



MIDDLESEX COUNTY IMPROVEMENT AUTHORITY

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Keystones of MCFOODS Meeting: Regional Hunger and Homelessness

EDISON – Human services stewards from around the region met in Edison this week to discuss overarching issues facing New Jersey’s most vulnerable population, from the hungry to the homeless.

Representatives from the Rutgers Cooperative Extension, the Middlesex County Department of Human Services, New Jersey Anti-Hunger Coalition, United Way of Central Jersey, local food pantries and other agencies were all on hand to exchange ideas, identify trends and shine a light on emerging obstacles.

Middlesex County Food Organization and Outreach Distributions Services (MCFOODS), the official County food bank, organized this networking meeting to improve the lines of communication among the various professionals, advocates and organizations.

For Lisa Pitz, a program director with the New Jersey Anti-Hunger Coalition, the recently revised federal Farm Bill was an obvious cause for concern.

“It’s expected to impact 157,000 households,” she said of regional repercussions.

She warned of the impending cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or SNAP benefits, as well as a secondary utilities-allowance program.

New Jersey was one of 15 cold-weather states eligible for the legislation’s “heat-and-eat” subsidy prior to its elimination, which will afflict the average participating household budget somewhere to the tune of about \$90 a month, Pitz added.

That, of course, will have a trickle-down effect on other attendees in the room, like Aaron Kennedy, assistant director of programs with Coming Home of Middlesex County, Inc.

This organization, dedicated to eradicating homelessness through collaborative planning and partnerships, also administers a federal “Point in Time Count” survey locally, helping to create an annual snapshot of homelessness in New Jersey.

“We’re also looking at housing for very low-income members of the population...the accessibility, affordability and sustainability,” Kennedy said.

Despite the challenges, several attendees also churned out helpful tips, mostly for individuals on the frontlines, like agency and food-pantry workers.



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One speaker instructed volunteers and employees to better identify their clients, whether they be youth in their early 20s or veterans in needs, as alternative resources and benefits may apply to these segments of a community.

“People who are homeless can be hidden,” said Social Services Manager Bridget Kennedy with the Middlesex County Department of Human Services. “Homeless youth are even more hidden, staying under the radar.”

United Way of Central Jersey’s Chief Professional Officer, Gloria Aftanski, advised the audience to have their clients file taxes by accessing one of the many free-preparation programs available at present.

Aftanski’s nonprofit coordinates one such service, the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program, which was responsible for preparing some 1,300 filings and recouping a collective \$1.6 million in returns for individuals and families in 2012.

“Undocumented workers, we’re encouraging to file as well,” she said. “This way we can get them a tax I.D. number.”

The discussion block also included fundraising suggestions and talks on “gleaning,” a type of food collection that targets area stores for products nearing their expiration and best-used-by dates.

“We’re getting a lot of meats and dairy products,” said pro-gleaner Juana Kearney, a representative of the Mercy House, a Perth Amboy group offering housing and other special services. “It helps with our emergency food supplies a lot.”

Kearney, like most speakers, referenced 2-1-1, a multilingual referral hotline used for almost any social service need imaginable.

The statewide line is locally contracted through Middlesex County, sees funding assistance from United Way of Central Jersey and other neighboring United Ways and provides case management referral services to Coming Home of Middlesex.

“(2-1-1) is the best way to engage the system on behalf of the clients you work with,” Aaron Kennedy emphasized.

For more information on the organizations mentioned, log onto the website for MCFOODS, an operation overseen by the Middlesex County Improvement Authority, at www.mciauth.com.

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