

United Way's campaign to focus on county's households in need

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LAFAYETTE — With the location of the Enrichment Center at West Side in Hopatcong, a preschool, kindergarten, and daycare, in jeopardy, United Way formed a coalition of partners to come up with solutions to ensure the center had technical assistance, proper equipment, and strong long-term goals to make it possible to turn around the center's operations.

"We owe much of our current success to our relationship with United Way of Northern New Jersey, who have helped us to obtain crucial equipment, streamline our administrative practices to increase net revenue, and achieve long-term stability and growth as the only center in Hopatcong offering early childhood education and child care to area families," said Anita Plantamura, director of the center. "We are so thankful to United Way for their help and partnership that has allowed us not only to overcome obstacles, but to thrive."

Access to preschool and early childhood education and the positive impact it has, not only on the success of a child's life, but on the business's foundation, was the main focus of the presentation at the Sussex County Chamber Business to Business Breakfast on Tuesday at the Lafayette House.

The event served to kick off the United Way of Northern New Jersey's annual campaign season, which aims to place the focus on the non-profit organization's work serving households in need in Sussex County.

"We cannot do this work without you," United Way community relations manager Monica Lemperle stressed to a crowd of 250 community business leaders. "Your investment is one that strengthens the community."

The center, which has been serving families for more than 40 years — many of them fall under the definition of ALICE families — currently has 110 children enrolled and has grown from a preschool to a full-time child care center for children attending Hopatcong public schools.

According to Lemperle, ALICE — which stands for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed — comprises 12,000 households in the county where individuals are working but struggle to make ends meet.

"That's one-quarter of our households in Sussex County and that doesn't include the 3,500 households that meet the federal definition of living in poverty," Lemperle said. "As you represent your business, you know how expensive it is to live and work here in northern New Jersey."

Adding that one of the top line items in ALICE's budget is child care and preschool, Lemperle noted that it costs nearly \$1,300 a month for a family of four with a toddler and a preschooler for daycare alone.

Emphasizing the importance of the words "high quality" when describing access to preschool and early childhood education, Lemperle stressed the long-term benefits on an individual's success in school and in the work world.

"Why should your business care? Because it makes economic sense," she said. "When we prepare children in our communities well, we are all the beneficiaries; children who attend a quality preschool are more likely to grow up to be stronger workers and stronger citizens with fewer costs to the community."

Stressing the short-term benefits of early access to education, Lemperle had the crowd imagine the implications on a business if a coworker worried regularly about whether their toddler or preschooler was in a safe environment or if their child came home sick time and time again because of poor hygiene issues.

"The costs of absenteeism, distractions, and retraining of employees to businesses can be enormous," she said.

In their investment to provide ALICE families access to quality early childhood education, Lemperle noted that the United Way was invested in partnering with the state to establish a quality rating system for child care centers.

"We ought to have clear guidance on the service we are receiving for our children at this time of greatest opportunity



and vulnerability,” she said. “In conjunction with piloting the ratings system, we work with centers to provide them access to technical assistance and shared services to help them improve their quality and remain viable businesses.”

In addition to their emphasis on early childhood access to education, United Way invests in teacher education and training to reduce high turnover rates among educators and funds half a million dollars worth of scholarships to provide access to quality care and education to ALICE families, that may otherwise

be out of reach.

Throughout the next six months, United Way will also be holding a series of conferences for those who are caring for an aging or ailing parent, a child with a disability, or a family member with a mental or physical illness.

For more information about [United Way of Northern New Jersey](http://www.UnitedWayofNorthernNewJersey.org) visit www.UnitedWayNNJ.org.

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