



## ESSENTIAL NEEDS

To thrive, central Iowans need not only their most basic needs of food and shelter but also access to quality, nutritious food and a safe place to call home.

**1 in 3**

central Iowa households are unable to afford basic needs.

## ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

To thrive, central Iowans need not only to be able to make ends meet but also to be financially stable and have the opportunity to build wealth for their family and future generations.

**88%**

of jobs in central Iowa require some additional education and/or training beyond high school.

## EARLY CHILDHOOD SUCCESS

To thrive, the youngest central Iowans need not only access to childcare but also access to safe, reliable, and affordable childcare to be healthy and ready to learn.

**76%**

of central Iowa children under the age of 6 have all parents/caregivers in the workforce.

## EDUCATION SUCCESS

To thrive, central Iowa students need not only to graduate from high school but also to graduate with a plan for a successful future.

**63%**

of central Iowa third-graders are proficient in reading, down 2.5% from last year.

## HEALTH & WELL-BEING

To thrive, central Iowans need not only access to medical care but also access to quality, culturally appropriate care promoting physical and emotional well-being and improving resilience.

Iowa has **530**

individuals for every 1 mental health provider.

# UNITED WAY OF CENTRAL IOWA IS UNITED TO THRIVE

Our strategic imperative drives the way we define strategies, set priorities, and measure progress in the community. UNITED TO THRIVE guides every decision as we unite central Iowans to foster a thriving community – one that is equitable, engaged, and empowered.

## Who is ALICE?

ALICE isn't an individual person; ALICE is an acronym. It stands for **A**sset Limited, **I**ncome Constrained, **E**mployed. It describes households that earn more than the federal poverty level but can't afford the basics where they live. These struggling households are forced to make impossible choices every day. ALICE workers are the engine that keeps our economy running – including our childcare providers, bank tellers, warehouse stockers, retail clerks, health care workers, and others. ALICE might be a family member, a friend, a neighbor – or you.

## The Challenge of Affordable Housing

More than 43% of central Iowa renters are rent-burdened, spending more than 30% of their income on housing. This number rose by nearly 1,500 households in 2023. Many central Iowans struggle with housing costs due to a lack of affordable rentals – only 21 are available for every 100 needed by low-income residents. With limited options, ALICE individuals and families must either pay higher rents than they can comfortably afford or risk unstable living conditions, leaving less money for other essentials and increasing financial stress.

**1 in 10**

central Iowans are food insecure.



## United Way Supports ALICE Families

by providing resources to programs that ensure our community can support our most vulnerable central Iowans.

United Way of Central Iowa sponsors 211 services in Iowa. 211 is the national hotline that helps people find the help they need 24/7/365. When someone calls, a trained professional can find the best local options for social services using an extensive, up-to-date database. Of the 23,000 calls that the 211 line received from central Iowa last year, nearly half were requesting resources for housing or utility assistance.

**LINC** is an affinity group of donors who give their time and resources to help central Iowans gain access to quality, nutritious food and a safe place to call home.

## Jobs Don't Pay Enough to Keep Up

Among the 20 most common jobs in central Iowa, 40% pay less than \$20 per hour, which is not enough to afford household essentials. Although wages increased 4.8% in 2022, the cost of basics for a family of four increased 17% in central Iowa.

What does this mean? People working in some of the most common jobs in central Iowa still struggle to make ends meet for themselves and their families. They can't afford basic costs of living, like housing and food, let alone save for emergencies or a down payment on a home.

**36%**

of central Iowans do not have cash on hand to cover a \$400 emergency expense.



## United Way Promotes Financial Stability

by supporting many partners and initiatives across the community to help central Iowans gain the skills and training they need to increase income and build wealth.

**United LEAGUE** is a United Way affinity group of motivated donors who are eager to address disparities in economic opportunity through volunteerism and advocacy, with a specific focus on summer youth employment programs.

