FRC. Still, three years out of the COVID pandemic our community continues to struggle with poverty and especially food insecurity. According to the most recent report from Feeding America, the meal gap, or hunger level, in Monmouth County rose 31 percent from 2021 to 2022.⁸ The number is even greater when we focus on children. For children, food insecurity increased 94 percent from 2021 to 2022.⁹

While much of America is rushing to put the pandemic behind them, the underserved families of our area are not as fortunate. We have instead moved from serving the greater Asbury Park area to providing services to 24 of Monmouth County's 54 towns; that is, 44 percent of the County. We have also responded to need outside of Monmouth County to include an additional five counties in New Jersey. Our own Pantry has moved from serving 1500 three years ago, to more than 100,000 this year. It is against this backdrop that Mercy Center sets out this plan for the next three fiscal years from 2025 through 2028.

⁸ <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2022/overall/new-jersey/county/monmouth>

⁹ <https://map.feedingamerica.org/county/2022/overall/new-jersey/county/monmouth>

The Strategic Planning Process for 2026-2028 Fiscal Years

In November 2024, the Board and Staff Leadership conducted a day-long retreat that began with a reflection on the charism of the Sisters of Mercy and moved to the Five Critical Concerns of the Sisters of Mercy: Earth, Nonviolence, Anti-Racism, Women, and Immigration. From the November 2024 retreat discussion, the Board determined to continue the work from the previous Plan and expanded our focus on technology to harness the power of AI to optimize operations, deepen community engagement, and amplify our mission.

MERCY CENTER VISION

The geographic coverage area for the last decades has been focused on Asbury Park or greater Asbury Park. Thus, our Vision has been limited to the greater Asbury Park area. However, in the last three years, we have served five counties: Monmouth, Ocean, Middlesex, Mercer, Camden and 44 percent of the municipalities in Monmouth County.¹⁰

The Strategic Plan has therefore changed our Vision to more accurately reflect our expanded service area:

Guided by the Critical Concerns and Values of the Sisters of Mercy, it is our Vision to alleviate generational poverty.

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

¹⁰ Asbury Park, Avon, Belmar, Bradley Beach, Neptune, Ocean, Long branch, Tinton Falls, Keansburg, Keyport, Hazlet, Middletown, Red Bank, Sea Girt, Spring Lake, Manasquan, Freehold, Holmdel, Monmouth Beach, Union Beach, Atlantic Highlands, Sea Bright, Brielle. Our largest numbers are predictably in Asbury Park [49,426] and Neptune [42, 065] but we have as many as 2,349 from Long Branch, 1,798 in Belmar, 875 in Bradley Beach, 863 in Tinton Falls, 470 in Howell, 438 in Freehold, and 391 in Middletown.

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 manner to:

-Empower people 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.

SISTERS OF MERCY AND MERCY CENTER VALUES

We are a Ministry of the Sisters of Mercy 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 for others.

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

Integrity: We will 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. These Initiatives outline what we intend to do and are driven by

our Vision and Mission. 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.

In the last three years, as summarized above, we achieved or made significant progress on most of the essential aspects of the plan. We fell short in ensuring our students have a plan for long-term success at the Sisters Academy both in mentoring and financing each student as they leave the eighth grade and transition to high school and later to higher education.

1. Expanding Service capacity.

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 our community will continue to be slow to recover from high inflation and unemployment. Our community lacks retail food stores that are readily accessible to residents, i.e., they live in a food desert. They are susceptible to supply-chain and national issues like tariffs as they have been and continue to be hit hard by the rising costs of transportation, food, and shelter.

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. 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. Interestingly, our partners universally support expanding the geographic reach of our wrap around services. 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.

As to Sisters Academy, we should successfully submit our self-evaluation to both Middle States and the New Jersey Association of Independent Schools (NJ AIS). We will assure that the Sisters Academy maintains the academic excellence that is recognized by dual accreditation by these two nationally respected organizations.

By working collaboratively with our partners using a client-centered approach, we will continue to be 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. Enhancing Program Effectiveness.

