

## **“Community Conversations: New Jersey’s COVID-19 Storytelling Project”**

### **Project Self-Sufficiency**

Project Self-Sufficiency has been serving the northwestern region of New Jersey for over 30 years, providing a holistic approach to partnering with low-income families as they pursue economic stability and beyond, and we have been with our community through generations of growth, change, and challenges. While we have always been here for families in need, in the past year we have been exceptionally grateful to be able to rise up and meet the unprecedented needs of our community that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to our doors. For each challenge presented to us, for each story of loss we have heard, we have gathered up the best of our community, pooled together our strengths, and offered creative and rapid-response solutions rooted in resilience, hope, and dignity.

We have heard of impoverished families living in close quarters, ultimately unable to protect their loved ones from COVID-19, after bringing the disease home from a job they could not afford to lose or walk away from. We have heard of anxious mothers caring for children with COVID, fearing that it might spread to other siblings, and a mother’s sleepless concern for her newborn baby who contracted the disease shortly after being born in the hospital. We have heard of families unable to say goodbye to loved ones, or visit them, or bring them home to care for them. While sadly these stories are now familiar, the impact of the pandemic on our rural New Jersey community may not be so. In an old farming region already struggling with a receding economy, limited transportation infrastructure, lack of adequate and affordable housing, sparse mental health services, weak communication systems, and severe isolation due to poverty and sheer geography, COVID-19 has only brought to light and exacerbated already existing disparities. Families in our rural area are more difficult to reach, they are vulnerable to missing important and timely information and to misinformation, there are limited services in place to connect them to, and what services do exist can often be too long-distance for them to access.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, our agency has been taking hundreds of live calls for assistance from local residents in real-time, from callers who have either experienced a COVID-19 diagnosis directly or have been economically impacted by the pandemic, and the tenor of these calls has increasingly become more panicked and desperate. Families do not have what they need to take care of themselves, and we have seen lines out our door for food and other basic needs. Additionally, whereas in the past low-income families may have been able to sustain a single unexpected blow such as an illness or a broken down car, in the pandemic environment, these events are now catastrophic. And it is not only low-income families who are exceedingly struggling, but formerly moderate income families who are now sliding into poverty for the first time as well. Loss of income and work hours, loss of benefits and health insurance, and cuts in childcare options have all opened up a chasm of vulnerability for families who were previously stable.

Fortunately, our community has responded with strength and resilience, and has rallied behind all of our agency’s efforts to address these challenges. With help from local businesses and donors, various local grants, and the New Jersey Pandemic Relief Fund, we were able to expand our Food Pantry’s capacity to source, store, and distribute fresh food, produce, eggs, and meat, and more under our “Food Project: Nourishing our Neighbors” initiative. Every week we are on the road delivering food, diapers, baby items, and other basic needs to families across Sussex, Warren, Morris, and Hunterdon Counties. To help connect families to each other and break down feelings of isolation, we host support groups, virtual

“Mommy Parties”, and educational forums. We persistently call, text, email, and mail all of our clients, and hang a banner on our campus gate and across our website that simply says, “We Are Here for You.” To assist with COVID-19 efforts, we have tracked COVID cases through our home visiting programs, provided COVID education at various events and informed the community of COVID testing sites, monitored local trends in prenatal and postpartum care and advocated with moms to seek out care despite fears, begun a COVID vaccination public relations campaign, and have been grateful to vaccinate nearly 70 of our staff members. To keep up staff morale, we hold daily morning team meetings and celebrate accomplishments in our daily staff communication, and have held some very emotional but much needed staff appreciation drive-by events. We find that community residents who are able to give during these times are looking for ways to connect with others and serve, and have come to Project Self-Sufficiency to assist in our efforts, and we honor them each and every day in our social media campaign, “The Face of Hope in our Community”. We are so fortunate to be a place where those who need help and those who want to help can seek out and connect with each other. As has been expressed in the recent words of one of our participants: “Thank you to the staff of PSS and donors who are helping the community. You give me hope. We gain strength knowing that we can lean on one another. We can be good to one another and gain from helping one another.” Words like these are our hope and our inspiration, and each day we continue to look for and find the next silver lining.