

HomeFront Matters

SPRING 2020

Resiliency at Its Best HomeFront Staff, Volunteers and Families Rise Up During Crisis

My dear friends,

It could have been the perfect storm — 38 families, stuck together in close quarters with no personal resources for an undetermined period of time and even more families, stuck in the Route 1 welfare motels with even less resources. It could have been a major feat to just get through the days, to not temporarily close our doors, as many nonprofits have been forced to do. However, in what may be HomeFront's finest hour, our amazingly resilient and adaptable staff and volunteers not only found ways to keep on going, but to achieve new heights of excellence! I could not be prouder of the staff, volunteers and donors that I work with every day who have turned into superheroes.

The puzzle pieces that HomeFront has learned to move so deftly into place, providing each family a path to a new life, were turned overnight into a whole new puzzle — one that we needed to master quickly. HomeFront staff members didn't settle for just getting by. They were determined to find

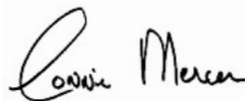
new ways to keep HomeFront as it is and always has been — a place of love, safety and growth, powered by innovation, determination and a big dose of magic.

“Adaptability is about the powerful differences between adapting to cope and adapting to win.”

—The English author Max McKeown, known for his books on innovative strategy.

My mind is always spinning with a thousand questions these days, but I know a few things. We will get through this and be stronger for it. We will learn from this experience and be better prepared for the future. The families we serve, and there will be so many more, given the support they need, will emerge with more self-confidence and resilience and, most of all, the knowledge that they are not alone. This new virus is a vicious and stealthy enemy, but in our little corner of the world, we will win.

Thank you,



Connie Mercer
HomeFront Founder and CEO



Children around the world are displaying rainbows in the windows of their homes to spread hope during the dark days of the coronavirus pandemic. Homeless families at the Family Campus are also sharing rainbows recognizing that there are better days ahead.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

For up-to-date details visit our website, HomeFrontNJ.org

VIRTUAL

Run/Walk for Hope

10K - 5K - 1 Mile - Dog Walk

June 7 – Facebook Kick-off 9 a.m.

Cooking with a Cause

Camp Cooking & Caring

For Community Kids Ages 9 to 12

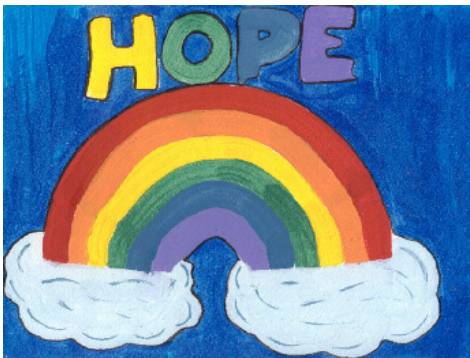
AUGUST 24-28

Our Wish List:

- Hand sanitizer
- Cars in working order
- Diapers (especially size 5+) and baby wipes
- Family size personal hygiene products
- Canned proteins and low-sugar cereal
- Cleaning supplies
- Small ACs and fans

To donate or get more information, contact us: at (609) 989-9417 x133, or getinvolved@HomeFrontNJ.org

Also see our Amazon wishlist: <https://tinyurl.com/HFCovidRelief>



On the Cover

Each *HomeFront Matters* issue features work created by an artist in ArtSpace. This Spring issue's rainbow was painted by Stephanie S., age 12.

Reaching Out. Making a Difference.

Longtime Women's Initiative leader and HomeFront volunteer, Mary Dougherty, reached out to HomeFront to see what she could do to help. Learning that many senior citizens across Mercer County had limited access to food, she enlisted her husband, Erik Neumann, and three sons, all home from school; Nyle Neumann of Mercer County Community College, Ryan, from Jefferson University and Alexander, a rising senior at Boston University, to help deliver much needed food bags. "It has been important to me and my husband that our three boys understand the meaning of gratitude. The smile on people's faces when we drive up really helps me get through this challenging time. I am always happy to do whatever I can for HomeFront."



