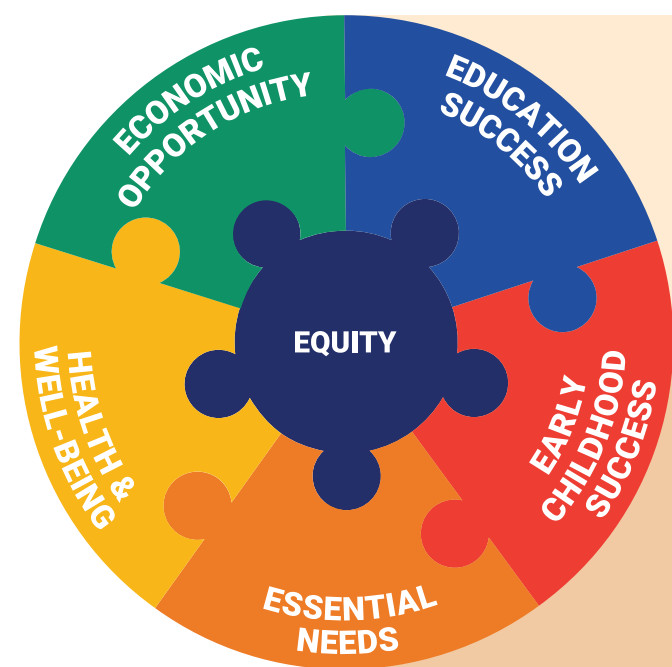


UNITED WAY OF CENTRAL IOWA IS UNITED TO THRIVE

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.

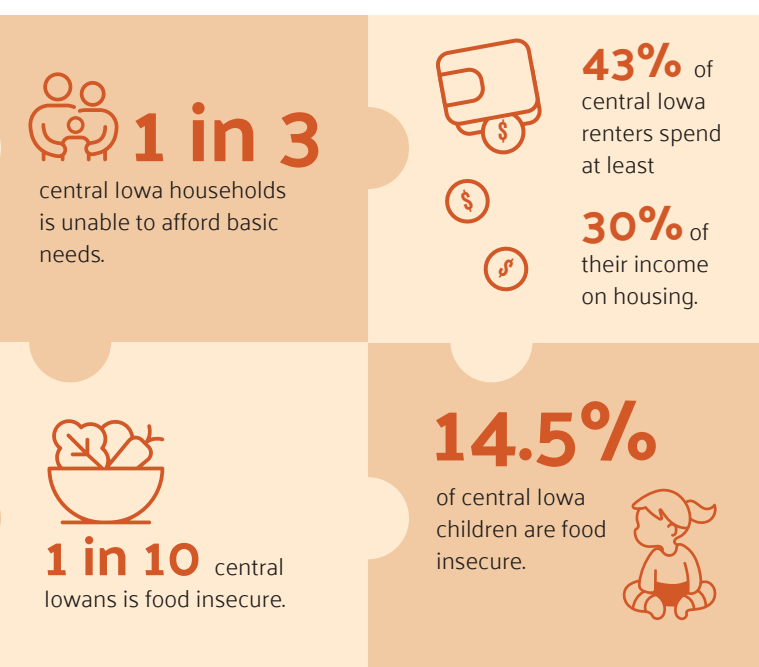


ESSENTIAL NEEDS

Central Iowans need access to quality, nutritious food and a safe place to call home.

The Issue: Rising Cost of Essentials

In central Iowa, many families are finding it harder to afford everyday necessities like food, housing, clothing, and transportation. In recent years, the cost of food and rent has gone up much faster than wages, making it difficult for working families to keep up.



United Way's Role: Supporting ALICE Families

While most ALICE families work hard and contribute to our local economy, rising costs continue to outpace wages, leaving little room for emergencies or long-term planning. United Way invests in trusted nonprofit partners that provide food access, housing stability, and other services to help families stabilize and move forward. By strengthening these support systems, United Way helps ensure central Iowa is a place where families can build stability and pursue a more secure future.

Bringing Partners Together

United Way looks at the big picture to help partners collaborate, avoid duplication of programs, and strengthen the overall impact of services in our community.

