

# Business, Government, Philanthropy Leaders Unite for Opportunity

BY NICK KEPPLER

At the Jan. 29 United for Opportunity event organized by United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania, corporate, government and philanthropic leaders gathered to address an alarming reality: 38% of households in United Way's footprint don't earn enough, despite working at least one job, to afford the essentials of living. Financial instability for these 331,000 households has significant economic impacts for businesses based in and serving the region.

The source of this statistic? United Way's ALICE data — which stands for asset limited, income constrained and employed — that tracks how working families are faring financially.

According to the most recent ALICE report, a family of four with two children in child care needs to earn \$83,544 annually to pay for food, housing, transportation, basic technology and child care. That's far more than the federal poverty level of \$31,250, which tracks only the cost of food.

"ALICE households are our employees, our customers, our families, friends and neighbors, and they are one health concern, car repair, appliance breakdown away from crisis," said Bobbi Watt Geer, president and CEO of United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania.

They're also often essential workers whose labor supports the region's health care, hospitality and business sectors. United Way has set an aspirational goal of lifting 6,600 households above the ALICE threshold so that they are better able to weather crises and move toward financial stability by 2027.

Lower-wage earners are starting to fall further behind, said Gus Faucher, senior vice president and chief economist of PNC Financial Services.



Moderator Darrell Smalley with panelists Jordan Golin, Brooks Broadhurst and Rebekah Byers Kcehowski at the United for Opportunity event.

"Earners in the bottom wage quartile are seeing smaller wage increases than higher income earners," said Faucher, "and there's also a lot of evidence that this group tends to suffer more from inflation."

The steepest in a spate of recent price increases have been for food, child care, health care and housing, said Faucher, and lower-income households spend more of their money on such necessities. "These are services and goods that you need to buy, so these families don't have much wiggle room," he said, and one result has been a drain on their capacity to build savings.

Jordan Golin, president and chief executive officer of Jewish Family and Community Services of Pittsburgh, warned of other threats to ALICE families: the loss of federal health care subsidies and rising premiums may cause them to lose their health insurance and new eligibility requirements might remove many of them from the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Immigrant families "are experiencing all that and more," said Golin. In the current political climate, some are hesitant to access benefits for which they are eligible,

and some are even "afraid to leave their homes to access food."

Brooks Broadhurst, senior vice president of the Eat'n Park Hospitality Group, said that employees at the chain's 50-plus restaurants come from various financial situations.

"We hire a remarkably diverse workforce — something that's common across our industry," said Broadhurst. "Our team members span all ages and backgrounds. For many, this is their first job or their re-entry into the workforce. Others come to us for the scheduling flexibility a traditional 9-to-5 can't offer. And in some cases, we're able to provide a safety net through employment for individuals facing unexpected hardship and simply need a job."

"We certainly recognize the fact that many of our folks struggle, as many people do across all sectors, with things like transportation, child care and the rising cost of health care," said Broadhurst, "and we constantly look at how we can continue to evolve our benefits that help in those areas."

Rebekah Byers Kcehowski, partner-in-charge of the Pittsburgh office of the global law firm Jones

Day, and secretary and thought leadership chair at the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, said that mobility for ALICE families should be considered a key factor in regional redevelopment.

She mentioned the \$650 million plan to revitalize downtown, announced in October 2024 and funded through a combination of city, county, state, private and philanthropic sources. One of its major goals is creating a neighborhood-like environment by upgrading public spaces and turning unused office space into housing.

"It is a real shared opportunity for this region, for individuals and families," said Byers Kcehowski.

When thinking "about return on investment," Byers Kcehowski urges funders of this vision to remember that its success hinges upon economically stable individuals and families living downtown and filling retail, customer service, hospitality and other jobs and career pathways.

"Any economic development strategy in this region has got to have economic mobility as part of it," said Byers Kcehowski, "and as you move 6,600 families out of ALICE and raise them up above that threshold, you're going to have a game-changing impact on our regional economy."

The Jan. 29 event was the first in a series of convenings United Way will host to translate this shared vision into coordinated action.

Coming Feb. 20: Part II, Uplifting ALICE: how the Business, Government and Nonprofit sectors are Uniting for Opportunity.

To learn more about how your company can help uplift people in the ALICE threshold, and to download the presentation deck and other materials, visit [www.unitedwayswpa.org/united-for-opportunity](http://www.unitedwayswpa.org/united-for-opportunity).