2026 Annual Report

Lighting Up The Skies

How We Build a Brighter Future for Children

children FIRST
THE ADVOCATE FOR KIDS

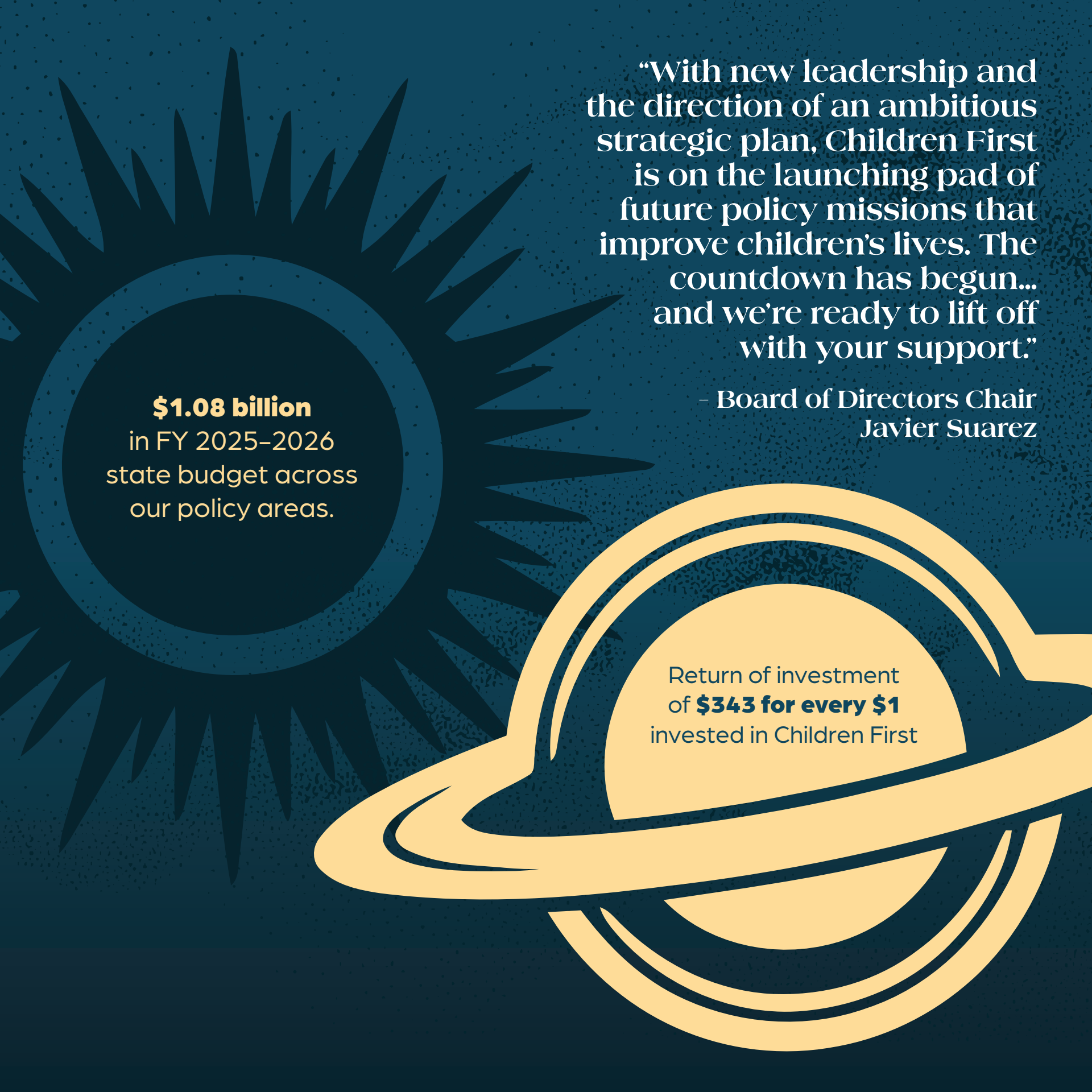
Children First is at a critical moment, successfully transitioning from the indominable leadership of Donna Cooper while completing a five-year strategic plan that met over 75% of its goals and benchmarks. Since 2021, Children First has proven that we can climb mountains, reach new peaks, and overcome obstacles so we can achieve big policy wins for kids. We learned that when we work together – in coalitions and in partnerships with families, communities, and youth – we shine bright and can light the way for children to have brighter futures. We're able to win big for kids because we have supporters like you. It is only when we work together that we can light up the skies.

It is through this lens that I intend to lead Children First into the next era, empowered to build a super-coalition of advocates that demand more for kids – that we don't just focus on systems, but invest in children, acknowledging that they exist within the families and communities that scaffold them. Our new strategic plan does not see us fighting over resources for education, health, or economic development. This scarcity mindset pits us against one another. We need to dream big so that the children in our communities can reach for the stars.

