



United Way
of Greater Philadelphia
and Southern New Jersey

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey Announces the J. Gordon Cooney, Jr. Fellowship in Criminal Justice

Philadelphia, PA (January 19, 2021): United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey (UWGPSNJ) announced today the creation of the J. Gordon Cooney Fellowship in Criminal Justice. Created by UWGPSNJ in September, the Gordon Cooney Fellowship honors Morgan, Lewis & Bockius senior partner and former UWGPSNJ Regional Board Chair J. Gordon Cooney, Jr., in recognition of his significant leadership to United Way.

The J. Gordon Cooney, Jr. Fellowship in Criminal Justice is a six-month fellowship presented to people who have lived experience with the criminal justice system in Philadelphia, aspire to a career in criminal justice or community organizing, and who have shown a commitment to social equity. The Cooney Fellowship is coordinated with Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity (PLSE), a UWGPSNJ supported non-profit agency that, since its founding in 2011, helps low-income Philadelphians clean up their criminal records.

The first recipient of the Cooney Fellowship will be Akeem Sims, a neighborhood activist and advocate for pardon reform who once worked at Morgan Lewis and is now an associate in the tax and bookkeeping services department of the Anita T. Conner Financial Group. He will be embedded in Diversified Community Services, Inc., an innovative UWGPSNJ agency that primarily serves the Point Breeze neighborhood of Philadelphia.

“Gordon Cooney has long been one of the best corporate trial attorneys in America, and he is well known in Philadelphia for his philanthropy,” said Tobey Oxholm, PLSE’s Executive Director, “but few know that he helped save someone from being executed who was wrongly convicted. Our nation’s pledge to provide ‘liberty and justice for all’ really means something to Gordon, and we are humbled to have his commitment to equal justice honored by having this Fellowship in his name established with us.”

After personally experiencing the damaging effects of poverty, drug addiction and incarceration, Akeem Sims now actively participates in programs in impacted communities, including but not limited to: Prevention and Recovery Organization Achieving Community Together (PRO-ACT), a program that supports those struggling with addiction and their journey to sobriety; and Mentors Empowering Now To Overcome Recidivism (MENTOR), a program established by the Philadelphia Court of Common Pleas to reduce probation violation among black males between the ages of 18 and 30.

Mr. Sims was honored by the Defender Association of Philadelphia with its first-ever Participatory Defense Community Connector Award in 2019, and he remains a core leader of the West Philly Participatory Defense Hub, a community collaborative with the Defender Association of Philadelphia that provides insight, perspective, and support to those navigating the criminal justice system and their families.

Akeem Sims will be hosted by Diversified Community Services, Inc. (DCS), an organization that provides resources and support for vulnerable residents in Point Breeze and surrounding communities. DCS works

with children, adults and families to facilitate early childhood education, adult and family services, and community development. During his fellowship, Mr. Sims will support these efforts.

“It’s clear that criminal records keep people from getting jobs, careers, housing, credit, training, and other opportunities they’re qualified for,” said Otis Bullock, CEO of Diversified Community Services. “We at DCS are deeply embedded in the communities we serve, and having Akeem with us will bring a critically important service to people and their families who deserve that second chance.”

The Cooney Fellowship in Criminal Justice is in recognition of J. Gordon Cooney, Jr. who served as Regional Board Chair for UWGPSNJ from 2017-2020. As leader of Morgan Lewis’s litigation practice, Cooney leads and oversees the firm’s litigation operations across the globe and has a long history of fighting for social justice.

Dr. Nikia Owens, Managing Director of Financial Empowerment at United Way, “It’s with sincere gratitude that United Way invests and dedicates a fellowship in Gordon’s name where the mission is representative of his drive toward social justice and giving freedoms to the unheard. We are thrilled to work with our partners at Philadelphia Lawyers for Social Equity and Diversified Community Services, Inc. (DCS) to welcome Akeem Sims as our inaugural fellow into the program.”

“I am honored to have this fellowship established in my name,” said J. Gordon Cooney Jr. “It was a privilege to serve as Regional Board Chair for United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey, and I am pleased to continue to work with UWGPSNJ to fight poverty and injustice in our region. This fellowship will provide opportunities and support to people who are using their experience with the criminal justice system to help others, like Akeem Sims is doing every day in West Philadelphia and beyond.”

Philadelphia is the nation’s poorest big city, with more than 700,000 people living in poverty. As a leading poverty-fighting organization, UWGPSNJ continues to invest in programs like the Cooney Fellowship that will address the root causes of poverty and work towards creating a more just and equitable community for all.

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United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey (UWGPSNJ) is on a mission to reduce poverty and expand opportunity for all. Serving Pennsylvania’s Chester, Delaware, Montgomery and Philadelphia counties, and New Jersey’s Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cape May and Cumberland counties, United Way creates solutions that break the cycle of poverty. As part of a network of independent local nonprofit organizations, United Way provides countless ways to give, advocate and volunteer. To learn more, visit www.unitedforimpact.org.