

[Home](#) [Newsroom](#) [Media](#) [Administration](#) [NJ's Priorities](#) [Contact Us](#)
[Press Releases](#) [Public Addresses](#) [Executive Orders](#) [Press Kit](#) [Reports](#)
[Home](#) > [Newsroom](#) > [Press Releases](#) > 2015 > [First Lady Mary Pat Christie Announces Candidates for October New Jersey Heroes Online Poll](#)

## First Lady Mary Pat Christie Announces Candidates for October New Jersey Heroes Online Poll

Monday, October 19, 2015

Tags: [First Lady](#)

### Essex County Family Justice Center, Strengthen our Sisters and Jersey Battered Women's Services Nominated for their Work on Behalf of Domestic Abuse Victims

**Trenton, NJ** – To mark Domestic Violence Awareness Month, First Lady Mary Pat Christie and the New Jersey Heroes Foundation are recognizing three deserving individuals as nominees for the October online New Jersey Heroes poll. Mary Houtsma, founding director of the Essex County Family Justice Center in Newark; Sandra Ramos, founder and executive director of Strengthen our Sisters in Wanaque and Cathy Stephens, Director of Client Services of Jersey Battered Women's Services, in Morristown are being honored for their work to educate, heal and empower domestic abuse victims in New Jersey

"I am truly inspired by the work of these three tireless advocates who are making a real difference in the lives of domestic abuse victims and their children," said First Lady Mary Pat Christie. "Mary, Sandra and Cathy are providing critical services and support measures that are helping abuse victims overcome the tragedy of domestic violence while providing the tools required to heal and help rebuild their lives. Each of these women is a true hero in their own right and I would be proud to have any one of them as our next New Jersey Hero."

Beginning today, Monday October 19 through 10:00 a.m. Friday October 23, the public will have an opportunity to choose the October New Jersey Hero by visiting <http://newjerseyheroes.org/index/poll/> to cast their selection.

This is the fifth New Jersey Hero being determined by the public via an online poll posted to the New Jersey Heroes website. Voters can cast their ballots once per day until the poll ends at 10:00 am on October 23. The October New Jersey Hero will be announced later that afternoon via press release.

The October New Jersey Heroes nominees are:



Cathy Stephens



Sandra Ramos



Mary Houtsma

 Stay Connected  
with Social Media

 Stay Connected  
with Email Alerts

 LIKE THIS PAGE? SHARE IT  
WITH YOUR FRIENDS.


Jersey Battered Women's Service  
Morristown

Strengthen Our Sisters  
Wanaque

Essex County Family Justice Center  
Newark

#### **Mary Houtsma – Essex County Family Justice Center, Newark:**

Mary Houtsma is a certified social worker and domestic violence specialist who has worked in the domestic violence field in New Jersey for the last 25 years. Her range of experience includes victim advocacy, offender accountability, and therapeutic services for children, leading her to become a proponent for interagency and cross-system collaboration to improve the coordinated community response to domestic violence. Mary is the founding Executive Director of New Jersey's first Family Justice Center, located in downtown Newark, where the diverse needs of victims can be better met by bringing government and non-government agencies together in one location. Multidisciplinary professionals from criminal justice, civil legal, and community-based agencies are out-stationed to Essex County Family Justice Center to help domestic violence victims navigate the often complex maze of legal, social service, and healthcare systems so they can undertake the work of rebuilding their lives. Since opening in 2010, more than 5,000 victims of domestic violence have made over 12,500 visits to the Center. The Family Justice Center Model is recognized by the U.S. Department of Justice Office on Violence Against Women as a best practice in the field of domestic violence intervention and prevention. There are currently over 90 operating Family Justice Centers across the country and interest in replicating the model in New Jersey is growing. Learn more at [www.essexcountyfjc.org](http://www.essexcountyfjc.org).

