



# 2024 CASE FOR SUPPORT

Breaking the cycle of poverty in South Jersey

---

Prepared by  
Natalie Fortunato  
Executive Director  
[nfortunato@southjerseydreamcenter.org](mailto:nfortunato@southjerseydreamcenter.org)

P.O. Box 52  
West Deptford, NJ 08086  
856-845-4500  
[southjerseydreamcenter.org](http://southjerseydreamcenter.org)





# WELCOME

A message from our Founder

## PASTOR JOE FORTUNATO

Dear Friends, this is our time to be a game changer. Traditional methods of helping the poor are not working. We are committed to helping people break the cycle of poverty in their lives *from the inside out*. To helping people understand their infinite value in God's eyes and that He has so much more for them. AND, with you at our side, helping people in areas that need the most urgent attention: food and clothing, meaningful employment, and providing for their own families. At the South Jersey Dream Center, we have the heart, the talent, and the tenacity to make an extraordinary impact. But your support is critical to helping us meet the increasing demands of the poor in today's society. You are the ones who can make an enormous difference.

## A BRIEF HISTORY

The South Jersey Dream Center (SJDC) is a familiar place to low income families in Gloucester County and the surrounding communities. Founded in 2010, the SJDC has become known among our guests as the "best" distribution program in the area. What began in Sewell, NJ on a cold November day with a Turkey Giveaway to 30 people, has progressively grown into an impactful operation having served over 20,000 people since inception. Today, the SJDC is poised to become one of the largest, full service, one-stop outreaches to low income and struggling families in the region.

## WHY WE EXIST

According to the last US Census, 1 in 10 people in South Jersey are living in Poverty. We exist to help break the viscous cycle of poverty in their lives...from the inside out.

## HOW

We offer people options to change their status quo, to discover their God given purpose and value, and to develop skills to reach their full potential.

## WHAT WE DO

We start with helping with food, clothing, household, baby, and hygiene items. Then begins the personal, spiritual, and professional training. We help develop the WHOLE person. We empower the poor to come out of poverty on their own.

---

37% of NJ households are at or just above poverty level and can't afford the basics\*

*Money that I normally spent on groceries and clothing could be used to pay for electric, gas, rent and other monthly living expenses. - F.T.*

\*United for Alice

---

## THE CYCLE OF POVERTY

At the SJDC, material poverty is defined as the lack of money, material possessions, access to wealth, or ability to provide for their basic needs. Over 250,000 people live in material poverty in South Jersey. That's nearly 18% of the overall population.

When people don't have the means to provide for themselves or their families...

- There is a loss of purpose and dignity.
- This creates a vicious cycle of poverty—economically, spiritually, and emotionally.
- They are more susceptible to crime, homelessness, domestic violence, a poor education and medical care, substance abuse, unwanted pregnancies, divorce, living in marginal or fragile environments, insecurity, powerlessness, exclusion, and suicide.
- And the cycle continues.

---

### 14% of children in New Jersey live in poverty\*

*Brandon would sit in my office and cry about having no food and money, no matter how hard he tried to provide for his family. His baby would cry all night because they had no food. Then one day the Dream Center came with food, and specifically asked if there was anyone with an infant, because they happened to have formula that week, which was out of the ordinary. I can't describe his joy, he was euphoric, he held tight to the formula as he talked to me. Even after he moved on from the program, because he found part time work with the city, he still came back on Wednesdays for three more weeks to pick up food.*

Mid-Atlantic States Career and Education Center, Woodbury, NJ

\*New Jersey Spotlight News

---

# THE PROBLEM

*A hunger-free zone may be possible, but developing the dependency-free zone is the real challenge.*

- Robert D. Lupton  
*Toxic Charity*

## POVERTY IN SOUTH JERSEY

Gloucester - 11.6%  
34,387

Cape May - 16.2%  
15,160

Camden - 19.1%  
98,345

Salem - 21.6%  
13,665

Atlantic - 21.9%  
58,579

Cumberland - 27.6%  
39,438

Data Source: US Department of Health and Human Services



A photograph of a woman with blonde hair, smiling warmly while holding a young child in a dark grey hoodie. They are outdoors, with trees and a building visible in the background. The image is partially covered by text blocks on the right side.

# BREAKING THE CYCLE OF POVERTY

## CAN THE CYCLE BE BROKEN?

The answer is a resounding YES. We know that not everyone believes the cycle of poverty can be broken over people's lives. We also know that not everyone wants help. But for most people entangled in poverty, they simply don't know where to begin or are not aware they have options. Some people were born into poverty, others have recently fallen on hard times. Trying to make ends meet and get through another day is the primary focus. Very few have a plan or hopes for a long-term solution. We want to be a part of that long-term solution.

---

Parental stress and limited financial resources directly affect the development of children.

---

*I'm not so depressed and worried about where our next meal was going to come from. - M. W.*

---

## WHAT SETS US APART

There are a multitude of food pantries, thrift shops, and training programs in South Jersey that offer help for low income families, yet the poverty rate in New Jersey has risen from 7.9% in 2000 to 9.7% in 2022. The poorest county in the state is in South Jersey, Cumberland County at 27.6%. We don't claim to be experts in alleviating poverty, but we do know that traditional methods are not working. What sets the SJDC apart from other programs in our region is not so much what we do, but how and why we do it. We help develop and empower the WHOLE person. No other program in South Jersey has this unique combination of providing life's basic necessities with training in a faith-based environment. We recognize that we can't grow another person, but we can give them the tools to develop themselves. We're not here to rescue or fix people, we're simply here to offer them options to change their status quo...from the inside out. Change that significantly disrupts the seemingly endless cycle of poverty and helps them take steps forward.

