County’s United Way unveils THRIVE Center

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Montgomery County residents struggling to make ends meet have a new resource at their fingertips.

The United Way of Montgomery County on Friday, March 22, hosted an open house of its new THRIVE Center – the newest such one-stop shop for those needing help in reaching financial stability.

“We are here to create opportunities for people to thrive,” said United Way of Houston CEO Anna Babin. “I see a room full of caring people.”

The THRIVE Center at the organization’s headquarters on Lake Front Circle in The Woodlands officially opened in February to assist families in tax preparation and financial counseling. But the United Way’s THRIVE program has been helping struggling families for more than a decade, with more than 28,000 clients helped and 47,000 receiving financial education and coaching since its inception.

Babin presented the 2018 ALICE Report at the event – a tally of families in Montgomery County above the poverty level, but below a basic “survival” budget that allows for savings and disposable income. Families counted as ALICE – “Asset Limited, Incomes Constrained, Employed” – have too high of an income to qualify for public assistance, but have little to no wiggle room in their budgets. According to the report, about 22 percent of the more than 83,000 households in Montgomery County qualify as ALICE.

In 2018, the United Way of Montgomery County distributed $4.8 million in assistance, goods and services to the community, effectively providing aid to one in seven residents of the county.

Representatives from THRIVE’s partners, including community colleges, government agencies and recruitment agencies, toured the facility after speeches by Babin, Montgomery County Commissioner’s Court Judge Mark Kough and partner agency Volunteers of America’s Houston Regional Director Damita Wadley, whose office is based in Conroe.

The THRIVE Center in The Woodlands came as part of an effort to spread the organization’s reach and help ALICE residents in the south county, Wadley said.

“We realized there was a gap between our Conroe and Houston offices,” she said.

At 31, new father Mark McLeod is working with Volunteers of America and the United Way to make a better life for his family, he said at Friday’s event. On his own at 16 with both parents dead by suicide, McLeod said he struggled to find stability at home and professionally.

He found his way to Volunteers of America and worked his way out of an ALICE classification through a guidance counselor, enrolled at a welding program at Lone Star College.

“I just want to keep progressing,” McLeod said.

“That’s all you can do in the end.”

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Margaret Oser, United Way of Greater Houston Vice President of Mission & Strategy, speaks as the United Way of Montgomery County hosts an open house for the organization’s new THRIVE Center, Friday, March 22, 2019, in The Woodlands.