

INAUGURAL POLICY REPORT

United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania



April 2025



Dear Friends and Supporters,

It is with immense pride that I introduce United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania's inaugural policy report. This document is more than a reflection of our mission—it is a testament to the belief that advocacy, policy and legislative action are as critical as the direct service programs we support in the communities we serve. We believe that these efforts, coupled with our investments in the community, form the foundation for lasting, systemic change.

This report is organized around four essential themes: digital access, economic stability for families, education & youth, and food access. These interconnected areas represent both the challenges our region faces and the opportunities to create transformative solutions:

- In **digital access**, we highlight programs like the Digital Navigator Network, which bridge the digital divide by connecting residents to affordable devices, internet services and training. We pair this with advocacy for policies that expand broadband access and support initiatives addressing connectivity gaps in rural and urban communities alike.
- **Economic stability for families** examines how programs such as the Guaranteed Basic Income Pilot and Free Tax Prep help families achieve financial stability. Simultaneously, we advocate for policy measures like the Earned Income Tax Credit in our commonwealth and for expanded disability employment initiatives that promote long-term economic resilience while also preserving life-sustaining medical benefits.
- In **education & youth**, we amplify programs such as kindergarten readiness partnerships and the College Emergency Financial Assistance (CEFA) coalition, while championing best practices in schools and legislation to expand early childhood education and funding for out-of-school time programs. These efforts ensure children and families in our region have the resources to succeed in the classroom and beyond.
- Finally, **food access for all** addresses food insecurity through programs like Community Food Solutions and Ride United Last Mile Delivery. Alongside these initiatives, we advocate for expanded free school meal programs and incentives to attract grocery stores to areas that do not have them.

The pages ahead provide a closer look at these themes, highlighting the progress we've made and the work that lies ahead to create a stronger future for everyone in Allegheny, Armstrong, Butler, Fayette and Westmoreland counties.

Looking forward, United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania remains steadfast in our commitment to advocacy and action. By deepening our partnerships with policymakers, community leaders and stakeholders, we will continue to drive meaningful change to ensure that every individual in our region can thrive.

Thank you for standing with us. Your dedication and collaboration are the driving forces behind this work. Together, we are shaping a brighter future, not just for today, but for generations to come.

With gratitude,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bobbi Watt Geer".

Bobbi Watt Geer, Ph.D.
President & CEO
United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania

Why digital access matters



Digital connectivity is no longer a luxury but a necessity for economic mobility, education, health care and overall quality of life. Yet thousands of residents across Allegheny, Armstrong, Butler, Fayette and Westmoreland counties face barriers to reliable internet access and digital literacy. As Jen Schuchart, United Way's director of [Meeting Basic Needs](#), highlights, "Everything we do in society requires digital skills and an internet connection. For many, it's the key to accessing basic resources like jobs and education."

The challenges are stark. Affordability and infrastructure gaps disproportionately affect rural residents, seniors and individuals with disabilities. Jules Koehl, United Way's special projects coordinator, explains, "For many of our clients, navigating the complexities of finding affordable internet plans or digital devices can be overwhelming. Our goal is to bridge this divide by connecting people to resources that empower them."

Program objectives

United Way's [Digital Navigator Network](#), launched in October 2023 with support from Comcast, is at the forefront of addressing digital access. The program provides:

- Connections to affordable internet plans and devices.
- Assistance with digital skills training.
- Support through trusted community organizations including Literacy Pittsburgh, Fayette County Community Action, Goodwill of Southwestern Pennsylvania, Reimagine Reentry, Vintage Center for Active Adults and YWCA of Westmoreland County.

By contacting [PA 211 Southwest](#), individuals can be connected to one of our Digital Navigator Network partner agencies. An agency staff person who is trained in helping people access digital devices, technical skills and internet service works with these individuals to ensure they receive the support required to get and stay online.

Program and policy wins and ongoing advocacy

Wins

- **Collaborative success:** United Way's participation in the Greater Pittsburgh Digital Inclusion Alliance facilitated the application for a \$16.8 million National Telecommunications and Information Administration grant to expand digital access for all. This initiative demonstrated the power of coalition building and transparent collaboration.
- **Comcast partnership:** A \$363,000 grant from Comcast enabled the launch of the Digital Navigator Network and the donation of 300 laptops to local organizations.¹

- **Increased access:** Efforts like Internet Essentials, a Comcast program that offers low-cost internet plans for eligible low-income households, have made low-cost internet a reality for many, allowing families to thrive and connect to school, health care, employment and other essentials.