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 established an interfaith coalition to address issues of domestic violence and sexual assault. As such, Mercy Center is a recognized leader in reaching the “shadow population,” such as undocumented and underserved persons. We strive to provide these groups the support and skills they need to rise above the poverty level. Mercy Center is the voice for these families not only to serve the community in need, 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. 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 continue to grow our community partners.

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

No Strategic Plan could leave unsaid the unsettled national environment in which we operate. We will continue to execute on the Five Critical Concerns and be particularly alert to the fear and uncertainty that relates to Immigration. It has been our policy, and will continue to be our policy, to help those in need regardless of their circumstances. We will continue to be a safe haven for those who seek our help and will develop, teach and raise awareness of our efforts. We will ensure that

our staff, clients, volunteers and Board are aware of events surrounding policy challenges on both a federal and local level.

3. Promoting Advocacy and Awareness.

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

There is no easy way to end generational poverty. We will continue to address this challenge by focusing on three equally important 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 ending generational poverty. Thus, we will aim to ensure that each of our three pillars work collaboratively to complement, supplement and enhance the services provided by the other.

We will continue to help end the poverty of our families through education. We will enhance their educational and employment opportunities by partnering with agencies that currently excel at those efforts. We will encourage their participation with support and referrals to those agencies. Instead of starting up new programs, we will survey the variety of programs already in existence in the area and make appropriate referrals.

We have expanded our efforts to reach other families in our community by opening the school to other outside programs and students from other religious affiliations.¹¹ For example, we have opened Sisters Academy to the Islamic Center for basketball, to the families of Asbury Park for softball practice, community meetings, tax preparation and other activities. In addition, we will continue to explore providing educational opportunities to young boys in a *co-institutional* setting (not *co-educational*). In this way, we will have the best chance of addressing each of the Five Critical Concerns of the Sisters of Mercy.

The opening to the Sisters Academy to fourth graders has been a success. And, in the next three years we will explore a school expansion to K-3 should space and finances allow.

¹¹ With full consideration to our Vision and Mission as well as logistics such as cost, insurance and security.

An important initiative over the next three years will be to ensure our work at the elementary school level continues through high school with mentoring programs, financial assistance and alumni programs.

As to the wrap-around services currently 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.

STRATEGIC ENABLERS

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

4. Cultivating a Culture of Excellence.

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

The dedication and leadership of our qualified staff continues to be the key to our success. In the last three years, we have doubled the number of employees, have normalized salaries, increased benefits and instituted a permanent annual review process that incorporates a commitment to the Charism of the Sisters of Mercy. In addition, we now have a comprehensive employee manual that is reviewed annually by outside counsel and approved by the Board.

We must continue to measure performance and morale among staff. Each member of the staff has a stressful job regardless of their position at Mercy Center. In recognition of our rapid growth, we provided a work from home day once a week. This year that policy was lifted absent specific contract provisions. That change in policy resulted in some job dissatisfaction that Management must continue to work through. Management must also recognize the need to evaluate staff structure given the rapid growth and right size the organizational structure to better address leadership challenges.

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 have created 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 driven by an ambitious new 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.

As noted in Section 5 below, we have approved a building plan that will modernize our space on Main Street. The challenge for the next three years is to keep our focus on day-to-day operations while conducting an active \$10 million capital campaign.

5. Investing in Infrastructure and Technology.

Invest in Infrastructure and Technology to ensure that the barrier free delivery of multicultural services in one place and under one roof supported by an aggressive capital campaign to pay for it.

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 our community has continued to grow substantially.

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”. The Audit recommended an initial infusion of cash of \$475,000 in year one. That figure alone, in addition to the rising

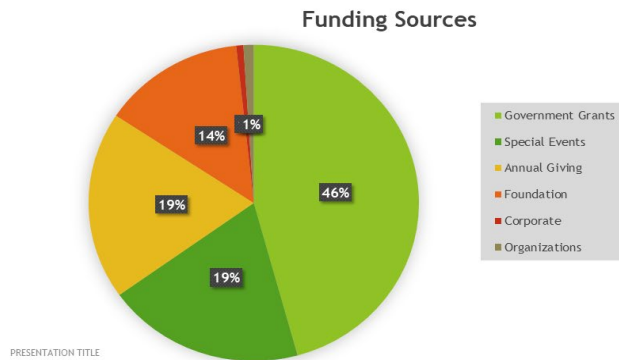
demand for services and space for services, called for an evaluation of, and a long-term solution for, our space challenges.

