

UNITED WAY OF HUNTERDON COUNTY ANNOUNCES LAUNCH OF 'UNITED IN PLAY'

A PROGRAM ADDRESSING YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS THROUGH SPORTS

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Recognizing the urgent youth mental health crisis and the well-documented benefits of physical activity on mental well-being, [United Way](#) of Hunterdon County is proud to announce the national launch of United in Play, a first-of-its-kind program designed to provide equitable access to sports and physical activities for youth from ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) families.



Research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) underscores the severity of the youth mental health crisis, reporting that more than 40% of high school students struggle with persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness. Additionally, the U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Protecting Youth Mental Health highlights the growing mental health challenges faced by young people, citing increased anxiety, depression, and suicide rates. On the solution side, studies from the Aspen Institute and the Journal of Adolescent Health confirm that participation in sports and regular physical activity significantly reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety while fostering resilience, self-esteem, and a sense of belonging in youth.

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Jennifer Thompson, CEO

United in Play removes financial barriers that prevent ALICE youth from accessing sports and recreational

activities by providing scholarships, covering equipment costs, and ensuring participation fees are no longer an obstacle. However, the program extends beyond financial assistance—it prioritizes mental health by equipping volunteer coaches with Mental Health First Aid training

and providing families with crucial wellness resources. Recognizing the increasing need for accessible mental health support, United in Play also offers free tele-therapy services to youth and families in need.

“As a community, we can must acknowledge the link between physical activity and mental health,” said Jennifer Thompson, social worker and CEO of United Way of Hunterdon County. “United in Play is a game-changer—ensuring that every child, regardless of financial circumstances, has access to the proven benefits of sports while embedding critical mental health support within the program. This is about equity, opportunity, and the well-being of our next generation.”

United Way of Hunterdon County is proud to partner with DVRR Jr. Terriers (DVRR) on the launch of United in Play. This partnership represents a true community-led initiative, bringing together dedicated volunteers and local leaders who are committed to solving real challenges. “It’s these kinds of community initiatives that drive meaningful change,” said Thompson. “By working with DVRR, we’re not just launching a program—we’re building a movement that ensures youth have both the opportunity to play and the mental health support they need to thrive. We are grateful to have this passionate team at the table to help shape United in Play and push innovation forward alongside United Way.”

Lisa Dettra, Vice President of DVRR Jr. Terriers (DVRR), a key partner in United in Play, added, “We’ve seen firsthand how sports can positively impact young people’s lives. By integrating mental health resources and training, this program goes beyond the playing field to truly support youth in every aspect of their well-being. We are excited to be part of this initiative and look forward to helping kids thrive.”

United Way of Hunterdon County invites partners, volunteers, and community leaders to join the movement to ensure that every child, regardless of economic background, has the chance to play, grow, and thrive.

For more information about United in Play, partnership opportunities, or ways to get involved, visit www.uwhunterdon.org or contact Youth Opportunity Director for United Way of Hunterdon County, Laura Hernandez at laura@uwhunterdon.org.

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