UNITED WAY
Central Iowa

THRIVING COMMUNITY SURVEY
2026

Services, Capacity, and Need in Central Iowa

INTRODUCTION

A thriving community depends on a strong network of health, human services, and education organizations that help people meet basic needs, build skills and opportunity, navigate challenges, and achieve long-term stability.

Across central Iowa, these organizations support individuals and families with food, housing, health care, mental health services, childcare, employment, transportation, education, safety, and other essential needs.

This report is called the Thriving Community Survey because the well-being of people and the strength of the organizations that serve them are closely connected. When individuals and families cannot access the support they need, challenges can grow and affect many parts of their lives. When the organizations that provide that support are stretched by rising demand, staffing shortages, funding changes, or other pressures, the effects can be felt across the broader community. Understanding these conditions helps central Iowa identify where stronger partnerships, investment, and coordination can help more people thrive.

The 2026 survey focuses primarily on health and human services organizations and other nonprofits (including organizations that receive United Way funding and those that do not) that provide direct support to people and families. This focus reflects an important insight from the 2024 Central Iowa Nonprofit Sector Survey, which included organizations from many areas of the nonprofit sector and was conducted in partnership with the Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines and Bravo Greater Des Moines. That report showed that nonprofits can face very different challenges depending on their mission, funding model, and the people they serve. Looking at all organizations as a whole can make it harder to see the specific pressures affecting direct service organizations and the households that rely on them.

Respondents range from small and volunteer-supported organizations to larger agencies with substantial budgets, staff teams, and service reach. Together, they serve people across central Iowa who may be experiencing poverty, financial instability, barriers to opportunity, or urgent needs that require coordinated support. This report is not intended to evaluate individual organizations or suggest that any one nonprofit, funder, business, or public agency can solve the challenges described here alone. Instead, it offers a view of the conditions affecting the organizations that help central Iowans meet basic needs and build stability. By understanding these conditions together, the community can better align resources, strengthen partnerships, and support the systems that help people thrive.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The 2026 survey findings point to a health and human services system that remains deeply responsive to community need but is being stretched by rising demand, staffing challenges, funding uncertainty, and a more complex operating environment. The organizations represented in this report continue to help central Iowans access essential supports and build greater stability. At the same time, the data shows that many are being asked to meet growing and more complex needs without the staffing, financial flexibility, or broader system support needed to keep pace. These findings reinforce that helping people thrive is a shared community responsibility that requires coordinated action across nonprofits, government, business, philanthropy, faith communities, and residents.

Topline Findings

Demand continues to outpace capacity and resources.
Most organizations reported increased demand in the past year, and even more expect demand to grow in the year ahead. Yet fewer than half said they are currently able to fully meet demand, and only 30% expect to be able to do so in the future.

Workforce challenges are limiting service delivery.
Staffing shortages, skill gaps, burnout, and leadership strain make it harder for organizations to provide consistent services, manage growing demand, meet funding requirements, and plan for the future.

Organizations are managing through financial uncertainty.
Many respondents reported balanced budgets or intentional financial planning, but others reported deficits, concerns about financial stability, or limited flexibility to respond to unexpected costs, funding changes, or further increases in demand.

Funding streams are shifting.
Reductions or uncertainty in federal and state funding can affect essential services that are difficult to replace through private fundraising alone.

External pressures are influencing the work of health and human services nonprofits.
Organizations are adapting to broader economic, policy, legal, and social pressures that affect how they communicate, deliver services, and support staff, boards, and the people they serve.

For more information about the methodology, response rates, and other details behind this survey and report, please email **contactus@unitedwaydm.org.**

DEMAND CONTINUES TO OUTPACE RESOURCES AS HOUSEHOLD HARDSHIP PERSISTS

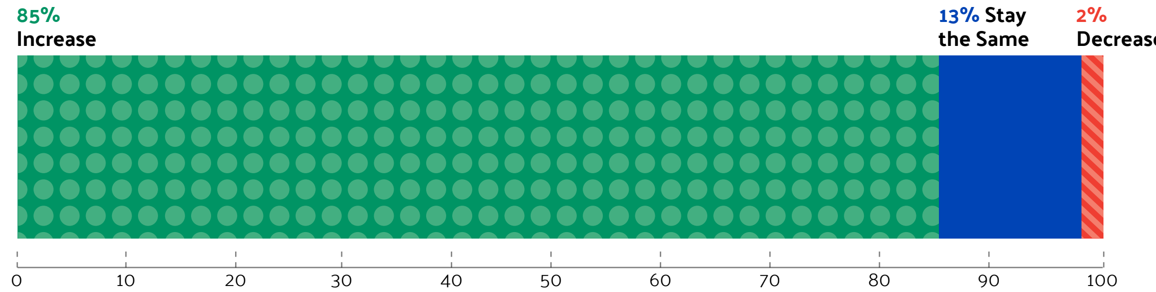
Health and human services nonprofits are seeing sustained and rising community need, but many do not have the staffing, funding, or operational capacity to fully meet current or anticipated demand. This finding echoes a central concern from the 2024 Central Iowa Nonprofit Sector Survey, but the 2026 results sharpen the focus on the organizations most directly serving people and families facing hardship.