I am thrilled to have the opportunity to lead Children First into its next era, one in which I see a brighter future for children in southeastern Pennsylvania.

Mai Miksic,
Executive Director




“With new leadership and the direction of an ambitious strategic plan, Children First is on the launching pad of future policy missions that improve children’s lives. The countdown has begun... and we’re ready to lift off with your support.”
– Board of Directors Chair Javier Suarez
$1.08 billion
in FY 2025–2026 state budget across our policy areas.
Return of investment of $343 for every $1 invested in Children First

EDUCATION

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

High-quality early childhood programs that set children up for lifelong learning

After five years, the Early Childhood Provider Council launched as its own **independent organization**, giving new heights to provider voices.

Children First helped to land a dedicated new line item in the FY26 state budget for recruitment and retention bonuses **totaling $25 million.**

Stars in Pre-K for PA
Children First, Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, Trying Together, First Up, United Way of Pennsylvania, Pennsylvania Head Start Association, PennAEYC

PRE-K FOR PA

START STRONG PA

Stars in Start Strong
Children First, Pennsylvania Partnerships for Children, Trying Together, First Up, United Way of Pennsylvania, PACCA, Pennsylvania Head Start Association, PennAEYC

Stars in PA Schools Work
412 Justice, Children First, Education Law Center, Education Voters of Pennsylvania, Keystone Research Center, Pennsylvania Association of Rural and Small Schools, Pennsylvania Policy Center, The Public Interest Law Center, Teach Plus, Urban League of Greater Philadelphia

PA SCHOOLS WORK
INVEST IN STUDENTS, SECURE OUR FUTURE



K–12 EDUCATION

Fairly funded K–12 schools that offer rigorous instruction to support every student's success

K–12

- $565 million more in adequacy funding targeted at school districts with the highest needs
- $125 million for school facilities
- $100 million to ongoing mental health & physical school safety support
- $105 million more in Basic Education Funding
- $40 million more in Special Education Funding
- Continued universal free breakfast for all 1.7+ million PA students

JUVENILE JUSTICE

Educational opportunities in the juvenile justice system that heal and prepare youth for a thriving future

With a stellar voter engagement strategy that reached more than **30,000 Philadelphians**, Children First guided voters to the polls to make permanent the city Office of the Youth Ombudsperson (OYO).

HEALTHY LIVES

PROTECTING HEALTHCARE ACCESS

Policies that increase access to high-quality physical health services so children can learn and grow

After federal changes jettisoned Medicaid protections, Children First kept child health in orbit by **defending state Medicaid and CHIP coverage.**

ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

Policies that reduce, prevent, or eliminate harmful exposures to keep children safe and well

Propelled legislation through the PA House of Representatives that ensures all children are tested twice for lead poisoning in their first two years. **Early detection is critical.**

Launched the Thriving Communities pilot program to educate families about the dangers of lead toxins. We worked through the Green and Healthy Homes Initiative to **reach more than 650 families** across three counties and distribute thousands of books and materials to parents, grandparents, and caregivers.

MENTAL HEALTH

A full continuum of mental health support for caregivers and children so that families experience greater stability and well-being

Launched the Strong Minds Youth Advocacy Council with 23 young people who will guide our mental health work.

Through **seven listening sessions** across the state, Strong Minds made space for young people, parents, and community members to strategize community-driven solutions.

Kids shouldn't have to wait to reach a health crisis.

Strong Minds, Bright Futures

A Partnership for Child Mental Wellbeing

108 coalition partners in the **Strong Minds, Bright Futures** Partnership working to ensure children and teens have access to preventative, primary, and intensive mental health care

Eighty coalition partners and 400+ members working together as the **Lead-Free Promise Project** to end lead paint poisoning

LEAD-FREE PROMISE PROJECT

ECONOMIC MOBILITY

CHILD WELFARE

A foster care system that promotes and maintains family stability so that children can thrive

Propelled legislation unanimously through the PA House of Representatives that outlaws child-serving agencies from covertly taking any federal public benefits the children receive.