Ongoing advocacy

Despite progress, critical bills supporting digital access were not passed in the Jan. 2 to Nov. 14, 2024 legislative session. These setbacks highlight the urgent need for continued advocacy.

Future legislative and policy opportunities

To ensure access to digital resources, United Way advocates for:

1. **Subsidized internet costs:** Advocacy for legislation requiring internet service providers to offer low-cost options, ensuring affordability is not a barrier.
2. **Infrastructure expansion:** Support for state-level initiatives such as Pennsylvania's Broadband, Equity, Access and Deployment program, which aims to help households and businesses access affordable high-speed internet through investments in broadband infrastructure.
3. **Sustained funding:** Continued investment in programs such as the Digital Navigator Network to maintain and expand digital navigation services across United Way's five-county region.

Real lives, real impact

The Digital Navigator Network's success is reflected in the stories of those it serves:

- **Angela's journey:** After losing her job and experiencing eviction, Angela received a computer through the program at no cost to her. This computer enabled her to go online and secure a job, find stable housing and plan for further education. "This computer changed my life and my children's lives," she said.
- **Jessica's growth:** Jessica and her grandson now have a desktop computer at home, allowing him to complete schoolwork and motivating her to attend digital skills classes at a local agency.

Call to action

Achieving digital access for all requires collective action. United Way calls on policymakers, businesses and community members to join our efforts to bridge the digital divide. Together, we can ensure that every resident has the tools they need to succeed in today's digital world.

Why economic stability matters



Economic stability is the foundation on which families can achieve safe housing, meaningful employment, education and strong relationships. Yet 41% of households in southwestern Pennsylvania are classified as [ALICE \(Asset Limited, Income Constrained and Employed\)](#), and do not earn enough to pay for basic needs such as housing, child care and transportation. This 41% includes households that live at or below the federal poverty line of \$31,200 for a family of four.

In Pittsburgh alone, the percentage of people who live at or below the poverty line stands at 19%, significantly exceeding the national average of 12.6%. As Alena Anderson, United Way's director of [Moving to Financial Stability](#), explains, "Economic stability allows families to dream bigger—to invest in education, build assets and break the cycle of poverty."

Emily Schmidlapp, United Way's manager of Moving to Financial Stability, emphasizes the interconnected challenges: "Reliable child care and transportation are not luxuries; they are necessities for securing meaningful employment and sustaining family well-being."

Dr. Josie Badger, who works closely with United Way, and is a champion for disability employment, highlights the systemic challenges people with disabilities face: "Far too often, individuals with disabilities are prevented from achieving financial independence due to arbitrary limits on what they can earn and save without losing access to the medical assistance benefits they need to survive. Our focus must be on removing these barriers and creating pathways to real opportunities." Her insights reflect the urgency of legislative and policy reforms that enable all individuals to contribute meaningfully to the workforce and earn a living while maintaining essential supports.

Program objectives

United Way initiatives aim to address economic instability through targeted programs and partnerships:

- **The Alliance for Access and Assets - Building Financial Power Together:** Brings organizations together quarterly to learn, network and share resources with a goal of increasing the financial security of people of color with disabilities.
- **ALICE data utilization:** Focus on households classified as Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) to illuminate and address the actual cost of living.
- **Skill-building and career development:** Partner with employers and training programs to connect individuals with career pathways that lead to sustainable wages.

- **Free Tax Prep program:** Assisted nearly 9,000 taxpayers last year in accessing \$12 million in tax refunds.
- **Guaranteed Income Project Expansion - Thriving Providers Project:** A national demonstration project that uses guaranteed income strategies so that home-based child care providers can stabilize their economic well-being and improve the availability and quality of care for children and families.