## Quality Childcare Empowers ALICE Families

High-quality childcare is essential for ALICE families because it supports both children's development and parents' ability to work. Reliable, affordable childcare allows parents to maintain stable employment, increase earnings, and work toward financial stability. At the same time, high-quality early education helps children build strong cognitive and social skills, improving their chances of success in school and beyond.

**46%**

of children from low-income households are not ready for kindergarten.



## United Way Removes Barriers to Access

by advocating for high-quality, affordable childcare and fairly compensated childcare providers. Iowa consistently ranks in the top three in the nation for the percentage of households in which all parents or caregivers of young children are in the workforce, making affordable, reliable childcare essential for a strong economy. United Way supports the childcare system in central Iowa through investments that create reductions in long-term costs for centers, improve opportunities for the childcare workforce, and increase access to quality, affordable childcare in central Iowa.

**Women United**, an affinity group focused on Early Childhood Success initiatives, has worked to improve the network of care and learning that ensures young children are ready to succeed in school.

## Planning for the Future

Children from ALICE families often face significant educational disparities. In central Iowa, 78% of high school students have a plan for post-graduation education or training, a 3.6% improvement from last year. In comparison, 66% of high school students from low-income households have a plan beyond high school. Education and training can open the door to better job opportunities, higher wages, and long-term financial stability and can break the cycle of generational poverty.

**24%**

of central Iowa students are chronically absent from school – an increase of 14,000 students from pre-pandemic levels.



## United Way Works to Bridge the Gap

by supporting initiatives and programs that connect students with training and apprenticeship programs as well as higher education.

### Education Leadership Initiative (ELI)

a United Way affinity group focused on Education Success initiatives, works to help central Iowa students not only graduate from high school with a plan for their future but also gain the essential building blocks for a better life. In fact, ELI-funded programs reported a drop in chronic absenteeism from 40.5% to 31.7% last year.

## A Cycle of Challenges

Poor health can be both a consequence and a cause of financial instability. ALICE families are more likely to become ill because their basic needs for health insurance coverage and regular, quality preventative care are not being met. In Iowa, regardless of income status, more than half of Iowa youth with major depression do not receive any mental health treatment for reasons including affordability and availability of mental health care.

**18%**

of central Iowa adults report that their overall health is "fair" or "poor." This is the highest it has been in over a decade.



## United Way Advocates for Quality, Affordable Care

by providing funding to partners that reduce barriers to accessing physical and mental healthcare and support central Iowans' sense of purpose, belonging, and connectedness. United Way is a leader in several coalitions including CAMH4Kids (Coalition to Advance Mental Health in Iowa for Kids) and Oral Health Iowa.

# UNITED IS THE WAY

Your giving goes further with United Way. Your generosity allows us to unite the caring power of our community, imagine a brighter future in which every central Iowan has the opportunity to thrive, and do the work to turn that vision into reality.



## Give

Your gift to United Way fuels the hard work we do every day to help make central Iowa UNITED to THRIVE: [unitedwaydm.org/give](https://unitedwaydm.org/give)



## Advocate

Your voice and your words are powerful. Advocate alongside us on issues you care about: [unitedwaydm.org/advocate](https://unitedwaydm.org/advocate)



## Volunteer

Find opportunities that allow you to share your time, talent, and expertise: [volunteer.unitedwaydm.org](https://volunteer.unitedwaydm.org)



For 20 consecutive years, United Way of Central Iowa has earned the top 4-Star Rating from Charity Navigator, showing financial strength and accountability. [CharityNavigator.org](https://CharityNavigator.org)

# MOBILIZING OUR COMMUNITY TO ACTION SO ALL CAN THRIVE

**Addressing central Iowa's complex issues requires a multisector, systems-level, community-based approach that includes government, business, nonprofit, faith-based communities, and the voices of our neighbors with lived experience.**

United Way works to join forces across these various sectors to build a stronger, more resilient community capable of meeting the diverse needs of its members throughout any economic, political, or social changes that may lie ahead. This holistic approach ensures that the responsibility for addressing these challenges is shared and that sustainable solutions are implemented for the benefit of all.

