

After the bell: How 585 DREAM is changing afternoons for Rochester's kids



When the final bell rings at the end of the school day, many children head home to do their homework, have dinner, and spend time with their families. But for too many in Rochester, that's not the case.

With a **47% poverty rate in the Rochester City School District**, many children come home to an empty house or an uncertain environment. Nationally, 22% of children live with only their mothers, 5% with only their fathers, and 4% with neither parent—numbers that hint at the challenges families face each afternoon.

That's why after-school programs like Rock Royal's 585 DREAM matter.

Founded by Khadija Yawn, 585 DREAM—short for *Dance, Respect, Education, Arts, and Music*—is **giving hundreds of Rochester youth a safe, creative, and empowering space to spend their after-school hours**. What began as a small idea in 2010 has grown into a full-fledged movement, **supported by United Way of Greater Rochester and the Finger Lakes**.

The 585 DREAM program began with Yawn's belief that art, mentorship, and creativity could offer kids more than just a pastime—they could provide a sense of belonging and hope. As a DJ and community organizer, she witnessed firsthand how music and movement could inspire children to express themselves and acquire valuable life skills.

“I started teaching DJ and graphic design classes during COVID,” she recalls. “That turned into a bigger vision—teaching kids how to use their talents to build confidence and even create opportunities for themselves.”

When United Way funding arrived, it allowed Rock Royal to expand its reach.

“We were able to hire a program director,” Yawn says. “Before that, it was just me. United Way didn’t just fund us—they showed up. They came to see the kids, talk with families, and understand what we’re building here.”

Today, **585 DREAM serves more than 200 children across Rochester**, with a waitlist of over 150 more hoping to join. The results are clear: higher confidence, stronger relationships, and a community of young people who feel seen and supported.

“When kids feel safe and valued,” Yawn says. “They grow. They dream bigger. That’s what this is all about.”

What happens after the bell rings can shape a child’s entire future—and thanks to 585 DREAM, those futures are looking brighter every day.

Learn more about United Way’s work: unitedwayrocflx.org/what-we-do

Restoring dignity:

How 12 Loaves Food Pantry is redefining what it means to feed a community



Food pantries have long stood as cornerstones of community care—steady, familiar places to turn when the cupboard thins and the rent runs high. But for all the generosity they represent, one thing has too often been missing: dignity.

Just because someone has fallen on hard times doesn't mean they should lose the simple grace of choosing their own groceries—the act of deciding what to feed their family, the small bit of control that steadies a person when life feels unsteady.

That's where **12 Loaves Food Pantry, supported by United Way of Greater Rochester and the Finger Lakes, has stepped in to fill the gap.**

The pantry began during the pandemic, when, like so many others, it operated on pre-packed boxes handed through car windows. But two and a half years ago, David Riddel, director of Venture Compassionate Ministries, and his team decided it was time for something more human. This “guest-choice” model would treat people not as recipients but as neighbors.

They studied what worked elsewhere, listened to families they served, and launched a reimagined pantry—laid out like a small grocery store, with aisles, carts, and checkouts.

Here, every household receives points based on family size and can “shop” within categories provided by Foodlink and the USDA. Each person gets to pick what fits their household's dietary, cultural, or religious needs.

The shift was about more than efficiency—it was about respect.

A May 2025 Foodlink report found that **one in eight people in its 10-county region, including Monroe County, struggle with food insecurity**. In Monroe County alone, that's nearly 99,000 people, or 13% of residents. The numbers are even higher for **Black (28%)** and **Hispanic (30%)** neighbors.

Children are especially affected—about one in six across the region don't always know where their next meal will come from. In parts of Rochester, such as ZIP codes 14605 and 14614, food insecurity rates exceed 30%, one of the highest in New York State.

Visits to food pantries and meal programs have surged—up 35% in early 2024 from the previous year—as families face rising costs and the loss of pandemic-era support.

Within this landscape, 12 Loaves is seeing record growth—a **130% increase in families seeking help over the past six months**. What began as a program for 125 households now serves more than 220 families a month. Each week, volunteers move approximately 10,000 pounds of food through the space—12 pallets from Foodlink, plus community donations and fresh produce from over 20 local farms.

The work is entirely run by volunteers—**over 80 active helpers**, ranging from retired engineers to office assistants, led by a core team of eight.

“Our pantry is 100% volunteer-run,” Riddel said. “From sorting donations to stocking shelves to helping families shop—it's the community helping the community.”