The survey results show that demand is not just increasing; it is exceeding organizations' capacity and resources to respond. More than eight in 10 respondents reported that they saw demand for their organization's services increase in the past year. At the same time, fewer than half said they were able to fully meet that demand. This gap suggests that many organizations are already operating under significant strain, even before accounting for future increases in need.

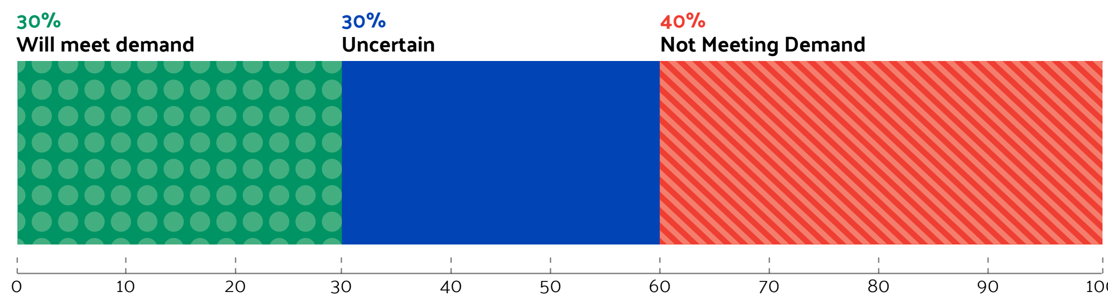
The outlook for the coming year adds to this concern. Most respondents (85%) expect demand to increase again, yet only 30% expect to be able to fully meet that demand. Forty percent said they do not expect to be able to fully meet future demand, while another 30% were unsure. Taken together, these responses point to a widening capacity gap: organizations anticipate greater community need, but many lack confidence that they will have the resources necessary to respond.

MORE DEMAND, LESS CERTAINTY

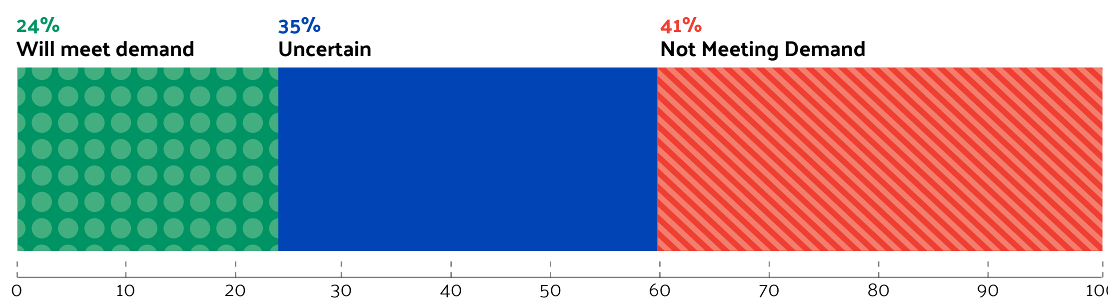
In the coming year, do you anticipate the amount of demand for your organization's services will increase?



In the coming year, do you anticipate your organization will be able to fully meet the demand for its services?



Of those organizations that are expecting an increase in demand for their services, the percent that are confident in their ability to meet the demand is even lower.



Resource Gaps Hit Hardest on Households Struggling to Afford the Basics

Many of the people served by health and human services nonprofits are living in or near financial crisis. Some live below the federal poverty level. Others are above the poverty line but still do not earn enough to consistently afford basic needs such as housing, childcare, food, transportation, health care, and technology. United Way defines this group as **ALICE**®, which stands for **A**sset **L**imited, **I**ncome **C**onstrained, **E**mployed. These are households that are often working but still cannot afford the basic costs of living in their community.

In central Iowa,

1 in 3

households struggles to afford basic needs.

The survey results show that health and human services organizations are primarily serving people facing this kind of financial strain. 38% of respondents primarily serve households below the federal poverty level, while 56% serve a mix of households below poverty and households above poverty but still struggling to afford basic needs. Only 3% primarily serve financially stable households.

of responding nonprofits support ALICE households

For these households, needs are often complex, interconnected, and urgent. A family may come to one organization for food assistance, while also struggling with rent, transportation, childcare, health care, or employment stability. One unmet need can quickly affect another. For example, lack of transportation can make it harder to keep a job, attend medical appointments, or access childcare. A missed rent payment can lead to housing instability, which can affect a child's school attendance, a parent's employment, and the family's physical and mental health.

This means that when one organization cannot fully meet demand, the effects ripple beyond one program or service. If a housing provider has a waitlist, food pantries, schools, health providers, youth-serving organizations, workforce programs, and crisis-response systems may all see greater need. Health and human services nonprofits are not operating in isolation; they are part of an interconnected support system for families whose needs often overlap.