Over the last three years, the Board has evaluated our needs and determined to build a modern, efficient space so that all our services are stigma free and under one roof. A capital and building campaign entitled “Under One Roof” was approved by the Board and the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas. The ability to provide barrier free services from the Pantry to social services at FRC will make it easier for our clients/shoppers and neighbors to benefit from the full array of help we offer. The next three years will be dedicated to funding and building a modern energy efficient building and all that such work entails. To that end, we will establish ad hoc committees for a Capital Campaign and to supervise the demolition and rebuilding of new facilities. It is our goal to have a new building open and operating before the end of this Strategic Plan.

To better engage the future of technology, we need to work smarter not harder. Artificial intelligence and better technology are the future of nonprofit work. Over the next three years, we must make the time to harness the power of AI to optimize operations, deepen community engagement, and amplify our Mission. We will strive to become a leader in nonprofits of our size in the use of AI and technology. To this end, we will: 1) conduct an AI readiness assessment to identify areas for potential implementation; 2) develop and implement an AI strategy aligned with our organization's mission and goals; 3) begin to integrate AI into core operations, optimizing workflows and decision-making processes; and, 4) develop clear guidelines for responsible AI use, including data privacy and bias mitigation.

6. Securing Sustainable Funding. Currently, Mercy Center revenue comes from a mix of sources:

Sources of Revenue FY 24 @6/30/24



Mercy Center must continue to improve its financial planning capabilities. We continue to evaluate the success of our programs and to adjust both our resources and staff to accommodate the needs of the community. The biggest hurdle we face, and must solve for, is a long-term operational plan to account for the cut in State and Federal funding.

Already, the New York Times is projecting changes in safety net benefits like Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Benefits [SNAP], and debate around the current state budget centers on a structural deficit. With 46 percent of our current operational budget attributable to state and federal government sources, we are constantly monitoring the impact any cuts will have on our ability to continue to provide services.

7. Expanded Donor Strategy

The question of financial stability has been a constant conversation at Board meetings. Currently, we rely heavily on personal connections and grants for funding. We need to develop a long-term plan to reach donors committed to the agency and encourage those donors to reach others.

It is also 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 Stone Pony Giving Tuesday event and the Engineer's Battle of the Bands event that in total raised nearly \$80,000 in 2024. Third-party events raise funds but require little or no Mercy Center staff.

Strategic Plan Approval

The Board of Trustees of Mercy Center will consider the fiscal 2026-2028 Strategic Plan at the June 24, 2025 Board Meeting. The Strategic Plan represents the Board's commitment to the Vision, Mission, and Values of Mercy Center.

Board of Trustees: Judge Mary Catherine Cuff, Chair, Larry Downes Vice Chair and Treasurer, Secretary Evelyn Quinn, Nicole Berry, Cecil Bright, Brother Frank Byrne, Jennifer Edmonds, Sr. Rosemary Jeffries, Kevin Higgins,¹² Eugene Garb, Rochelle Hendricks, Richard Jursca, Dana Lawrence, Linda Leasor, Elaine Rocha, Lu-Ann Russell, Carol Stillwell, and Miriam Tort.

Conclusion

This Strategic Plan serves as Mercy Center's roadmap for the next three years. It will guide our efforts to break the cycle of generational poverty. We recognize that challenges will undoubtedly arise. However, by embracing innovation, fostering collaboration, and continuously adapting our approach, we will build an agency that not only survives but thrives for decades to come. This plan is a commitment to a future where everyone has the opportunity to thrive, regardless of their circumstances. Together, we will build a stronger, more equitable community where prosperity is shared and generational poverty is finally overcome.

¹² Kevin Higgins became a member of the Board on April 30, 2025.