Behind the operation is a web of partnerships that make it possible. Among them, United Way plays a vital role. “We began working with United Way during the pandemic,” Riddel explains. “And in 2025, **we received a multi-year grant through United Way of Greater Rochester and the Finger Lakes**. That partnership changed everything.”

The grant helps cover critical overhead and technology costs, funds food purchases, and allows the pantry to maintain the guest-choice model. “It doesn't go to salaries,” Riddel notes. “It goes directly into keeping this place running—buying food, maintaining carts and shelving, and covering the systems that track our inventory.”

Beyond funding, United Way offers something equally valuable: information. “They help us understand what's happening across the region and in Albany and Washington,” says Riddel. “That insight helps our board and volunteers make better decisions. It's been invaluable.”

For Riddel, the work is about more than food—it's about justice. “Food justice means accessibility for everyone,” he says. “It shouldn't matter where you're from, what your income is, or whether you're a citizen. Every person who walks through our doors is a neighbor. We treat them that way.”

And as need grows, that spirit will matter even more.

Donations—whether food, funds, or skilled volunteer time—help 12 Loaves keep its shelves full and its mission strong. It stands as proof that dignity and compassion can coexist with efficiency and effectiveness.

In a season of rising need, 12 Loaves reminds us that food is more than sustenance—it's a sign of belonging, a quiet way of saying: you still matter here.

Learn more about United Way's work: unitedwayrocflix.org/what-we-do

There's no such thing as other people's children: How The Spot is meeting quiet needs in Canandaigua and Victor



People say that suburbs and rural towns don't carry the same level of need as inner cities. That story is tidy—and wrong. In Victor and Canandaigua, need shows up quietly: at the bus stop with shoes that don't fit, in kitchen cabinets stretched thin until Friday's paycheck, in classrooms where a missing backpack becomes a missing homework grade.

Before the school year began, we visited The Spot to see how a small team and a stubborn idea—there's no such thing as other people's children—turns quiet need into steady help.

"I'm Dani Hines, director of operations with The Spot," Danny said, smiling like someone who has hauled more boxes than they can count.

"I've been here seven years. **Our program helps families in the Victor and Canandaigua school districts with food support.**"

The list didn't stop there. The Spot hosts a Back-to-School Bash, where every registered student receives a backpack tailored to their grade-level supply list. **They fill gaps with personal care products, clothing, shoes, and seasonal gear.** "Every day is different," Danny said. "I'm making even a small impact in our community every day."

A multi-year United Way grant helps them plan instead of chasing emergencies.

“You’ve (United Way) helped us buy things ahead and inventory sizes we don’t always keep in stock,” Hines said. That’s how “Sneaker Saturday” became a staple—kids lining up for new kicks, parents exhaling for a minute.

“The kids were so excited to get new shoes,” Hines said. “Run faster and jump higher—if that’s all it did, they loved it.”

What used to be a single gym filled with tables of supplies has evolved into a system: resource rooms inside multiple schools are stocked for teachers and students, pop-ups offer winter gear and sneakers, and a school-based pantry operates like clockwork.

Kalene Reiner manages the food side. “We’re a school-based pantry that provides monthly and weekly food support to families in need,” she said. “**About 70–90 families receive monthly distributions**, and we also do weekly emergency support.”

No refrigeration means shelf-stable staples—breakfast items, easy microwaveable meals, and proteins when possible—and then fresh bread, tortillas, apples, and potatoes when available.

“A lot of our weekly support goes home on the bus with the kids,” Reiner said. Relief is the word she hears most. “A bag of groceries helps them make it to the end of the week or the next paycheck.”

Becca Soller, program director for Canandaigua, tends the day-to-day in the schools. “I oversee the primary, middle, and academy resource rooms and volunteers.”

For Becca, the work is both professional and personal. “When kids have what they need to thrive in school, it creates a better environment for every kid in every classroom.” **The United Way partnership means more winter boots, more coats, more sneakers, and more stocked rooms.** It also means people power: United Way’s Day of Caring volunteers packing bags, organizing shelves, scaling what a small staff can do.

“A bigger team helps things grow,” Soller said.

This year, The Spot **packed over 700 backpacks**, most of which were pre-registered and already promised to a student by their first day.

Need in a lake town can hide behind a pretty view. Dani Hines doesn’t let the myth stand. “People think, ‘I live in Canandaigua on the lake—people are rich. Middle-class families are making it paycheck to paycheck. Canandaigua has poverty. So does Victor.’”

