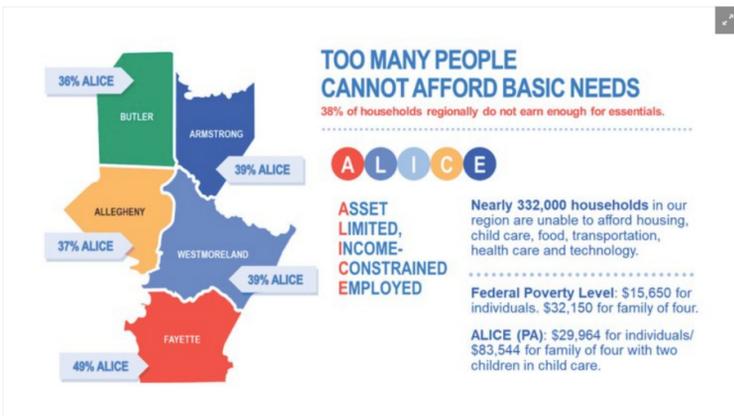


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Uplifting ALICE: How the business, government and nonprofit sectors are uniting for opportunity

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RECOMMENDED

By Nick Keppler
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At the Jan. 29 United for Opportunity event, United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania brought together 60 of the region's business, political and philanthropic leaders around its goal of lifting 6,600 households to financial health and stability by 2027.

According to United Way's ALICE metric, 38% of households in the region do not earn enough despite working full-time to cover basic needs. Economic instability for so many households has repercussions for the business, government and human services sectors.

"Clearly, there's a lot more to be done," said Bobbi Watt Geer Ph.D., president and CEO of United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania, "and we want to be able to do that in conjunction with those of you in the room and across the sectors."

ALICE – which stands for asset limited, income constrained and employed – looks at the actual costs of living including food, housing, health care, transportation and other necessities. In Pennsylvania, the ALICE survival budget comes to \$29,964 for an individual and \$83,544 for a family of four with two kids in child care.

Jordan Golin, president and chief executive officer of Jewish Family and Community Services of Pittsburgh (JFCS), described a "two-step approach" to working with ALICE families.

When people turn to his organization, they are usually looking for help with an immediate need, like food or rent assistance. As they address those needs, JFCS staff also direct individuals and families to resources such as career counseling, job training and mental health services to help clients move to long-term stability.

But, "there is only so far that our clients can go by themselves," said Golin. "Really, what's required is a community-wide commitment to developing solutions."

He recommended that companies form tight partnerships with nonprofits. "Your company has values that you believe in, that your employees believe in, that you promote, that help drive your business. Find a nonprofit in our region that shares those values." The nonprofit could be "almost an extension of your business and of the vision that you have for the community," he said. In addition to offering recurring financial support, Golin suggested businesses ask their employees to "get in the trenches" and volunteer.



United for Opportunity moderator Darrell Smalley (EY) in conversation with Jordan Golin (JFCS).

This community-wide approach was echoed by business leaders who see direct pathways to opportunity.

Brooks Broadhurst, senior vice president of the Eat'n Park Hospitality Group, touted the restaurant sector as an accessible workforce on-ramp.

"You don't have to have a high school diploma," said Broadhurst. "You don't need any certification. You need to be able to come in and work. We'll help you learn how to deal with people, how to have a boss, how to show up on time, and how to do your job."

Recognizing that people sometimes experience unexpected and unavoidable crises, Eat'n Park Hospitality Group has an employee assistance fund for its team members. "We provide assistance for emergencies that unfortunately pop up and could cause a financial spiral for the individual. We can step in and help almost immediately without a lot of red tape," said Broadhurst.

Beyond immediate workforce entry, regional development also plays a crucial role in creating sustainable opportunities.

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 job opportunities for ALICE workers should be considered in plans for urban redevelopment.

"When you have more welcoming public areas and safer access downtown, it means more foot traffic, more businesses and more jobs," she said.

"It's going to help small businesses thrive in our region, all of which makes it easier for people to access opportunity."

However, beautifying and upgrading areas like downtown will not effortlessly bring opportunities to those who most need them, Byers Kcehowski said.

Employers must also practice "intentional hiring" to help pull people from lower economic brackets into stable jobs that offer training and sustainable career pathways for advancement.

The event ended with table discussions among the attendees, who lead the region's business, philanthropic and political sectors.



L to R: Deb Rice-Johnson (Highmark), Bobbi Watt Geer (United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania), Karen Hanlon (Highmark), Craig Riner (Highmark).

Ideas included introducing employee assistance plans for emergencies, modifying return-to-the-office initiatives to consider the impact of transportation and child care costs on ALICE workers, and tying annual salary increases to increases in cost-of-living indexes.

Participants also suggested helping employees learn about and access internal, nonprofit and government resources. The need for a robust workforce pipeline was also discussed, including partnerships with workforce development programs, and removing potential barriers to employment, like background checks and drug tests.

Others focused on company culture, suggesting policies that encourage volunteering through organizations like United Way and understanding how an unexpected car breakdown, child care issue or caregiving for an older adult can destabilize ALICE workers and lead to staff turnover.

Darrell E. Smalley, managing partner for EY's Pittsburgh office and a moderator at the event, suggested as a first step recognizing the existence of ALICE households, which, although they are employed and have some resources, still have unmet needs.

"That first step [is] recognizing that ALICE could be a colleague who sits right next to you," he said.

"Understand what the goals are," Smalley added, "what the investment means, how the investment ultimately will drive a thriving economy. And then roll up your sleeves, right?"

To read Part I of the event summary, learn more about how your company can help uplift people below the ALICE threshold, and to download the presentation deck and other materials, visit www.unitedwayswpa.org/united-for-opportunity.

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