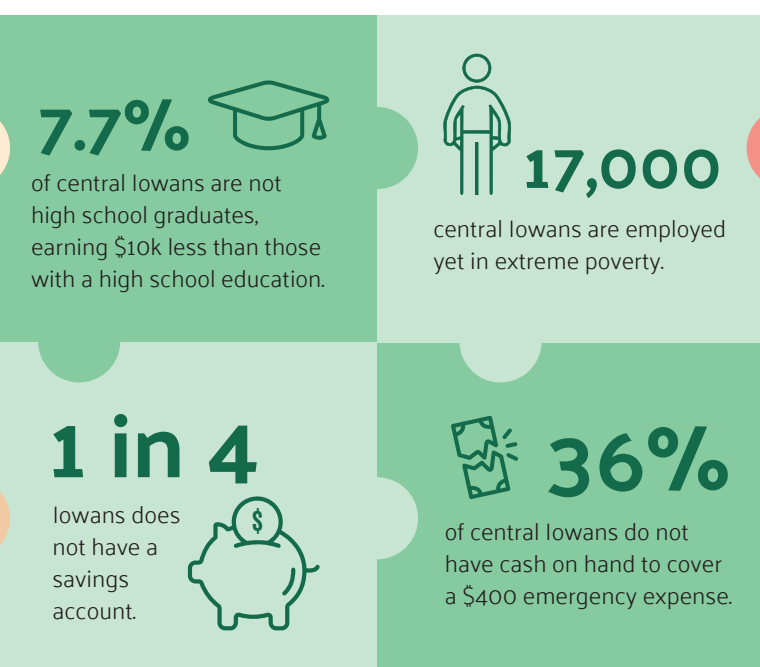
LINC is an affinity group of donors who give their time and resources to help central Iowans gain access to quality, nutritious food and a safe place to call home.

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Central Iowans need to be financially stable and have the opportunity to build wealth for their family and future generations.

The Issue: Moving From Survival to Stability

In central Iowa, many people are working but still face barriers that make it hard to improve their financial situation. Among the 20 most common jobs in central Iowa, 40% pay less than \$20 per hour. At the same time, challenges like access to training, childcare, transportation, and financial tools can prevent individuals and families from taking the next step toward better opportunities.



United Way's Role: Creating Opportunity

United Way of Central Iowa works with employers, nonprofits, and community partners to help people move toward stable, higher-quality employment and long-term financial security. This includes supporting job training and credential programs, removing barriers to work, and helping families build financial skills and savings.

Investing in Our Community

By aligning workforce efforts and focusing on practical pathways forward, United Way and partners help individuals not just survive but start to thrive.

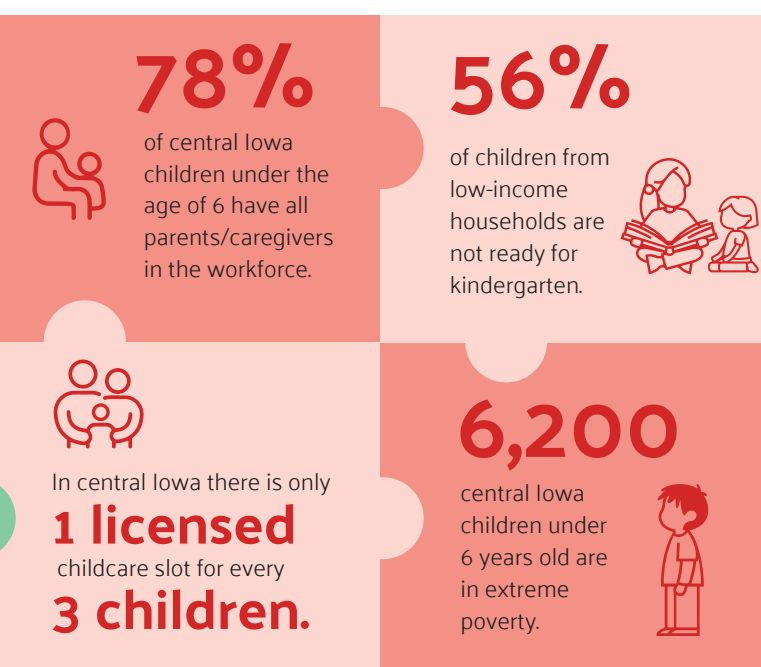
United LEAGUE is a United Way affinity group of motivated donors who identify as Black or allies who are eager to address disparities in economic opportunity through volunteerism and advocacy, with a specific focus on summer youth employment programs.

