

United
Way



Mia and Carol play together before Carol heads to a regular parent-support group meeting. Carol has found comfort in the Children's Aid Society at The Lehman Center, an organization that, thanks to support from the United Way of York County's Community Fund, is changing lives.

The Lehman Center makes 'world of difference' for York families

by OUR
YORK
MEDIA

Mia Abate is a spitfire. At 7 years old, she wears clothes meant for a 5-year-old, but her oversized, hyper personality can fill a room. She loves math and science, and she's smart as a whip – which is why Carol Hinch was surprised when Mia started calling her a different name: Mommy.

"You know I'm Grandma, right?" Carol asked Mia.

"I know that," Mia replied. "But mommies take care of kids, and that's what you do."

Raising Mia

Mia's short life hasn't been easy. She was born a month early, addicted to opiates. She's been diagnosed with autism, seizures, severe ADHD, and apraxia, a motor speech disorder that makes it hard for children to speak. And that's not even the complete list.

But none of that stopped Carol from taking in Mia when she was two months old, as her parents, addicted to drugs and in jail, couldn't care for their daughter.

That first year was especially hard. Mia would only sleep for 45 minutes at a time. She struggled to eat and was sensitive to touch. Long, sleepless nights and Mia's need for constant care left Carol, who was in her late 50s, physically and mentally exhausted. She was desperate for a break – for her sake and for Mia's.

Over and over again she was turned away or told she didn't qualify for the assistance she needed.

Then she found Children's Aid Society at The Lehman Center, an organization that, thanks to support from the United Way of York County's Community Fund, is changing lives.



Mia Abate, 7, plays on the swing set at the center in downtown York. After a rough start for Mia and her main caretaker, Carol Hinch, The Lehman Center provides a refuge and support.

Daniel Roth of The Lehman Center helps Mia with a puzzle on a recent visit. Daniel is one of the few people who can help Mia calm down when she gets too worked up or excited.



United Way of York County

Finding support

"Our vision is that all children are safe and feel loved," says Eric M. Chase, executive director and CEO of Children's Aid Society at The Lehman Center and Crisis Nursery. "We want to help stabilize the family system."

The Lehman Center offers emergency respite care for newborns to children 6 years old in its 24-hour crisis nursery, one of just three of its kind in Pennsylvania. The center also offers art and child-centered therapy, family advocate services, and parent support groups.

After meeting with a case worker at The Lehman Center, Carol left Mia in the nursery under the care of its professionally trained staff. Then, for the first time in a year, Carol went home alone. She took a nap, then pulled some weeds in her garden. She was gone only four hours, but that break was a life-saver. It rejuvenated Carol while giving Mia a chance to socialize with other children.

"A lot of what we do is be that support system someone might not have," says Shari Gordon, director of volunteers and parent support groups at The Lehman Center.

Knowing that there was somewhere she could take Mia if she needed helped alleviate Carol's stress.

"It's like a weight off your shoulders," she says. When Carol needed surgery, she was able to leave Mia with the staff in the crisis nursery for three days.

A relieving safety net

That respite care is also available for caregivers who might simply have a doctor appointment or job interview and don't have anyone dependable to care for their child.



"Just knowing that that safety net is there is a relief," Carol says.

Picking Mia up was like reuniting after a sleepaway camp — hugs, joy, and Mia bursting with stories of all the fun things she'd done. A lot of kids call it Camp Lehman or The Kids Hotel, Eric says.

Carol also started going to the parent support group once a week. It's a chance to share her struggles and triumphs.

Partnering with United Way

The Lehman Center has been there for Carol and Mia. But they couldn't have done it without support of their own, coming from the United Way of York County.

"The United Way is critical to our services," Eric says. "Every dollar matters. If it wasn't for their contribution, we would run out of money a full month before the end of the year."

That support from the United Way's Community Fund means Children's Aid Society at The Lehman Center can continue its mission to be there for families like Carol and Mia, 24-hours a day, year-round. They're supporting us, so we can support her, Eric says. Carol knows she can rely on The Lehman Center and it's made a world of difference.

"I don't know where I'd be without it."

When Mia was diagnosed with autism, she went to the support group and cried. But she also learned she wasn't alone.

"We share the trials and tribulations. We share the joys and the tears and everything else, and I know Mia is safe in the other room and happy," Carol says.

"The United Way is critical to our services. Every dollar matters. If it wasn't for their contribution, we would run out of money a full month before the end of the year."