#### **Sandra Ramos - Strengthen Our Sisters, Wanaque:**

Sandra Ramos is the Founder and Executive Director of Strengthen Our Sisters, a non-profit that runs a licensed shelter with 7 locations housing 177 women and children, a thrift store, 2 daycare centers and a car-donation program, along with a community food pantry. Sandra has spent most of her life fighting to make sure that battered women have the support and services they need by establishing support groups, job training, a sisterhood among survivors, and a myriad of services to help empower women to become independent, including developing model programs to assist families in building the essential life skills needed to break the cycles of poverty, abuse and dependence. For 40 years she has organized marches, staged sit-ins and defied court orders to help beaten, bruised, & broken women find dignity, grace, and safety away from their abusers. Along the way, Sandra has been instrumental in helping over 30,000 women who were caught in the cycle of domestic violence. 365 days a year, 24/7 the SOS hotline rings directly to Sandra to give hope and comfort, as her work is never done. She is a born crusader, who has the tenacity, resolve and fierce determination as a tireless advocate on behalf of battered women everywhere. Sandra is an urban anthropologist and continues her '*Calling*' by facilitating groups to empower victims of domestic violence and their children, teaching Dynamics of Domestic Violence and Social Issues at Ramapo College, public speaking, trainings, as an expert witness in court, and receiving calls from the NJ hot line for battered women, police, hospitals, neighbors, religious institutions and social workers 24/7 for those seeking a safe haven from abuse. Learn more at:

<http://www.strengthenoursisters.org/>

#### **Cathy Stephens - Jersey Battered Women's Service, Morristown:**

Cathy Stephens knows firsthand the traumatic effect that domestic violence has on families. At the young age of 10, she witnessed violence in her own home. Today, she is a champion for thousands of victims seeking refuge at the Jersey Battered Women's Service (JBWS). Her passion has fueled her work over the past 25 years as she has shaped JBWS' client services to be among the most comprehensive in the state, meeting the needs of every victim, abuser, and child. As the JBWS director of client services, Cathy is intimately involved in all of its services, from hotline and shelter to counseling, legal advocacy and children's programming. Cathy is a leader in program innovation, having designed and opened JBWS' nationally recognized transitional housing center, and more recently, planning and preparing for the opening of Morris' Family Justice Center in March 2016. In all services, Cathy leads her team of professional staff, student interns, and volunteers to provide trauma-informed, strength-based, and culturally competent services. Cathy has developed strong relationships with essential community partners, allowing JBWS to improve the community's responsiveness and ability to help victims become survivors. With the overarching mission of JBWS in mind – the prevention of domestic violence – Cathy and her client service team work diligently to break the cycle of domestic violence so that all families can live free from abuse. Learn more at: <http://www.jbws.org/>

In New Jersey, there were 64,556 domestic violence offenses reported by the police in 2013, a 1 percent decrease compared to the 65,060 reported in 2012, according to a 2013 report on domestic violence prepared by the New Jersey State Police. Wives were the victims in 16 percent (10,158) and ex-wives were the victims in 3 percent (2,167) of the reported domestic violence offenses in 2013. Overall, females were victims in 75 percent (48,305) of all domestic violence offenses. Additionally, children were involved or present during 30 percent of all domestic violence offenses occurring in 2013.

New Jersey Heroes is an initiative First Lady Mary Pat Christie began in 2010 to showcase the positive and unique ways people and organizations are impacting New Jersey and their communities. To nominate a hero, go to [newjerseyheroes.org](http://newjerseyheroes.org) and follow the application instructions to submit the person you believe is a true New Jersey Hero.

Press Contact:  
Brian Murray  
Nicole Sizemore  
609-777-2600

Statewide: [NJ Home](#) | [Services A to Z](#) | [Departments/Agencies](#) | [FAQs](#)  
Office of the Governor: [Home](#) | [Newsroom](#) | [Media](#) | [Administration](#) | [NJ's Priorities](#) | [Contact Us](#)

Copyright © State of New Jersey, 1996-2017  
Office of the Governor  
PO Box 001  
Trenton, NJ 08625  
609-292-6000