Program and policy wins and ongoing advocacy

Wins

- **Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) funding:** Federal support for our regional VITA Free Tax Prep program has steadily increased, allowing United Way to offer free tax preparation services to more people.
- **Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit:** Advocacy efforts have helped align Pennsylvania's tax credits with federal standards, making it easier for working families to afford child care.
- **Disability employment advocacy:** Legislative successes including the Medical Assistance for Workers with Disabilities (MAWD) and Act 69 Workers with Job Success program empower individuals to earn more without losing essential medical assistance benefits.

Ongoing advocacy

Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC): State-level EITC legislation narrowly failed despite significant bipartisan support. Renewed efforts are necessary to implement this critical resource for low-income families.

Future legislative and policy opportunities

United Way advocates for systemic reforms to enhance family stability:

1. **State-level Earned Income Tax Credit:** Advocate for Pennsylvania to enact a state EITC to provide a financial safety net for families working hard for low-wages.
2. **Home-based child care provider support:** Secure funding to increase training, licensing and operational support for child care providers in communities where center-based child care options are not readily available or do not accommodate parents' work schedules.

3. **Disability employment:** Advance amendments to Act 36 of 2018 (the Employment First Act), including creating a permanent Employment First executive director position at the Employment First Oversight Committee (EFOC) in Harrisburg. The EFOC is dedicated to ensuring that individuals with disabilities have the opportunity to achieve economic independence through jobs that pay competitive wages in community-integrated settings. ²

Real lives, real impact

Programs supported by United Way transform lives:

- **Guaranteed Basic Income Pilot program:** A participant shared, “The stability provided by direct cash payments allowed me to focus on improving my family’s future without constant financial stress.”
- **Medical Assistance for Workers with Disabilities:** Enabling individuals to earn and save without jeopardizing essential benefits has empowered hundreds to pursue higher-paying jobs.

Call to action

Ensuring economic stability requires the collective effort of policymakers, businesses and community organizations. Join United Way in advocating for systemic solutions that empower families to move from surviving to thriving.

Why education & youth matter



Education is the cornerstone of opportunity. In southwestern Pennsylvania, gaps in school readiness, access to enriching out-of-school-time programs and resources for post-secondary success continue to create barriers for many families. Jesse Sprajcar, United Way director of Regional Impact Initiatives, states, "Investing in education and youth creates pathways for lifelong success. Whether it's kindergarten readiness or career preparation, every step is essential to building stronger communities."

Ana Kay Yaghoubian, United Way director of [Building for Success in School and Life](#), adds, "Early engagement is critical for ensuring that every child has the support they need to thrive, no matter their circumstances."

Program objectives

United Way aims to enhance educational outcomes through three core focus areas:

1. **Kindergarten readiness:** Addressing systemic inequities in early education and connecting birth-to-five providers with school districts to ensure that children enter kindergarten with foundational skills.
2. **College and career readiness:** Supporting first-generation and nontraditional students and those in under-resourced communities with programs such as the College Financial Assistance Coalition, which provides emergency funding that helps students remain in school by avoiding crises.
3. **Safe, affordable, enriching out-of-school time programs:** Consider new ways to fund out-of-school program providers so that they can continue to provide enriching experiences for children outside of the school day.

Program and policy wins and ongoing advocacy

Wins

- **Welcome Back Summer initiative:** Launched in 2020, this program has provided more than \$4.5 million in funding to serve 34,500 children across five counties through innovative summer programming.
- **College Emergency Financial Assistance (CEFA):** This program disbursed more than \$29,000 in 2024 to support students with critical needs like transportation, child care and rent.
- **Building Opportunities for Out-of-School Time (BOOST):** Successfully secured \$11.5 million in funding for Pennsylvania to support after-school and summer programs.

Ongoing advocacy

- **Expanded early childhood education funding:** Advocacy for greater investment in high-quality pre-K programs has not yet achieved the necessary state-level appropriations.
- **Science of Reading implementation:** Legislative frameworks for evidence-based literacy strategies including Science of Reading methodology lack mechanisms to ensure teachers are training in the science of reading. This limits teachers' impact in classrooms.

Future legislative and policy opportunities

United Way supports the following legislative priorities to advance educational access:

More training for educators: Advocate for funding to expand training and development for schools and youth programs.