EARLY CHILDHOOD SUCCESS

The youngest central Iowans need access to safe, reliable, and affordable childcare to be healthy and ready to learn.

The Issue: Strain on Families and Employers

Affordable, reliable childcare remains out of reach for many central Iowa families and businesses. When care is unavailable or too costly, parents may reduce hours, decline promotions, or leave the workforce. At the same time, limited access to quality early learning can hinder children's development. The result affects family stability, workforce participation, and long-term economic growth.



United Way's Role: Strengthening the System

United Way of Central Iowa works with partners to expand access to quality early learning, support childcare providers, and advance solutions that help parents stay employed and businesses retain workers.

Aligning Strategies and Coordinating Solutions

By investing in childcare as both an early education and workforce issue, United Way and partners help children get a strong start while supporting a more stable local economy.

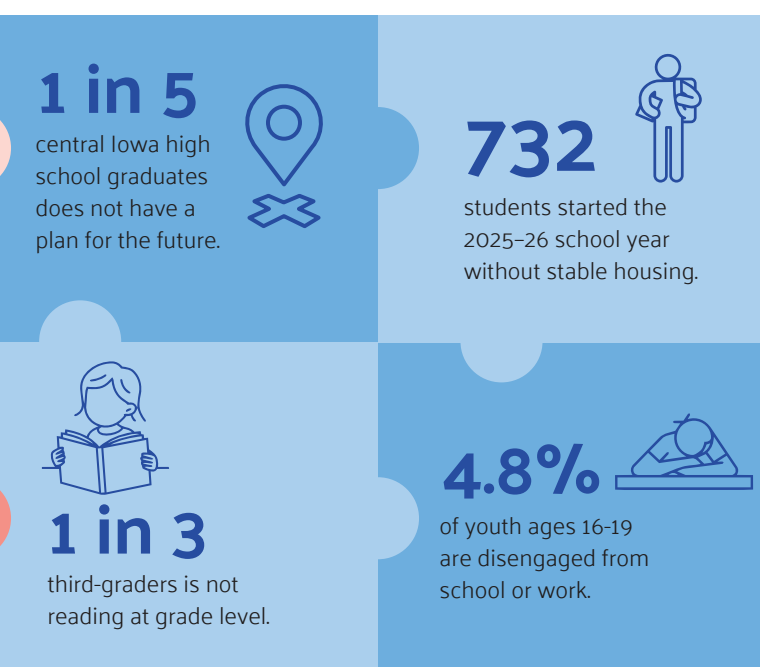
Women United, an affinity group focused on Early Childhood Success initiatives, works to improve the network of care and learning that ensures young children are ready to succeed in school.

EDUCATION SUCCESS

Central Iowa students need to graduate from high school with a plan for a successful future.

The Issue: Barriers to Student Success

Families may struggle to afford supplies, technology, tutoring, or enrichment, and older students often juggle school with work or caregiving. These pressures contribute to gaps in attendance, achievement, and graduation, limiting future education and career options.



United Way's Role: Expanding Educational Access

United Way of Central Iowa partners with schools and community organizations to help ALICE students stay engaged and succeed. Investments focus on improving attendance, strengthening academic support, and connecting families to critical resources.

Nurturing Partnerships Across the Community

By removing barriers to learning, United Way and partners help keep education a pathway to economic opportunity.

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.

HEALTH & WELL-BEING

Central Iowans need access to quality, culturally appropriate care promoting physical and emotional well-being and improving resilience.

The Issue: Health Impacts Stability

In central Iowa, many families struggle to stay healthy while balancing work, caregiving, and financial stress. Limited access to affordable healthcare, mental health support, healthy food, and stable housing can make it harder for individuals to manage chronic conditions or address stress and anxiety. For ALICE households, these challenges often lead to missed work, lower productivity, and higher long-term costs, affecting both family stability and overall well-being.



United Way's Role: Supporting Whole-Person Health

United Way of Central Iowa partners with community organizations to improve access to health and well-being supports that help individuals and families thrive. This includes connecting people to physical and mental health resources, promoting preventive care, and addressing social factors that influence health.

Connecting Efforts Across the System

By focusing on whole-person well-being, United Way and our partners help families stay healthy, remain employed, and build stronger foundations for the future.

Who is ALICE?