## WHAT IF...

So, what if the SJDC did not exist? Great question. People would continue to receive handouts instead of a hand up. People would continue to be asked "what do you need?" instead of "what assets do you have?" that can help them become self-sufficient, provide for their own families, and be contributing members of society. The cycle of poverty would continue.

# SERVICES WE PROVIDE



## BASIC NECESSITIES

We start by providing healthy food, clothing, and basic household and baby items. Our distribution is set up like a retail store, and our guests "shop" for the items they need, which lessens the stigma and shame of visiting an assistance program. Having food on the table and clothes in the closet frees people up to use their money for other pressing needs, and allows them to focus on their individual well-being. We also know that without offering these basic resources, most people would probably never visit the SJDC, and therefore never know that we nourish people in more ways than just food.

## PERSONAL TRAINING

Many of the poor do not act "like everyone else" because of various social conditions that impair their ability to function the same as more advantaged populations. These conditions have a profound impact on what they can achieve or aspire to achieve. Therefore, we offer workshops that help people deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life, such as overcoming addictions, handling grief, financial literacy, problem solving, interpersonal relationships, effective communication, and more.

## SPIRITUAL TRAINING

Faith-based education is the key element in helping our guests discover their true God-given value and purpose. Many have allowed their current circumstances to define them, "welfare mom", "addict", and "disabled", and to dictate their future. Many have been told "this is it for you, there is nothing else". We offer Bible Studies that help people unlock their God-given capacity and rise above poverty. By learning of God's unconditional love and grace, people are strengthened from the inside out, and given a sense of worth and honor to build a pathway toward a brighter tomorrow.

## VOCATIONAL TRAINING

We help people hone in on their unique gifts, talents, and assets that lead to meaningful work and being productive members of their local community. Training that helps people become connected to a community of support, and help them obtain far more than just a job. They learn people skills, social skills, good character and attitudes that enable them to navigate their environment, work well with others, perform well, achieve, and reach their full potential.

---

The effects of poverty are more than just missing a meal

*I enjoy the company of others in a positive, non-judgmental atmosphere, and I met new people. - R.S.*

---



# OUR IMPACT

For many low-income workers, the hardest part of breaking the cycle of poverty is changing their mindset towards money

*I feel like less of a burden to my relatives, and I feel better about myself through the message of hope. I'm more thankful and inspired to take steps forward. - A.P.*



Over **20,000** people living at or below poverty level have received assistance through the South Jersey Dream Center, including veterans, single parents, children, working adults, the unemployed and underemployed.



Nearly **one million** pounds of food, clothing, and basic necessities have been donated to and distributed by the SJDC. Donated by individuals, businesses, and through Food, Clothing, and Diaper Drives.



The SJDC partners with the Center for Family Services Mother-Child Residential in Woodbury, Acenda Integrated Health, and the Woodbury Public Schools to provide hundreds of diapers, baby supplies and equipment, and household items for **single parents**.



Over **1800** financial donors, in-kind donors, businesses, and volunteers are connected to the SJDC, including players and sponsors of the Annual Pickleball Against Poverty Tournament each March.



**Retail and wholesale partners** include BJ's, Panera Bread, Amazon, Uptown Bakeries, Wawa, Macy's, Acme, Rastelli Foods, Heritage's Dairy Stores, Welch's, Deptford Mall, Sam's Club, as well as local schools lost and found, and more.



In 2020, the SJDC received the "**Excellence in Community Impact**" Award from Acenda Integrated Health's Circle of Impact awards. The Dream Center was also nominated for the **2020 and 2022 Non-Profit of the Year** by the Greater Woodbury Chamber of Commerce.

# THE TIME IS NOW

**9.7%**

Poverty rate in New Jersey

**14%**

Poverty rate of children in New Jersey

**17%**

Poverty rate of children in South Jersey  
231,150 children

**9.4%**

Poverty rate of seniors in New Jersey

**\$104,770**

The bare minimum budget needed for  
a family of 4 living in New Jersey

**103%**

Increase from 2020 in the number of  
New Jersey residents who depend on  
Food Pantries

South Jersey Dream Center Food distribution at the National Park Elementary School on March 30, 2020. Over 150 low income families received nearly two tons of fresh produce, meat, dairy, and non-perishable groceries.



---

*We are going to be able to eat because of the help from the Dream Center. Our food stamps got cut off the other day, this is God - N.K.*

*My husband's hours got cut down because of the virus going around and you helped so much with the food it took some of the stress that we had - A.M.*

---



# KIM'S STORY

---

*The Dream Center is an absolute blessing to my family and the community! My family had a very rough 2019, we spent the whole summer in a family shelter due to some tribulations. While we were in the shelter we started to get on our feet, my husband started working again, and before you know it we were finally able to move into our new place in October of 2019. Although we were very happy to be in our new home we still needed so much. Being a family of 6 at the time and 8 months pregnant with baby number 5 we needed furniture and the new baby still needed many things! I reached out to several agencies with no luck till I got connected via Facebook to the Dream Center. God sent us Natalie, Tracy, and all their staff and volunteers to the rescue. It brought so much joy to them to want to help our family. They heard our story and treated us like family from day one. They reached out to several different people on their end and found my family a brand-new king bedroom set with a mattress included and a brand new recliner and also tons of other baby supplies that we needed. They communicated back and forth and made sure that we received what we needed. They continue to help my family and even check in just to make sure we are ok. Their customer service is outstanding! This organization is extremely friendly, trustworthy and is an excellent example of what God's love truly is. Five stars all across the board! The Robinson's are so grateful and blessed to be part of the Dream Center family!*

- Kimberly Robinson

---

