



THE SOCIAL JUSTICE LEAGUE

Nonprofit leaders join forces to fight for clients in need

WRITTEN BY RICARDO KAULESSAR

They may not be superheroes, exactly, but the work that the Social Justice League of Passaic County has been doing during the COVID-19 pandemic can sometimes seem superhuman. The group is composed of six nonprofits based in Paterson, some of them led by Bergen residents or people with roots in the county, who join forces to provide their clients with more services.

The nonprofits comprising the league are the Boys and Girls Club of Paterson & Passaic; Star of Hope Ministries; Oasis: A Haven for Women and Children; Passaic County CASA; Paterson Habitat for Humanity; and CUMAC, which runs Passaic County's largest food pantry. The Social Justice League first came together in March as the Passaic County Pandemic Partnership, with a goal of providing families uninterrupted access to crucial services during the COVID-19 crisis. The group's efforts from March to June led to

the distribution of over 30,000 food kits to the public, 500 home deliveries to 191 families vetted by the organizations, and 1,000 food and supply boxes given directly to St. Joseph's Hospital for people stricken with COVID-19 and who are served by WIC, the Women, Infants and Children nutrition program.

While the coronavirus created needs in the community that spurred group leaders to collaborate, it also provided a window that might not otherwise have been available, says Jennifer Brady, the executive director of Oasis and an Allendale resident who previously lived in Wyckoff. She says that COVID-19 made her focus her time in a way

JUST FOR FUN
League members had this illustration made to reflect their commitment and the fun they have working together.

ILLUSTRATION: COURTESY OF WENDY MCGUIRE, CREATED BY: ANDY SEABERT AND PATRICK QUINN

helping others

that would not have been possible before.

“We probably never would have made the time to do this as we’ve done now,” she says. “Someone likened it to how after 9/11, everybody wanted to help a neighbor. Everybody was affected, everybody wanted to help. And that’s how we were. You couldn’t see anyone, you couldn’t go anywhere, so we had this very unique opportunity to spend an hour and a half together (remotely) every week that we would not have had under normal circumstances.”

Paramus resident Wendy McGuire, the CEO of Boys & Girls Club of Paterson and Passaic, gives an example of how the groups, each with different missions, collaborate under the new umbrella of the Social Justice League. “If a family

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WENDY MCGUIRE

CEO OF BOYS AND GIRLS CLUB OF PATERSON AND PASSAIC

that (Habitat for Humanity) serves has affordable, safe housing but doesn’t have affordable child care, or if the parents are food-insecure, getting them the house doesn’t solve the whole problem,” she says. “It’s not about serving more families, it’s about being of greater service to families.”

Brady says the struggles of families in Paterson affect surrounding communities, and the work that the group is doing in helping them is creating a model for non-profits that can be emulated in other places. “If we work together to create, I guess the popular term is a ‘self-healing community’ where people are invested in their futures and nonprofits are invested in helping them in paving their futures, it really affects some serious change and can be a model for nonprofit private-public partnerships across the country,” she says.

The self-healing community model, first developed in Washington State, promotes collaboration across various non-profit missions to help communities build the capacity to overcome trauma and adversity.

Scott Millard, CEO of Paterson Habitat for Humanity, says he has talked to members of other Bergen County organizations who have heard about what the SJL is doing and want



HELPING HANDS Volunteers work together to distribute food.

to learn more. “They’re saying, ‘We would love to learn from you as you keep going,’” he says.

McGuire says she and her fellow nonprofit executives saw early on that their work would have to go beyond just reacting in the short term. That meant looking at the long game, which came with a name change during the summer. She says the group is creating plans for community-built facilities that include stable housing and on-site social services, including affordable childcare. She says this is part of the Social Justice League’s evolution from being reactive to being proactive.

The good works of the Social Justice League have benefitted people besides the group’s clients: They have helped the organization’s leaders themselves. Remarking on the standard dynamics of competing agencies, Erica Fischer-Kaslander, executive director of Passaic County CASA, says, “Our relationship has been completely different. It’s been a completely supportive, collaborative relationship, which is exactly what we needed right now.”

Matt Andersen, the executive director of the Star of Hope Ministries and a longtime Park Ridge resident, attributes the group’s working together well to leaders being able to check their

egos at the door. “For me, any time you bring people together for anything, one of the most important elements you need is people who have humility,” he says. “There has never been any kind of jockeying of who’s in charge and who makes the decisions with this group. And it really is just a testament to what you can accomplish when nobody cares about who gets the credit.”

