

Unity Square to receive \$1 million for revitalization

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Residents and community organizers in New Brunswick's Unity Square neighborhood will receive a \$1 million grant from Johnson & Johnson to support and expand The Unity Square Partnership, a cooperative between Catholic Charities, Diocese of Metuchen and the Sacred Heart Church.

The funds, provided by the Neighborhood Revitalization Tax Credit Program, which establishes partnerships between businesses and community organizers, will help expand the medical services at St. John's Clinic, job training and placement programs as well as scholarship programs, said Lorena Gaibor, director of the Unity Square program.

Entrepreneurial programs of Elijah's Promise soup kitchen, ESL literacy education and youth education and recreational services will also benefit from the grant, Gaibor said.

"We are starting a new Soup to Jobs program at Elijah's Promise that will employ residents to hopefully create products from our community gardens," she said. "We want to help our residents to learn a range of skills and for them to take those skills to find new work."

Gaibor, who received her master's degree in social work from the University, said the program organizers also hope to start a youth financial education program to support the career development of the neighborhood's youth.

"Many parents as well as youth do not have bank accounts, so we are really starting with the basics," she said. "We will provide them with small funds to start off and encourage them to set goals, like saving for college."

The 37 square block neighborhood, within Commercial and Livingston Avenues and Sanford and Welton Streets, has an estimated population of 10,000 people, of which 24 percent live below the Federal Poverty Level, she said. Once a predominately black neighborhood, the majority of Unity Square residents are Hispanic, many Mexican immigrants with young families.

The Unity Square Revitalization project began in 2004, founded by Nancy Finn from Catholic Charities, Father Joe Kerrigan, pastor of the Sacred Heart Church and local residents, Gaibor said.

"The community came together to do something about the problems in the neighborhood," she said. "Residents decided they wanted to focus on reducing crime, job development, affordable housing, affordable health care and youth recreation services."

Coming to the end of a five-year grant from Wachovia, the neighborhood partnership investigated the tax credit program and

approached Johnson & Johnson, Gaibor said.

Bonnie Petrauskas, the director of Corporate Contributions & Community Relations at Johnson & Johnson, said the pharmaceutical company is happy to grant \$1 million to the Unity Square neighborhood, with hopes that this act will bring about change.

"We're proud to support our partners as they make a difference in the well-being of residents in the communities where our people live and work," said Petrauskas via email correspondence.

In addition to working with Johnson & Johnson, the Unity Square Partnership plans to involve many community partners in their projects, Gaibor said. Many of their programs developed in partnership with The Intersect Fund, the Rutgers Cooperative Extension, New Labor Training and Education Institute and Middlesex County College.

The community will host a celebration on Wednesday from 9 to 11 a.m. in the New Brunswick historic firehouse on Remsen Avenue, the future home of the Unity Square Partnership Community Center and Administrative offices, said LaNella Hooper-Williams, president of Hooper Williams Communications.

"This will really be a celebration, attended by Mayor James Cahill and [Department of Community Affairs commissioner Lori] Grifa," Hooper-Williams said.

Gaibor and Petrauskas will also attend the event along with many Unity Square residents.

"This is really a grassroots organization," Gaibor said. "The residents are very involved. They have a sense of ownership in these programs. This partnership is theirs."

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