ALICE® isn't an individual person; ALICE is an acronym. It stands for **A**sset **L**imited, **I**ncome **C**onstrained, **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, warehouse stockers, retail clerks, healthcare workers, and others. ALICE might be a family member, a friend, a neighbor – or you.

For more information on our sources for the statistics and information in this document, please visit unitedwaydm.org/communityreport.

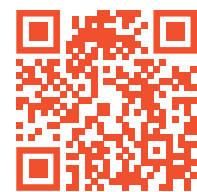
GET INVOLVED

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.



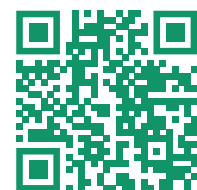
Give

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



Advocate

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



Volunteer

Find opportunities that allow you to share your time, talent, and expertise: volunteer.unitedwaydm.org

Charity Navigator

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

UNITED IS THE WAY

Mobilizing Our Community to Action So All Can Thrive

Addressing central Iowa's complex issues requires a multisector, systems-level 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.

UNITED WAY AND PARTNERS

1 IN 3 CENTRAL IOWANS benefits from United Way-funded programs

112 funded partners

185 programs

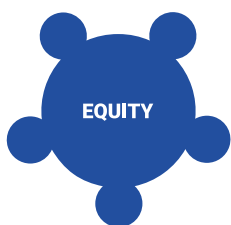
48,652 volunteer hours

11,584 volunteers

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.

In central Iowa, people face a variety of challenges, and in many cases those challenges are more pronounced based on factors like race, ethnicity, disability, birthplace, and more – factors that should not negatively impact a person's ability to thrive.



AFFORDABLE HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness in central Iowa remains a visible and complex issue. Since the release of the Blueprint to Address Homelessness in 2025, community partners have moved from planning to implementation, aligning strategies to prevent homelessness, shorten the length of time people experience homelessness, and expand pathways to permanent housing.

United Way of Central Iowa continues to play a convening and investment role in these efforts, supporting the Polk County Housing Solutions Alliance and advancing cross-sector solutions that address both immediate housing needs and long-term stability. Through partnerships with nonprofit providers, local government, and advocates with lived experience, United Way works to ensure that housing solutions are equitable, coordinated, and responsive to community needs. By addressing housing as both an essential need and a foundation for economic opportunity, United Way helps create pathways toward stability so all central Iowans can thrive.

FOOD SECURITY

Food insecurity remains a pressing challenge in central Iowa, particularly for ALICE families who are often forced to cut back on food to manage other rising household costs. In response, United Way of Central Iowa and community partners are advancing more coordinated, systems-level solutions guided by the Central Iowa Food Security Plan, a community-wide roadmap to improve access, affordability, and long-term stability. A key recent effort is the Community Navigator Pilot, which places trained navigators in food pantries and service sites to connect neighbors with food, benefits, housing, and other supports. In its first year, the pilot served over 1,800 neighbors, helping families address immediate needs while reducing the risk of future food insecurity.

SAFE AND THRIVING YOUTH

Reducing youth violence in central Iowa requires sustained collaboration, prevention, and meaningful opportunities for young people. Building on the 2025 Safe & Thriving Youth action plan, United Way of Central Iowa and community partners are focused on addressing root causes such as youth disengagement, limited access to trusted adults, and economic instability. Recent work has emphasized building a strong network of mentors, strengthening collaboration among youth-serving organizations, and engaging law enforcement as partners in prevention and early intervention. Efforts also include expanding summer youth employment opportunities, which provide young people with income, skills, and positive connections during critical months. By aligning systems, investing in relationships, and focusing on upstream solutions, the Safe & Thriving Youth initiative is helping create safer communities where young people are supported, connected, and able to thrive.

CHILDCARE ACCESS AND AFFORDABILITY

Access to safe, affordable, high-quality childcare is essential for working families and a strong regional economy. In central Iowa, most families with young children have all parents or caregivers in the workforce, yet childcare remains difficult to find and afford, especially for ALICE households.

Childcare professionals are the workforce behind the workforce, but low wages and staffing shortages limit capacity and access. United Way of Central Iowa is working with national and community partners to strengthen the childcare system by increasing availability, improving quality, and supporting workforce stability. Through targeted investments and cross-sector collaboration, these efforts help parents remain employed, reduce long-term costs for providers, and ensure young children have the strong early learning foundation they need to succeed.



COMMUNITY REPORT

2026