ECONOMIC MOBILITY

Stronger economic support for families that reduce child poverty and expand upward mobility

Paid Family & Medical Leave legislation soared higher than ever in PA, **passing the full House of Representatives and landing in the Senate for the first time.**



CAREER READINESS

Career and Technical Education (CTE) that opens pathways to prosperity for teens and young adults

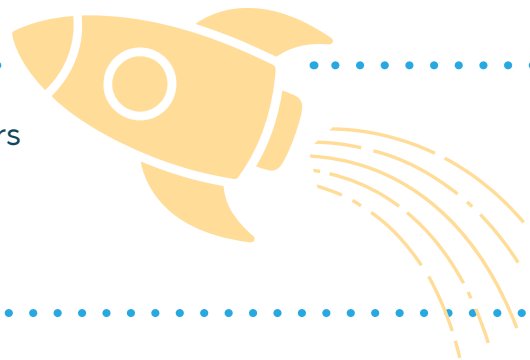
Children First research explored the barriers to CTE enrollment, namely a widespread CTE teacher shortage. We presented state decisionmakers with a viable plan to **streamline CTE instructor certification and open more classrooms.**

PARENTS EMPOWERED FOR CHANGE

A single star can shine brightly but when stars are connected, they become something greater – a constellation to help others find their way.

That's the vision behind Parents Empowered for Change. When Children First nurtures parent leaders, we build a constellation of advocates whose leadership stretches across time, each one building on the work of those who came before.

This year, 25 parents completed more than 50 hours of political education, deepening their understanding of organizing, policy, and systems of change. Equipped with new knowledge and a growing constellation of peers, they emerged as a beacon for change long after the classes ended.



Change accelerates when communities move together. Parents and caregivers mobilized hundreds of Philadelphians to protect pre-k and playgrounds from being unfunded. What began as individual voices became a visible force that helped sustain critical resources for Philadelphia's families.

By elevating lived experiences into policy conversations, problems otherwise unexplored are illuminated. Parents and caregivers know that children are being unofficially pushed out of child care or pre-k programs because of behavioral or developmental issues, primarily because providers don't have enough staff and training to provide sufficient support. More than 50 parents and caregivers shared their incredibly personal experiences of the pre-k pushout problem, leading to collective analysis and guided policy recommendations for parents and providers.

Powerful advocacy alters lawmakers' gravitational pull. After five years of sustained parent organizing and coalition building, the Philadelphia mayor and city council committed $216 million in new investments for the School District of Philadelphia. This milestone reflects years of parents refusing to accept the status quo and demonstrates how persistent collective action can reshape public priorities for children.

A shining example of the power of Parents Empowered for Change: The development of the Philadelphia Office of the Youth Ombudsperson (OYO).



Geneva Williams

Geneva Williams, a Parents Empowered for Change alumna, worked closely with Children First to establish the OYO in 2022, recognizing that children and youth in juvenile detention and congregate care deserve an independent office to protect their rights and hold public systems accountable.



Jazmin Banks

When the future of the OYO required renewed public commitment in 2025, Parents Empowered for Change alumna Jazmin Banks actively advocated in support of making the OYO a permanent part of Philadelphia's accountability infrastructure. Her advocacy made sure that families would continue to have an independent place to turn when their children's rights were at stake.

Regina Brown

Regina Brown, another Parents Empowered for Change alumna, relied on the very institution that earlier parent leaders had helped build and sustain. After her child's rights were violated while in juvenile detention, she filed a complaint with the OYO. When her complaint was initially dismissed, Regina persisted.

With assistance from Children First staff, Regina took her complaint to the next level by laying out to the OYO specifically how her child's experience exemplified why the office was created in the first place. In the process, OYO uncovered barriers in the intake process that made it harder for families to get help.

In addition to improving the OYO intake process, her advocacy led to an investigation into her child's treatment and contributed to greater scrutiny of conditions at the detention facility. Future families will benefit from her work.



This is the power of a constellation; no single parent transformed the system alone. Geneva helped establish the OYO. Jazmin fought to secure its future. Regina made it work better for families.

Marginalized, stigmatized and invisible families like mine need a consistent organization we can trust and turn to — hopefully before a crisis — that will listen to us, work with us, and save our children and families.

YOUTH LEADERS ADVANCING HEALTHY LIVES

Young people help shape a brighter future when their experiences and ideas guide decisions that affect them. Through Children First's Strong Minds Youth Advocacy Council, 23 youth leaders identify barriers to mental health support, shape priorities, and lead projects alongside more than 100 partners across Pennsylvania. Together, they form a statewide constellation of advocates, connecting different perspectives and expertise to make support easier to reach.

BUILDING YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Launched in the summer of 2026, the Council brings together teenagers and young adults with different experiences of mental health, education, and access to care. Children First supports members in developing advocacy skills, collaborating with partners, and translating their priorities into public policy recommendations and shared projects.

TURNING IDEAS INTO SHARED ACTION

Council members contribute through direct advocacy and three workgroups: Creative Works, Public Awareness & Policy Engagement, and Storytelling & Digital Media. Their projects connect mental health with art, public education, and storytelling. A youth-led podcast and zine are in development, with members choosing the topics and shaping the content.

