

MORRISTOWN

Forum examines families' struggles

By **MaryAnn Spoto**
For The Star-Ledger

New Jersey needs higher-paying jobs and expanded access to quality preschool for children in families struggling to make ends meet, two of the state's top former and current politicians said at a forum on poverty in the Garden State.

U.S. Sen. Cory Booker and former Gov. Thomas H. Kean shared the stage Friday night at the United Way of Northern New Jersey's Public Officials Forum, where they pondered solutions for the 890,000 working families that the nonprofit group has identified as barely able to meet their basic daily needs.

"Preschool education — that's the one thing we know works," Kean said at the forum held at the College of Saint Elizabeth in Morristown. "There is no argument on this. Every single piece of research that I've seen in the last 20 years says that if you give kids preschool education, you change their whole future trajectory."

In their first time sharing a stage together, Kean, a Republican, and Booker, a Democrat, said the state needs to take a bipartisan approach to address an issue that experts have said has been growing in severity in New Jersey.

"What frustrates me is ... when you see how fragile a family is when they're doing everything right and they're barely making it," Booker said.

Besides expanded quality preschool opportunities, these families need higher-paying jobs to be attracted to New Jersey, Kean and Booker said.

They also said there should be some kind of compensation provided to family members who are caregivers for relatives with long-term illnesses.

The forum was a chance to address policy issues that affect families struggling financially to afford the basic necessities, such as housing, child care, food, transportation and health care in New Jersey.

The United Way has dubbed that group ALICE — Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed — to describe people in working households who live above the federal poverty line but below a basic cost of living. The United Way study in 2014 found 890,000 families in New Jersey fall into that category. In all, 1.2 million

families are at that level or in poverty in New Jersey, the report said.

The 45-minute conversation between the two politicians, which was attended by 400 people, was moderated by New Jersey Monthly magazine publisher Kate Tomlinson.

"Seeing this crowd tonight, I am optimistic we can make a difference," United Way CEO **John Franklin** said. "I believe that we can do as Mothers Against Drunk Driving did ... or the people who dreamed up public education. I believe we can change the dialogue in this country."

The United Way also used the event to present its first ALICE award to Kevin Rigby, a former mayor of River Edge, chief of staff to former Democratic U.S. Sen. Bill Bradley and retired Novartis Pharmaceutical Corp. executive.

Rigby was chosen for his decade-long advocacy for United Way, his support of the ALICE project and paving the way for a caregiver-friendly workplace at Novartis, Franklin said.

The forum was sponsored by Novartis Pharmaceutical Corp., which is also a founding member of United Way's National ALICE Advisory Council.



By the numbers

890K

Number of families in New Jersey in working households who live above the federal poverty line but below a basic cost of living.

1.2M

Number of families in New Jersey living at the ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) level or in poverty.

85%

Percentage of towns in New Jersey that have 20 percent or more households unable to afford basic costs of living.
— *United Way of NJ*