

Background: Youth Mental Health and the Power of Sports

In December 2021, the **U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory** declaring **youth mental health a national crisis**, citing alarming rates of anxiety, depression, and isolation among children and adolescents. The report underscores the urgent need to foster **stronger community connections**, emphasizing that **youth sports and recreational programs play a critical role** in promoting not only physical health, but also **social-emotional well-being, resilience, and positive peer relationships**.

However, **many youth — particularly those from ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) families and other underserved communities — face significant barriers to participation in sports programs**. These barriers include:

- Cost of registration, uniforms, equipment, and travel fees.
- Lack of reliable transportation to practices, games, or community recreation facilities.
- Limited availability of affordable, community-based sports leagues in rural and lower-income areas.

Why It Matters

Research consistently shows that **youth who participate in sports experience lower rates of anxiety and depression, improved self-esteem, and stronger relationships with peers and caring adults**. Team sports, in particular, foster a **sense of belonging** and connection to **trusted coaches, mentors, and positive peer groups** — all of which are protective factors against mental health challenges.

For many low- and moderate-income families, however, these opportunities are out of reach. This gap in access further widens disparities in both **mental health outcomes** and **long-term community engagement**. In communities where affordable and accessible sports programs do not exist, youth miss out on **critical developmental experiences** that could improve their mental health, academic success, and future pathways.

At United Way of Hunterdon County, we believe **every child deserves the chance to play, grow, and thrive** — regardless of their family’s financial situation. That’s why we are proud to launch **United in Play**, a new program dedicated to ensuring **all children — including those from ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) families — have equal access to the benefits of youth sports.**

Our Vision

Through **United in Play**, we aim to break down the financial and logistical barriers that prevent too many children in Hunterdon County from participating in organized sports. We know that **youth sports do more than build athletic skills — they foster positive mental health, strengthen social connections, teach teamwork and leadership, and connect youth to supportive mentors.** These are essential building blocks for healthy development, especially during a time when **youth mental health is at crisis levels.**

How It Works

United in Play is a collaborative effort between **United Way of Hunterdon County, local schools, and youth sports organizations** across the county. Together, we work to:

- **Eliminate registration fees and equipment costs** for ALICE families, removing the financial burden that often puts sports out of reach.
- **Ensure access to essential sports gear** — from cleats to helmets to uniforms — so all children can participate with confidence.
- **Connect families directly to partner programs and streamline enrollment processes**, making it easier for ALICE families to sign up and get involved.
- **Advocate for inclusivity and access** within community sports leagues, emphasizing the importance of welcoming all children, regardless of economic background.

Why It Matters

Participating in sports is about much more than the game. It’s about:

- **Building friendships and a sense of belonging.**
- **Learning resilience, leadership, and teamwork.**
- **Connecting with positive adult mentors, such as coaches and volunteers.**
- **Improving physical health and reducing stress.**
- **Strengthening ties between families, schools, and the broader community.**

For ALICE families — who often face tough choices between paying bills and providing enrichment opportunities for their children — sports are often out of reach. **United in Play ensures all kids, regardless of income, have the opportunity to play, thrive, and experience the lifelong benefits of sports participation.**

Join Us

Together with our community partners, **United Way of Hunterdon County is creating a level playing field** where **every child can experience the joy and benefits of sports.** Through **United in Play**, we’re **building stronger kids, stronger families, and a stronger Hunterdon County.**