MAKING SUPPORT AVAILABLE BEFORE CRISIS

The council advances Children First's Healthy Lives commitment to preventive mental health care for all children. Strong Minds, Bright Futures advocates for Medicaid to cover support before a diagnosis, a larger mental health workforce, and care that supports parents and children together. Youth perspectives help ground these recommendations in what families need to find and receive care.

CONNECTING POLICY TO EVERYDAY LIFE

Schools and community organizations are often where young people first seek help. Council members emphasize trusted adults, clear guidance, culturally responsive resources, and staff with time and training to respond. Their contributions help illuminate barriers and guide advocacy for dependable funding, stronger coordination, and support within reach.

Three youth leaders bring different strengths to a shared goal: making earlier, more accessible mental health support part of every child's future.



Ana Buehler, Lancaster County

Advocating for support before crisis

Ana brings a clear priority to the Council's Public Awareness & Policy Engagement work: teenagers should receive support before they reach a crisis. Drawing on her own experiences, she advocates for care regardless of a young person's background. Ana is studying special education and early childhood education and plans to work with children who have experienced trauma and mental health challenges. She connects the partnership's prevention agenda with a future educator's commitment to compassionate support.



Mohammad Shedeed, Allegheny County

Bringing students into school mental health decisions

Mohammad wants students involved in policies affecting mental health education and resources at school. A University of Pittsburgh senior studying neuroscience and Spanish, he advocates for culturally responsive support, especially in communities where mental health is rarely discussed or resources are difficult to access. Mohammad brings these priorities into the Council's shared advocacy. An aspiring physician, he connects his interests in medicine and policy with a commitment to helping young people understand mental health and find care.



Adriana Termine, Montgomery County

Leading conversations that young people shape

Adriana is helping lead development of the Council's youth-led podcast through its Storytelling & Digital Media work. Members are choosing topics and shaping conversations around their own questions and perspectives. Her interests in psychology, child welfare reform, and disability rights inform her commitment to young people being heard and included in decisions. Through the podcast, Adriana is helping create a platform where youth lead the conversation and explore what better mental health support could look like.

The strength of this constellation comes from connection. Youth leaders bring experience and ideas; partners contribute policy, clinical, education, and community expertise. Their shared leadership helps turn the promise of a brighter future into advocacy for the support children need today.

When a young person has the courage to ask for help, hold that moment carefully. Your reaction in that instant has the capacity to change the trajectory of their life.

STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION

Cash and cash equivalents	$1,310,368
Investments	$3,100,052
RECEIVABLES	
Grants receivable	$3,236,467
Pledges receivable, net of discount of $50,864	$199,136
Contracts and other receivables, net of allowance of $527,535	$2,044,931
Total receivables	$5,480,534
Security deposits	$13,711
Property and equipment, net of accumulated depreciation of $46,1578	$5,707
TOTAL ASSETS	$9,910,372





LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS

LIABILITIES	
Accounts payable and accrued expenses	$438,686
Accrued payroll and paid leave	$207,332
TOTAL LIABILITIES	$646,018

NET ASSETS	
Without donor restrictions	$4,962,642
With donor restrictions	$4,301,712
TOTAL NET ASSETS	$9,264,354

TOTAL LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS	**$9,910,372**

2025-26 CITIZEN LEADERS

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Barbara Adams
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Soledad Alfaro
Majid & Mary Alsayegh
Saumya Ayyagari
Michael & Irene Beer
Nancy Bernstein
Rebecca Bien
Ira Brind
Marianne Callaghan
Larry Bomback
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LaTi Spence
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Linda Wright Moore
Mary Beth & Edward Yarish
Gerald Zahorchak



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Alta Management

American Association of University Women – Doylestown Branch

AmeriHealth Caritas Services LLC

Archer & Greiner PC

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Brightside Academy

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Future Focus Consulting LLC

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Strategic Nonprofit Finance

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Teamsters Local 502

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Temple University – Public Policy & Gov Relations

TroutmanPepper

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The Barra Foundation

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Bushnell/Pelkey Fund

CHG Charitable Trust

Children Can Shape the Future

Christian R. and Mary F. Lindback Foundation

Delaware County Interactive Gaming Revenue Authority

Delaware County Medical Society Public Health Fund, Inc

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Hamilton Family Charitable Trust

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Lenfest Institute for Journalism

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NBME Community Impact

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Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development

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Pottstown Regional Community Foundation

Pritzker Children's Initiative

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Strada Education Foundation

The Marni Sweet Fund

The Foundation for Delaware County

Thomas Scattergood Behavioral Health Foundation

United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey

US Department of Education – Education, Innovation and Research (EIR)

van Ameringen Foundation

Vanguard Strong Start for Kids Program

Vert Charitable Trust

Voices for Healthy Kids

Wyncote Foundation

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