

Unity Table Welcomes Essex County Teachers and First Responders at The Highlawn

More than 100 educators, first responders and civic leaders gathered at The Highlawn to celebrate service, connection and community.

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More than 100 educators, first responders, elected officials, business professionals and community leaders gathered at The Highlawn in West Orange for "Welcome Back: Honoring Our Teachers & First Responders," a [Unity Table](#) reception celebrating service, connection and community as the new school year begins.

Unity Table, a program of the New Jersey nonprofit [Little Box of Love](#),

created the evening to recognize educators preparing students for the year ahead and first responders working every day to keep communities safe.



From left: Undersheriff F. Figliuolo; Acting Chief Z. Thomas-Jenkins; J. Wayman Henry III, Founder; Rita Duran, Exec. Dir.; Sheriff Amir D. Jones; Sgt. D. Acevedo; Det. E. Robinson-Toone; S. Knox; Capt. G. Palma. Photo: J. Record

The gathering was also designed to create meaningful connections across sectors. Guidance counselors met business owners. First responders exchanged ideas with attorneys and entrepreneurs. Educators connected with public officials, nonprofit leaders and community advocates.

“

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J. Wayman Henry III

“Teachers and first responders are usually the ones giving the welcome. We wanted one night where they were the ones being welcomed,” said J. Wayman Henry III, Founder of Unity Table. “Our message has always been ‘Different Voices. Shared Solutions.’ When you bring people together

who might not ordinarily share the same room, they often discover they have more in common

than they realized.”

The evening drew a broad cross-section of New Jersey civic and community leadership, including State Senators Renee Burgess, Britnee N. Timberlake and John F. McKeon; Orange Mayor Dwayne Warren; Democratic nominee for Essex County Commissioner-at-Large Abdur R. Yasin; former New Jersey First Lady Ruthi Byrne; Essex County Sheriff’s Office Acting Chief Zipporah Thomas-Jenkins; Chief Todd Warren; West Orange Councilwoman Joyce Rudin; Councilman Larry Crump; Englewood Councilwoman Angela David, Ward III; and Orange Township Council President and At-Large Councilmember Adrienne K. Wooten.

They were joined by leaders from education, healthcare, public safety, law, construction, nonprofit organizations and the business community.

“There are so many people doing important work across our communities, but too often that work happens in separate spaces,” said State Senator Renee Burgess. “When educators, first responders, business leaders, public officials and community advocates are able to sit together, build relationships and exchange ideas, we strengthen the entire community.”

From Celebration to Service

The impact of the gathering extends beyond The Highlawn today.

Guests were encouraged to donate backpacks and back-to-school supplies in support of the Essex County Sheriff’s Office Community Day, taking place today, Monday, August 31, at Monte Irvin Park in Orange, New Jersey.

Supplies collected through Unity Table’s network are being delivered to support local children and families and help students begin the school year prepared.

“Community Day is about making sure every child in Essex County begins the school year prepared and supported. Unity Table’s partnership and its effort to engage its network in collecting school supplies for local families reflects the kind of community collaboration that makes a real difference,” said Essex County Sheriff Amir D. Jones.

The partnership reflects Unity Table’s broader model: gather people, build relationships and turn those relationships into action.

A Growing Community Platform

The Welcome Back reception is the latest in Unity Table’s monthly series. A Community Reception in May was followed by a Team Challenge Fundraiser in June, Symphony at Sunset in July, and August’s recognition of teachers and first responders.

Each gathering is different, but the mission remains the same: Different Voices. Shared Solutions.

The event was made possible through the support of On Collab, New Jersey Consulting Solutions, CareWell Health, Brivado Cigars, Double Cross Vodka and Pronghorn, with the Essex County Sheriff's Office serving as a community partner.

Next at the Table

Unity Table will return to The Highlawn on Thursday, September 24, 2026, at 7:00 p.m. for "[Todos a la Mesa](#) — Everyone to the Table."

The free gathering will celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month, recognizing the culture, leadership, entrepreneurship, service and contributions of Hispanic and Latino communities while welcoming people from every background.

Details and RSVP information are available at www.unitytable.org.

About Unity Table

Unity Table is a program and DBA of Little Box of Love, A New Jersey Nonprofit Corporation, a tax-exempt organization recognized under Section 501(c)(3). Founded in 2023, Little Box of Love works to strengthen communities through service, connection and collaborative initiatives.

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