Hines points to the numbers—working parents with two or three jobs, rising food prices, and mounting school costs—and then proposes the solution: neighbors meeting neighbors where they are.

By the time families picked up the last of the pre-registered backpacks, the lesson was plain. Need does not check zip codes. It sits next to your child on the bus, serves your table at dinner, drops packages on your porch, and, some days, walks in your shoes.

Learn more about United Way’s work: unitedwayrocflex.org/what-we-do

Where Stability Begins: Inside The Margaret Home



Stability is the quiet engine of a thriving life—especially when a mother carries the sacred charge of raising a child. When one pillar in that journey buckles, whether from systemic fractures or personal upheaval, the whole engine strains. One life feels it. Often two. Sometimes more.

The Margaret Home stands as the place where that engine can be rebuilt—steadily, intentionally, and with love.

Once an old convent, the building now **opens its doors to pregnant and parenting mothers seeking safety and direction**. As President and Founder, Paula Belemjian moves through the halls with a tenderness that needs no performance. She carries the stories of every woman who has sought refuge here—the heartbreaks, the small victories, the long exhale of hope.

“Why are we doing what we’re doing?” she asks. “We’re doing it because the person matters.”

That belief is the thread running through every room, every conversation, every act of care inside the home.

A Place for Mothers to Exhale

The mothers who arrive at The Margaret Home carry layers of hardship:

- financial instability
- domestic violence
- unstable housing
- broken family connections

They are met with structure, consistency, and compassion. This is not a shelter and not a temporary fix. It is a family.

Once accepted, **mothers receive emotional, practical, and financial support throughout their stay—and long after they leave the program.** Stability is built in quiet, patient ways: birthdays celebrated, holidays shared, milestones honored. Some toddlers taste their first birthday cake here. Each mother has her own pantry and refrigerator space—simple, but profoundly symbolic: this is yours.

“You can breathe, your child can breathe as long as you’re here and even after that,” Belemjian reminds them.

The living room radiates warmth—soft, calm, safe. The kitchen hums with shared meals. Outside, a modern playground restores laughter to the daily rhythm. Books spill off shelves with stories and affirmations meant to strengthen weary spirits.

Everything is intentional. Everything is built toward stability.

Building the Backbone of Stability

Stability also has a practical side. Mothers learn financial literacy, budgeting, credit building, and steps toward future homeownership. They receive career planning, cooking lessons, driving instruction, parenting classes, babysitting help, groceries, and mental health support.

This isn’t charity. This is empowerment.

And none of it happens by accident. The Margaret Home’s ability to offer such comprehensive care depends on a strong financial framework—**one made possible in part by the United Way of Greater Rochester and the Finger Lakes.** United Way’s investment ensures this work doesn’t rest on hope alone.

It ensures longevity, reliability, and a space for women to rebuild without fear of the rug being pulled out from under them.

“Empathy is what drives us toward action,” Belemjian says.

United Way’s partnership helps make that action steady and sustainable.

Taye’s Story

Holding her newborn, Taye remembers the crossroads she once faced:

“I was planning on giving her up for adoption because I didn’t think I could care for her the way she deserved. Coming here gave me the opportunity to keep her and raise her and love her.”

Belemjian reflects softly:

“That is the essence of what The Margaret Home is working on. She is able to move forward with a deep understanding of who she is and where she’s come from—and not transfer any of those pieces that are unhelpful onto that child.”

For Taye, the volunteers became more than helpers:

“They don’t get paid. They do what they do for her. They’re all her extended family.”

Her words to other mothers are simple and powerful:

“Take a chance on yourself, take a chance on your baby. Don’t be ashamed because you need help.”

Sami’s Story

Sami arrived at the home, lost and desiring direction.

“I didn’t know where my next step was. I just wanted a community. I needed hope, because without hope, you don’t have anything.”

She found stability, safety, and space to heal. She graduated from cosmetology school while living at The Margaret Home and now works in a children’s salon.

The Margaret Home Model

The program offers a structured path forward, centered on long-term growth:

- a self-directed action plan
- an individualized coaching team
- educational and career support
- entrepreneurial and job-training opportunities
- up to 24 months of residence at no cost

Their core values—dignity, encouragement, family, integrity, respect, and love—guide every decision.

“Anxiety can creep up and freeze people in place,” Belemjian says. “When it does, people can’t see their way around a problem.”