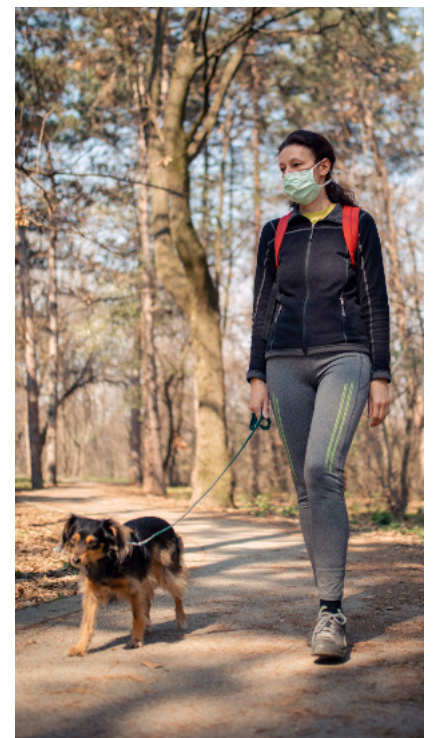
Mary Dougherty, dedicated volunteer and Women's Initiative leader, with a carload of groceries for seniors in need.



This Virtual Event Is a Real Way to Help

Show your support of HomeFront's life-changing, 6-day per week children's programming, which serves over 400+ local kids annually. Sign up to go out solo, with your family, or start/join a VIRTUAL team to make it even more fun. Ask friends/family/co-workers to sponsor you. We'll provide a playlist to run/walk to, and email you a "runners bib" to print so passersby will know you're out supporting HomeFront.

Join us, if you want, at 9 a.m. on June 7 for our Facebook live kick-off, win a prize for largest VIRTUAL team or for being among the top fundraisers, and take pictures/video of yourself on June 7 and post it to Facebook so we can see everyone who came out. To sign up, visit www.homefrontnj.org.



Fit Kidz Keeps Our Kids Fit

One of the biggest challenges the HomeFront staff faced was how to make sure the kids and adults got critically needed exercise so they would feel good, think clearly and sleep well.

The delightful Mr. Dan of Fit Kidz, who had a bout with homelessness in his upbringing, instinctively gets HomeFront's goals and has a deep love for, and understanding of, our kids. He wanted to bring what his company, Fit Kidz, does best to help the kids stay healthy and joyful during this crisis. He regularly comes to lead invigorating exercise classes in a safe and uniquely fun way. And, he has quickly achieved rock star status with our youngest residents.

All-star volunteer Mandy Holanda continues to teach fitness, yoga and Zumba classes outdoors to families living at the Campus and provides much-needed moral support as well. And of course, our playground, generously donated by the Rotary Clubs of Central New Jersey, is used throughout the day, one family at a time.



To Plant a Garden Is to Believe in Tomorrow

Being good parents — properly caring for and nurturing their children — is the goal of every HomeFront parent. Clients attend parenting classes to learn how to do this since many of them were never nurtured themselves. For the children in residence at the Family Campus, nurturing skills are taught early through careful book choices and, these days, hands-on experiences in the garden.

Case managers are making the most of the extended lockdown to allow each child to plant a socially distanced flower or vegetable in the campus garden and tend to it on a daily basis. The kids have created a friendly competition to see who can grow the healthiest garden baby.



Making the Best of Confinement

Being home for weeks at a time is challenging for everyone right now, but for those in group shelters, the days and nights can be especially long. Our amazing and creative staff was determined to give adults and kids alike things to look forward to, respites from the confinement.

Tutors continue to help our kids with homework through zoom video-conferencing. We are holding socially distanced movie and Bingo nights and have organized magic shows, “shopping” trips to our newly expanded Token Store and video game competitions for the older kids. Our volunteers are virtually reading stories to our younger children and a client is leading a DIY home decor workshop so everyone can keep thinking about the future.



Protecting the Future

HomeFront has always known that a dangerous and long lasting by-product of homelessness is childhood emotional trauma. During this unprecedented event, even young children in secure circumstances can sense that something is different, something is wrong, which can result in anxiety and developmental delays.