McGuire has displayed an artist’s rendering she commissioned of the group as superheroes (see page 56), which was done not to imply that their efforts are superhuman, she says, but as a sign of appreciation for her fellow members, and as a way to find levity in the work they do. “These five leaders are some of the best people I know,” she says.

And the work done by the group does not go unnoticed, she says. She recalls a moment in June when she was walking into the Boys and Girls Club and found a message without a name attached. “There was an envelope that was taped to the fence, and when I opened it, there was a note that said, ‘May God-bless you all... Every little thing counts for me and my family. We need all the help we can get,’” she says. “It was very powerful.” ■

SIX SEPARATE ORGANIZATIONS BAND TOGETHER TO FORM THE

SOCIAL JUSTICE LEAGUE

CUMAC

CUMAC is one of the largest anti-hunger organizations in Passaic County. Based in Paterson, it provides food support to more than 50,000 people and more than 65 organizations and community groups annually. CUMAC believes that “Ending hunger has nothing to do with giving people food,” and addresses the root causes of hunger and poverty by focusing on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) research and asset-based community building principles. CUMAC uses healthy groceries as the first step in providing services that can empower individuals and families with the tools they need. CUMAC also hires workers from the communities it serves and dedicates time and resources to teaching them skills they can then share with their communities. CUMAC.ORG



MARK DINGLASAN
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

**OASIS
A HAVEN FOR WOMEN
AND CHILDREN**

Oasis – A Haven for Women and Children is a multi-service antipoverty organization located in Paterson. Its mission is to change the lives of women and children by breaking the cycle of poverty through compassionate programs designed to feed, clothe, educate, and empower women and children in need. The nonprofit serves some 1,000 impoverished women and children every day. Oasis’ educational programs include the After-School Academy, College Knowledge and teen programs, Saturday Rise and Shine classes, high school equivalency degree and English as a second language instruction, and citizenship, computer and workplace readiness programs. Oasis’ clients are supported by services including its soup kitchen, free childcare, clothing, diapers and food pantry. OASISNJ.ORG



JENNIFER BRADY
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

**BOYS & GIRLS CLUB
OF PATERSON & PASSAIC**

The Boys & Girls Club of Paterson & Passaic is a youth development organization whose mission is to inspire and enable all young people, especially those from disadvantaged circumstances, to realize their full potential as productive, responsible, and caring citizens. The club serves 1,500 youth ages 5-18 through academic support, athletic and artistic programming, college and career readiness for teens, daily meals on site and a well-designed curriculum at two club-houses and eight school-based sites in Paterson and Passaic. With education as the cornerstone of all its programs, the club provides the resources and guidance necessary for children to discover their talents and uncover their potential.

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WENDY MCGUIRE
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

**PATERSON
HABITAT FOR
HUMANITY**

Paterson Habitat for Humanity has been serving the Paterson and Passaic County areas, bringing people together to build safe, stable, and affordable housing, since 1984. Families and individuals in need of a hand up partner with Paterson Habitat to build or improve a place they can call home. Through the merger of affordable home ownership and community redevelopment efforts, Paterson Habitat revitalizes distressed neighborhoods and creates communities. PATERSONHABITAT.ORG



SCOTT MILLARD
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER

**PASSAIC COUNTY
COURT APPOINTED SPECIAL
ADVOCATES FOR
CHILDREN**

Passaic County Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) for Children champions the best interests of children who have been abused or neglected and placed into the child welfare, court and/or foster care system. Passaic County CASA recruits, screens, trains, and supervises volunteer advocates from the local community to ensure children in foster care are safe and receiving the services they need. Through CASA for Children, every individual in the community has the ability to impact the life of an abused or neglected child. PASSAICCOUNTYCASA.ORG



ERICA FISCHER-KASLANDER
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

**STARS OF HOPE
MINISTRIES**

Star of Hope Ministries, Inc., a historic Paterson nonprofit, partners with churches, pastors and community leaders by providing them with tools and resources to build healthy, thriving neighborhoods. Located on Broadway in downtown Paterson, Star of Hope serves a network of more than 75 churches and other organizations representing thousands of individuals and families in the area. Programming includes weekly food distribution, leadership development, the STARWARES Thrift Store, Pastors’ Prayer events, job readiness and computer literacy and skills training. Star of Hope’s “Trio of Hope” resource initiatives, which serve more than 10,000 people, include Project Backpack, Thanksgiving Box of Love, and Christmas Joy Shoppe. SOHM.ORG



MATT ANDERSEN
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR