Building Bridges

United Way connects residents with support

Nearly 28,000 households in Butler County are living at or below the ALICE threshold, a measure that tracks families who earn too much to qualify for government assistance but still can't make ends meet. For a family of four in Butler County, meeting basic needs requires $7,167 per month.

SHERRIE DUNLAP GALLAGHER

The United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania (UWSP) invested more than $270,000 across 19 partner agencies in Butler County last year, working to address food insecurity, housing instability, and financial challenges that affect thousands locally.

"When we talk about the ALICE population, people are interested in learning more about it," said Sherrie Dunlap Gallagher, who leads the United Way's fundraising and corporate engagement team. "These are people who, if they have an unexpected expense, they may not be able to meet it."

Volunteers from NextTier Bank help build bikes for children in Butler County at United Way's Build A Bike event in Cranberry Township.

Meeting needs

The United Way's 211 helpline received nearly 2,000 contacts from Butler County residents last year. Utility assistance topped the list of requests, followed by housing assistance with 825 contacts. The data helps the organization understand where help is needed most, said Kitty Julian, chief marketing officer for UWSP. "We can narrow that data down to a neighborhood or give a five-county service demographic depending on what the corporation's philanthropic goals are."

The organization works closely with corporate partners who bring financial support and volunteer hours. Some companies run giving campaigns among their employees. Others allow workers time off to participate in volunteer opportunities, especially during weekday hours.

"We see a lot of companies listening to what their employees want, which is the desire to give back to the communities where they live and work and allowing them the time to do it," Julian said.

Darla Livermore, senior vice president, director of human resource management at NexTier Bank, said she has been active with United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania her entire banking career, volunteering on United Way's local operating board. She also has served as cochairman of Women's Leadership Council, now known as Women United, and has remained active as a Women United member.

"Having lived in Butler County my entire life and for most of my banking career, I wanted to be part of something that aligns with not only my personal philanthropy, but also NexTier Bank's," Livermore said. "United Way and NexTier Bank not only serve the same great communities in our region, but also believe in supporting those communities through donations, volunteerism and, most importantly, moving to financial stability.

Jesse Sprajcar, who handles regional grantmaking and community impact for United Way, said the organization works to match volunteers with meaningful projects that partner agencies need.

"One of our best attributes is we're able to work with our partners to make sure we're offering resources that volunteers can put together," Sprajcar said. "We want to fill the gap for these nonprofits working at capacity that could use the extra volunteer help."

Partner agencies

Every three years, United Way holds a rigorous request for proposals process open to 501(c)(3) organizations or those with a fiscal partner in the five-county region. Applicants must fit into one of three

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areas: meeting basic needs, moving toward financial stability, and building for success in school or life from birth through post-secondary education.

All applications go through a rigorous process that takes months to complete. The approach gives reviewers eyes on every corner of Butler County, so all communities are represented, Sprajcar said. Partner agencies receive funding based on demonstrated need and community impact. The 211 helpline data backs up applications with real-time information about what residents are requesting. United Way conducts workshops to show partner agencies how to access this public-facing data and use it to identify and meet needs.

Food insecurity

When a SNAP disruption hit the region, United Way moved quickly to help trusted partners address increased demand at food pantries. In less than 10 days, the organization worked with the Heinz Endowments to provide real-time support.

Glade Run Lutheran Services campers roll up their sleeves and enjoy hands-on learning in the therapeutic garden.

They funded the Lighthouse Foundation's food pantry and community meals initiative and helped the Jean Purvis Community Health Center's food pantry restock. The response showed the organization's ability to act fast when crises emerge.

"One of our superpowers is our ability to quickly turn around things to trusted partners in the community," Sprajcar said. "We're out in the community and part of agencies that allow us to have our ear to the ground on what's happening in the community."

Food insecurity continues to challenge Butler County and the region. The United Way saw escalated calls to 211 about food needs starting in June and July, which intensified when the SNAP freeze occurred.

Sprajcar said the organization's role is not to re-create services that already exist but to support underserved areas and connect smaller organizations with larger services like the Lighthouse Foundation or Greater Pittsburgh Food Bank.

Supporting youth

Steven Green, president and CEO of Glade Run Lutheran Services, said his organization has a tremendous relationship with the United Way. The social service agency covers every county in Western Pennsylvania with mental health and social services.

In recent years, United Way helped fund Glade Run's summer enrichment program in Butler. Youths in the program are involved in the juvenile justice system. Staff members work with them on emotional intelligence and introduce them to positive social outlets.

"More than anything, we're trying to fill their time with positive events since they come from backgrounds where they may not have family support during the summertime," Green said.

This year, Glade Run introduced an incentive program that rewarded participants for completing curriculum tasks. Youths earned "Glade Run Bucks" throughout the summer, then used them to buy back-to-school supplies and clothing.

Most recently, United Way funded Glade Run's warming center in Butler, which serves the unhoused population and vulnerable adults who have fallen through the cracks.

The organization's annual Build a Bike program gives Glade Run bicycles and gear to distribute to youth. A volunteer support program helps the agency find volunteers to complete vital work that limited staff members would otherwise struggle to finish.

Housing and recovery

Erin Cioffi, Lighthouse Foundation developmental director, said United Way's support is critical to the organization's transitional housing program.

"Without that funding, we wouldn't have our transitional housing program," Cioffi said. "We have five homes in the community, and the services we provide to those individuals to get them self-sufficient is critical."

Community members gather food items at the Lighthouse Foundation's food pantry.

Residents can stay up to 18 months while working on skills needed to obtain living-wage jobs, build savings and achieve independent housing. The program offers financial management, employment readiness, meal preparation, home care, parenting classes and spiritual development.

Two houses specifically serve people in recovery, including Johnny's Place for men and Cathy's Place for women, which will open in 2026. These locations include accountability measures and services to support sobriety.

The proposed outcome for the transitional housing program is that 75 to 80% of residents achieve self-sufficiency. When residents graduate, they receive household essentials like linens, cookware and cleaning supplies to help them start their new independent lives.

United Way volunteers also help spruce up housing facilities as families transition out, preparing the spaces for new residents.

Continuing support

Sprajcar said food insecurity will continue to challenge Butler County. Housing remains an ongoing concern, and utility assistance requests spike when cold weather arrives.

United Way also supports a policy and advocacy committee for southwestern Pennsylvania that establishes goals at local and state levels and encourages lawmakers to create legislation addressing community needs.

Green identified insurance coverage as an emerging challenge. People are losing Medicaid coverage during eligibility reapplication, which limits the agency's ability to treat them. Private insurance companies are covering less, creating barriers to mental health services.

He hopes to work with the United Way on funding for people who are underinsured or uninsured and to address housing needs with more case managers who can help people with complex needs, including mental health challenges.

— Article by Shari Berg, submitted photos