A Home Built on Intentionality and Community

Belemjian’s mission is unwavering. Her memory for beginnings is sharp.

“I will never forget that first baby. I remember looking into his eyes and being awed by the chance to serve our community in a way I had never imagined.”

The Margaret Home is what happens when compassion, community, and structure converge with a mother’s determination to try again. It is where women reclaim enough peace to imagine a future beyond crisis.

And **with United Way providing both financial strength and ongoing partnership, this home remains not only a refuge—but a foundation.** A place where dignity is restored, stability is rebuilt, and mothers and children step toward the next chapter of their lives supported, strengthened, and never alone.

Learn more about United Way’s work: unitedwayroclx.org/what-we-do

United, We Rise: Stories of Resilience and Renewal Across Our Community



No one walks their road alone. Hardship threads itself through families, across blocks, and into entire towns. What shakes one life shakes many, and what lifts one life becomes part of our shared rhythm. Pain ripples—but so does resilience. And when that resilience is met with the right support, people rise.

These stories show that truth. And they show how **the United Way of Greater Rochester and the Finger Lakes stands beside our partners**—not only with funding, but with continued support that strengthens the work on the ground. United Way invests in the organizations in these stories so they can be present in the hardest moments, steady and ready.

In community work, it's tempting to focus on metrics: families assisted, meals delivered, services provided. But those numbers only exist because someone cared enough to resource the work behind them. Every dollar entrusted to United Way becomes fuel for real lives, real turning points, real courage.

Take the young mother—33, fleeing domestic violence with her three children. She spent nearly a year without a true home: a friend's couch, a relative's spare room, a hotel she could barely afford. She kept going. She kept working. She kept believing. When she finally secured an apartment, Catholic Charities—supported by United Way's investment—stepped in to cover her security deposit and provide the essentials: food, hygiene items, cookware. When she held her keys, she cried and whispered, "It feels like my nightmare is gone." That wasn't just her victory. It was the result of a community choosing to show up for her.

Then there were the children whose safety demanded immediate protection. When signs of abuse emerged, the Child Advocacy Center—another United Way–supported partner—mobilized instantly. Law enforcement, medical professionals, and advocates formed a united front. The children told their story only once. Evidence was collected. Arrests followed. Doctors cleared their schedules. The perpetrator pled guilty, sparing the children from facing him in court. They were believed. They were safe. And the healing began—powered by a coordinated team sustained through United Way’s ongoing support.

Some wounds are quieter. A father in Batavia learned this after losing his job. He invested his retirement savings in a small business, hoping to create stability. When it failed, eviction loomed. Shame kept him silent—he had never asked for help. The Salvation Army Batavia Corps, funded in part through United Way, stepped forward with rental assistance, resume help, and food for his children. Today he’s working again, rebuilding his life. He said the money helped—but what saved him was knowing someone cared enough to stand beside him.

Or the 16-year-old girl arrested after a fight at school. Behind that moment was grief: a friend lost, rumors spreading, pain she couldn’t name. She stopped going to class. The diversion program at Wayne Pre-Trial—strengthened through United Way’s support—gave her the space to understand her emotions and choose peace. Months later, the same classmate tried to provoke her. She walked away. Her record cleared. Her dignity restored. She finished the program smiling, knowing one mistake would not write her future.

And then there’s Cai. A foster youth separated from siblings, moved from home to home, unsure where they belonged. **Hope585’s mentorship program—funded by United Way—brought people into Cai’s life who showed up again and again.** They celebrated milestones. They stood beside Cai through the hardest day—the day parental rights were terminated. Over time, those mentors became family. Now Cai dreams aloud about college, about work, about a future that once felt out of reach.

Each story begins in struggle but bends toward hope:

- A mother escaping violence.
- Children shielded from harm.
- A father finding his footing.
- A teenager reclaiming her voice.
- A young person discovering belonging.

Different paths, same truth: when people meet vulnerability with support—real, consistent, community-backed support—lives change. And United Way is part of that change, not only through financial investment but through the long, steady commitment to help partners stay strong.

This is **the heart of United Way’s work—standing shoulder to shoulder with organizations that meet people where they are.** United Way helps carry the weight, sustain the response, and make sure no one slips through the cracks. Every partner, every program, every life touched is part of a larger promise: no one is alone here.

Because when a community stands together—United, we rise.

Learn more about United Way’s work: unitedwayrocflx.org/what-we-do