The Atkinson Child Development Center staff was determined to mitigate these feelings as much as possible by finding ways to provide our youngest clients with what they need most – structure, familiarity and developmental activity. For attendees who are now locked down in their homes, staff is holding virtual circle time and lessons for every student each day. The Center is open for children who are homeless and residents of our Family Campus, formerly homeless or whose parents participate in our Hire Expectations program.

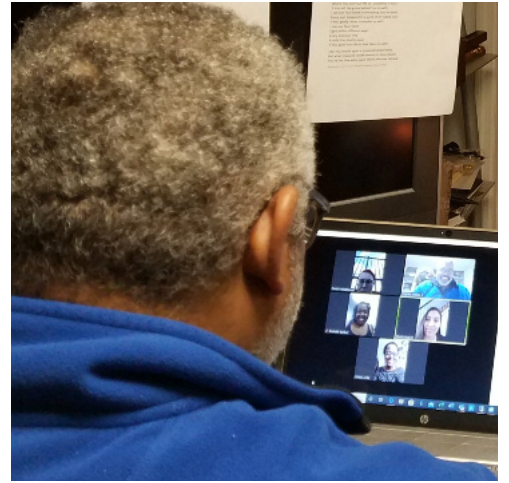
HomeFront Happenings

Hire Expectations: Not to Be Denied

The day before his 25th birthday, Donte earned his high school diploma. "This is for my 1-year old daughter," he said. Donte, his wife and daughter have been living at HomeFront's Family Campus during these trying times, but have not been deterred from working towards a brighter future.

Our moms and dads have worked so hard, for so long and many were about to achieve something they never dreamed would be possible for them, a real skill and a job with a future. Determined to keep the momentum going for sequestered students, staff and volunteers learned how to tap into the wealth of online courses and new technology to keep their students virtually supported; learning and growing until they can come back to class.

While teacher Audrey Rapp instructs class through Zoom meetings, Hire Expectations Director Charles Wallace works with students via FaceTime. Case managers help clients identify Wi-Fi hotspots in their apartments and learn how to use applications to connect to classes.



Celebrating a Chance to Choose

It has been said that one of the greatest joys of independence is the ability to make choices. Poverty strips people of that joy — putting all of their focus on their needs, and none on what they want.

While the Stark Family Token Store has been open for business since the inception, now it is new and improved and offers a real "shopping" experience. The Token Store, located on the Family Campus, is stocked with brand new donated goods and toys.

Residents can buy goods with tokens earned by practicing good parenting, healthy lifestyles and careful social distancing. The store hosts one customer at a time and is located in a Family Campus outbuilding. Our moms are loving the time as they get to browse the goods at the Token Store and "shop" for what they like.



Sew Many Masks!

In addition to the essentials, HomeFront knows that a key ingredient to an empowered future that breaks the cycle of poverty is the right mindset. After years of being marginalized and thought of as "less than," parents learn that they are valuable citizens, able to help others and make a difference in the world.

The women in the *SewingSpace* program wanted to help, so they are using their new-found skills to make washable masks for homeless families at the Family Campus, for HomeFront staff and for local hospitals.



HomeFront Happenings

Back to Our Roots

Decades ago, HomeFront was founded to help families survive who were stuck indefinitely in the tiny, amenity-free rooms of the Route 1 welfare motels.

Over the years, HomeFront and Mercer County did their part to make sure that new options developed to more quickly move families out of the motels and into better living situations. The pandemic lockdown has put us back where we started, with scores of newly homeless families and individuals living in the Route 1 welfare motels with no way to get out.

HomeFront will always have a huge place in its heart for the motel families and has launched an important initiative of nurturing outreach on several fronts. The HomeFront team of staff and volunteers, already dealing with current challenges, has mobilized in extraordinary ways to care for these families caught in the worst possible place at the worst possible time.

Along with a weekly outreach of food bags and diapers, staff, volunteers and generous local area restaurants have created a supply chain of essential hot meals and other needed items to be delivered.

If you're interested in sponsoring a hot meal for the families at the motels AND supporting a local restaurant, please email homefront@homefrontnj.org.



Walter Saravia, HomeFront case manager, delivers food bags to local motels.

