

**2024 Core Mission Grant
Executive Summary of Finalist Proposal
Community Health and Well Being Focus Area Committee**

1. **Organization Name:** Hispanic Family Center of Southern New Jersey, Inc.
2. **Organization website:** <http://www.hispanicfamilycenter.com/>
3. **County where organization headquartered:** Camden County
4. **County(ies) being served by proposed project:** Camden and Gloucester Counties
5. **Organization Mission and Vision Statement:** The *vision* of the Hispanic Family Center of Southern New Jersey, Inc. (HFC) is to provide comprehensive programs and services that address the immediate needs (physical, mental, social, and economic) of the residents of Southern New Jersey, as well as establish the organization as an instrument of change and a voice of power for those we serve and represent. Our vision is guided by our *mission* to provide the community with a broad range of culturally relevant social services and advocacy programs that promote and encourage empowerment and self-sufficiency.
6. **Organization's Current Annual Operating Budget 2023:** \$3,587,650
7. **Proposed Project Name:** Mental Health Healing Garden
8. **Proposed Project Summary:** The Mental Health Healing Garden will serve a wide variety of populations. The Healing Garden will be utilized by our existing mental health, substance use, and domestic violence programs as a place to offer therapeutic activities and group counseling sessions. The Healing Garden will also be open to all members of the community for special events aimed at improving mental health protective factors. We recognize that most members of our community are survivors of traumatic events (whether as a child/adolescent/adult) and often feel a deep sense of helplessness, lose problem-solving skills, lose the ability to move, and lose the ability to protect loved ones. The psychological impact includes high levels of anxiety and stress, behavioral disturbance, night terrors, emotional dysregulation, difficulty connecting with surroundings, and low self-esteem, among other impacts. The response to trauma is both physical and psychological. Traditionally the approach to addressing trauma has been through talk therapy, which is certainly still very important and a service that is available at HFC, regardless of insurance or residency status, and is provided by fully-licensed and credentialed psychologists and clinicians. Working with plants, in the garden, offers relief from that sense of helplessness because the risk of making decisions is lessened. The space surrounded by

plants/vegetation has a different rhythm, it's a space free of judgement, a *safe place*; this is very important because the sense of safety allows survivors to experience it in their body without feeling overwhelmed, it is not blocked, and can continue to function daily; they regain hope, and painful memories of the trauma are unlocked. According to Bessel van der Kolk & Peter Levine: "The physical exercise of gardening gives the body the opportunity to redirect hyperarousal, to experience movement, heavy breathing, and even sweating, for good reasons. The sensory stimulation from fragrances, visual beauty, and physical contact with plants are powerful antidotes to the negative sensations that terrify and paralyze survivors.

The geographic area the Healing Garden will serve includes any client receiving services in our Camden County and Gloucester County programs, as well as partnering with other Southern NJ programs and agencies that desire to host events or programming in the Healing Garden.