1. **Science of Reading:** Support Senate Bill 801 and House Bill 998 to mandate the implementation of evidence-based literacy instruction.
2. **Sustainable funding for out-of-school time programs:** Work to secure recurring appropriations for programs that keep children safe and engaged, giving their adults peace of mind while they are at work.
3. **Expansion of College Emergency Financial Assistance programs:** Advocate for government funding for emergency expenses so that more first-generation and nontraditional students can graduate and access higher-paying jobs to support themselves and their families.

Real lives, real impact

- **Meaningful youth employment:** Jordan, who worked as a camp counselor at a United Way-funded agency, shares, "This program gave me the chance to develop invaluable skills that have shaped me as a leader and prepared me for the future."
- **CEFA:** An emergency funds recipient from Butler County Community College said, "Without help to repair my car, I would have had to drop out. This program kept me in school and on track to graduate."

Call to action

Join the United Way in advocating for policies and programs that ensure every child in our five-county region can learn, grow and succeed. Together, we can close the gaps in our education system and create a brighter future for all.

Why food access for all matters



Healthy food is one of the most important drivers for success in the classroom and at work. It fuels learning, productivity and well-being while also serving as a catalyst for building relationships and strengthening community bonds. In southwestern Pennsylvania, 41% of households struggle to afford basic needs, including access to nutritious food. Communities with limited or no convenient access to healthy and affordable food are prevalent across Allegheny, Armstrong, Butler, Fayette and Westmoreland counties.

United Way manager of Meeting Basic Needs, Angela Mallick, explains, “Food insecurity is a systemic issue that requires systemic solutions. We can’t just meet immediate needs; we must build sustainable systems that ensure long-term access.”

Jen Schuchart, United Way director of Meeting Basic Needs, adds, “Too many communities face barriers to food access. This isn’t about food deserts. It’s about more than proximity — it’s about justice.”

Program objectives

United Way’s food access for all initiative is focused on:

- 1. Creating long-term sustainable solutions:** Moving beyond short-term aid by supporting community-driven initiatives that build infrastructure for sustainable food systems.
- 2. Eliminating food insecurity in the communities we serve:** Establishing consistent access to nutritious food for all residents, regardless of income or location.
- 3. Increasing food access for communities experiencing food insecurity:** Expanding initiatives such as the Community Food Solutions mini-grant and technical assistance initiative to empower local organizations and people to address food access challenges where they live and work.

Program and policy wins and ongoing advocacy

Wins

- **Summer SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) benefit codification:** Federal legislation extended and codified the summer EBT (Electronic Benefits Transfer) program, ensuring children have access to nutritious meals during summer months when school meals are unavailable.
- **Free school breakfast program:** Pennsylvania’s commitment to providing of free breakfast for all students has significantly reduced food insecurity among children.

Ongoing advocacy

While Pennsylvania’s implementation of free school breakfasts has made significant strides, efforts to expand the program to include free lunches for all students have yet to gain full legislative approval. This leaves a critical gap in ensuring consistent, comprehensive nutrition for children, particularly those from low-income families.

Future legislative and policy opportunities

To address food insecurity comprehensively, United Way supports:

- 1. Legislation to expand free school meal programs:** Advocate for the passage of Pennsylvania-level legislation to expand free meal programs to include both breakfast and lunch, ensuring no child goes hungry during the school day.
- 2. SNAP benefit enhancements:** Support federal efforts to increase SNAP benefits and streamline application processes.
- 3. Incentives for grocery store development:** Advocate for policies that incentivize grocery stores to open in areas that lack options and also supporting community-led initiatives including urban gardens and farmers markets.

Real lives, real impact

United Way programs have made significant strides:

- **Community Food Solutions mini-grants and technical assistance:** This initiative has supported projects such as community gardens and local food cooperatives, enabling communities to take charge of their own food systems.
- **Ride United Last Mile Delivery:** This innovative program, run in collaboration with DoorDash, has delivered thousands of meals and food items directly to families and individuals experiencing food insecurity thereby reducing transportation barriers and improving access to nutritious food.

Call to action

Achieving food access for all requires systemic change and collective action. We invite policymakers, businesses and community organizations to join our efforts to create a southwestern Pennsylvania where every family has access to the healthy food they need to thrive.



To learn more, contact

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FOOTNOTES

1. [Comcast and United Way Partnership](#)
2. [Employment First 2024 Annual Report](#)



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Pennsylvania