“Thank God you’re here”

So many poor families struggle with food insecurity during the best of times. Grocery stores can be miles away and whole neighborhoods can be what is known as “food deserts” with only junk food snacks available. Social distancing rules coupled with lost jobs have only made the whole process more frightening and challenging. Fran’s Food Pantry was determined to be responsive to the growing demand while keeping everyone safe at the same time.



Dee Nelson-Barnes, our permanent housing case manager, prepares for a busy day.

In spite of this pandemic, the food pantry is open three days a week, enforces social distancing practices and serves one person at a time. Case managers report that they are seeing over 70 new families a day, many of whom have never sought assistance before, in addition to our regular clientele. On one recent day HomeFront distributed 1,800 diapers within three hours of being open. We know that this is just the beginning and the need will be even greater in the months to come.

One of our new clients, Chereyse, expressed, “So many other food pantries have closed and I was scared that my kids wouldn’t have enough to eat. Thank God you’re here!”

Families Meeting the Challenges

In the first days of the pandemic, all families in HomeFront’s permanent and transitional housing were given food bags, diapers and a list of instructions about safety protocols and practices. As the lockdown has continued, case managers are constantly checking in to assess the families and their needs, providing them with a lifeline of advice and encouragement and making sure they know that they are not alone.



Each family has its own set of challenges.

Marci was trying to follow the school’s lesson plans for her three school-aged children on her small cell phone. When her case manager discovered this, HomeFront procured iPads for each child to access class websites, which made all the difference in how well and how long each could study.



Cece Picinich

A Fond Farewell

HomeFront bids a reluctant goodbye to our volunteer food pantry manager, Cece Picinich, who is retiring after ten years of making sure hungry people got the food they needed with love and respect. Her boundless energy and sharp mind ensured that the pantry ran

like a well-oiled machine and we will all miss her tremendously. “Volunteering has made me a better person,” said Cece. “It has made a huge impact on my life! It has allowed me to help others and put their needs and welfare ahead of my own.”

Cece took on volunteering in a big way and is taking on retirement in a big way too! She and her husband have an RV and are hoping to head out to see America soon — up close and personal. Best wishes Cece!

Extraordinary Under Any Circumstance

We know that our Family Campus is not an ordinary shelter. We intentionally made it different — a real place to live, warm, friendly and caring — a place where homeless families could thrive and get back on their feet. And more than anything else, a place that makes all tomorrows possible. A recent client sent us this note. We think it's worth sharing.

With humility and gratitude, I'd like to express how HomeFront has impacted my life, in ways both big and small.

After a lifetime of self-sufficiency, I found myself without a place for both me and my grandchild in early January. I didn't know about homeless "shelters," but I am sure that I'd never imagined something this wonderful and truly life-saving. Beyond a pillow on which to rest our heads, the staff here is available and attentive, ensuring that the trauma of whatever situation created our homelessness is addressed and all of our basic needs are met with care and consideration.

Our time here has taught me that being without a home has many faces, each of our life journeys accenting our varying struggles; and that there is never a struggle too insurmountable when there are people who have hearts open to helping. HomeFront is a place uniquely filled with and supported by



those very kind and loving people... and for me, it has meant the difference between having to awaken in fear and anxiety versus a refreshed outlook of hope, for which there are no words of gratefulness that can adequately be expressed as a grandmother who lives to ensure her grandchild's peace, happiness and good health.

My granddaughter has many amazing dreams and I'm certain she'll accomplish them. HomeFront has ensured that those dreams haven't had to be interrupted, or even possibly shattered, by the starkness of living without shelter or safety. *This is a lifeline... and I'll speak for all who have walked these halls in saying that beyond making sure that we're okay today, you have gifted countless promising tomorrows.*

With gratitude,

A client at the Family Campus

TO SUPPORT THE COUNTLESS FAMILIES WHO NEED HELP DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS, VISIT WWW.HOMEFRONT.ORG. TO THE MANY WHO HAVE ALREADY GIVEN, WE ARE FOREVER INDEBTED TO YOU FOR YOUR KINDNESS DURING THESE DIRE TIMES.



You can cut all
the flowers, but you
cannot keep Spring
from coming.
— Pablo Neruda

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