**Equity is at the center of a thriving community.**

Equity means giving everyone the resources and opportunities they need to succeed based on their unique needs and goals.



# AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

More than 700 people experience homelessness on any given night in Polk County. United Way of Central Iowa participated in the development of the Blueprint to Address Homelessness, which was released in May 2025. The Blueprint charts a path to reducing homelessness over the next five years, with an ultimate goal of eliminating all homelessness. United Way of Central Iowa will continue to play a role on the Polk County Blueprint for Housing Solutions Alliance and has provided initial funding for start-up costs.

The OpportUNITY Housing Workgroup continues to convene monthly with a focus on issues of affordable housing and homelessness.

# FOOD SECURITY

Food pantry use in central Iowa is at an all-time high. In fact, 37% of central Iowans say that they have run out of food or been worried about running out of food in the past year.

In the short term, food may be the easiest place for an ALICE family to cut back on costs, but in the long term, the consequences of a poor diet or food insecurity can include developmental delays in children, compromised performance at school or work, and chronic disease in adults.

Food security has been considered a critical community issue by United Way of Central Iowa for more than two years, and it has been the focus of an OpportUNITY workgroup since 2016.



**In February 2024, United Way and the Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines unveiled a community-wide Food Security Plan. The plan is being implemented through the OpportUNITY Food Insecurity Workgroup facilitated by United Way.**

The continued dedication of our workgroup members has led to the launch of a pilot project to create real impact in our community. This initiative has placed community navigators in food pantries and other service providers, helping connect neighbors in need with essential resources. These navigators are also gathering data to better illustrate the realities of food insecurity and guide future policy and service changes.



**SCAN TO SEE THE IMPACT**

or visit [unitedwaydm.org/food](https://unitedwaydm.org/food)

# YOUTH VIOLENCE AND DISENGAGEMENT

Recent increases in gun violence among central Iowa youth brought the issue to the forefront in our community. Youth disengagement, which is defined as not being enrolled in school and unemployed, can be a determining factor contributing to youth violence.



**In central Iowa, 6.1% of youth ages 16-19 are disengaged from school or work. That number of youth would fill the chairs in 80 empty classrooms.**

United Way of Central Iowa convened the Safe & Thriving Youth coalition in March 2023, bringing together subject matter experts, educators, concerned community members and young people, city and county officials, nonprofits, and many others to discuss solutions.

In January 2025, the Safe & Thriving Youth coalition released a comprehensive plan to reduce youth violence in central Iowa. The plan seeks to prevent gun violence among youth, reduce shootings, and improve access to services for community members impacted by violence. Adopting a public health approach, this plan focuses on individuals at high risk of gun violence victimization and offenses. A project manager is now working to guide the implementation of the plan, building bridges to create a unified front against youth violence.



**SCAN TO SEE THE IMPACT**

or visit [unitedwaydm.org/youth](https://unitedwaydm.org/youth)

# CHILDCARE

Access to safe, affordable, quality childcare for working families can enable them to maintain stable employment and earn a living wage. This, in turn, supports their access to healthcare, their ability to obtain quality housing, and their children's academic success.

Childcare professionals play a largely unrecognized but pivotal role in this equation: they are the workforce behind our workforce. Despite their critical role in the economy, the average hourly wage for a childcare employee in central Iowa is only \$13.89 – less than the average wage for cashiers and fast-food counter workers.



**In central Iowa, there is only 1 licensed childcare slot for every 3 children.**

United Way of Central Iowa is collaborating with partners to enhance childcare availability in centers serving ALICE families. United Way has secured grants from the National Fund for Workforce Solutions and Polk County to identify and implement impactful solutions that will increase quality and capacity, improve staffing stability and retention, and raise employee wages.



**SCAN TO SEE THE IMPACT**

or visit [unitedwaydm.org/childcare](https://unitedwaydm.org/childcare)



# COMMUNITY REPORT

2025