The rising cost of essentials adds pressure on both sides of this equation. Families need more support as basic costs rise, and nonprofits are also paying more for staff, supplies, facilities, insurance, technology, transportation, and other operating expenses. As a result, organizations are being asked to respond to deeper household needs while also absorbing higher costs themselves.

WORKFORCE CHALLENGES ARE A KEY DRIVER OF CAPACITY CONSTRAINTS

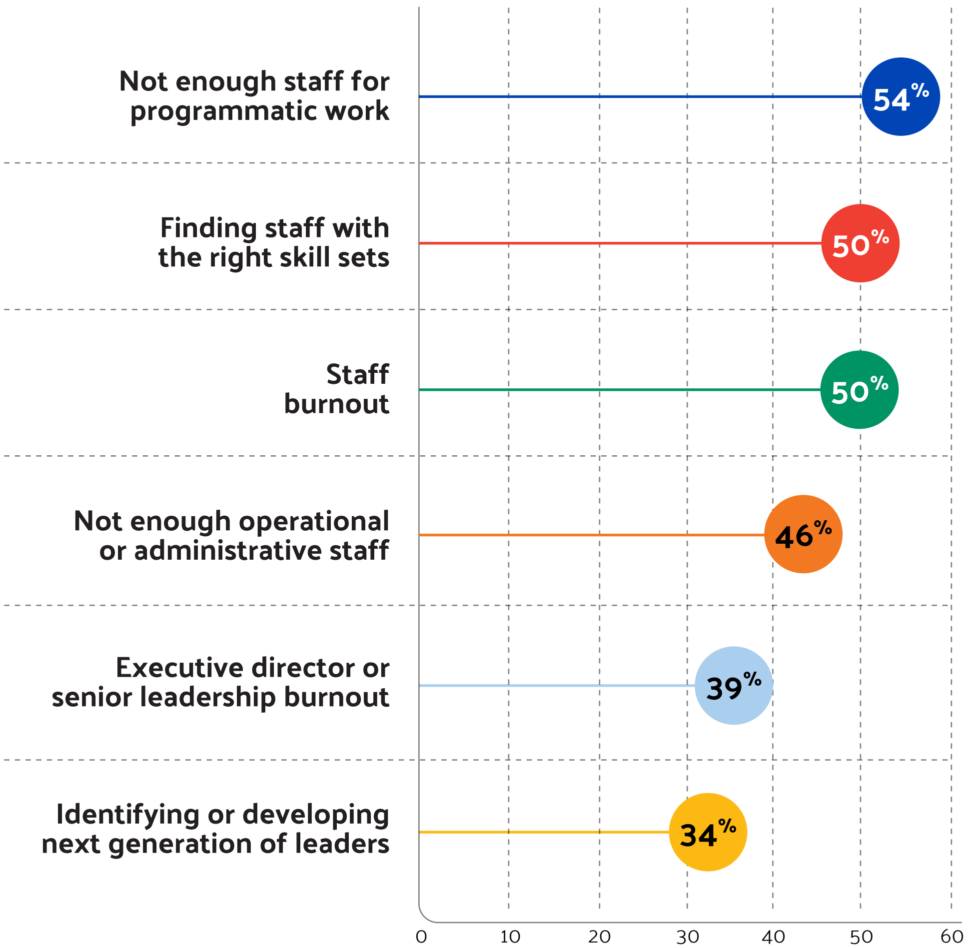
Workforce challenges remain one of the clearest constraints on the ability of health and human services nonprofits to meet community need. These organizations require skilled, committed staff to provide direct services, manage complex household needs, build trust with clients, coordinate with other providers, meet grant and compliance requirements, and sustain day-to-day operations. When organizations cannot recruit, retain, and support the people needed to do this work, the result is not only an internal staffing challenge. It becomes a community capacity challenge.

Survey respondents identified several workforce pressures that directly affect service delivery. More than half reported challenges employing enough staff to do all programmatic work, while half reported difficulty finding staff with the right skill sets. Half also reported staff burnout. These challenges suggest that many organizations are not only trying to fill open positions, but also trying to maintain quality, consistency, and responsiveness in a demanding service environment.

Operational and administrative staffing is also a significant concern. Nearly half of respondents reported challenges employing enough staff to do the operational or administrative work of the organization. This matters because programs cannot run effectively without the infrastructure behind them. Finance, human resources, grant management, compliance, data reporting, communications, volunteer coordination, and evaluation all support the front-line services that community members rely on. When these functions are understaffed, organizations may struggle to manage funding requirements, track outcomes, support staff, or pursue new opportunities.

WORKFORCE CHALLENGES ARE AFFECTING EVERY LEVEL OF THE ORGANIZATION

Has your organization experienced any of the following management challenges in the past year?



Burnout is not limited to front-line staff. A substantial share of respondents reported executive director or senior leadership burnout, pointing to strain across the whole organization. Health and human services leaders are often managing increased demand, uncertain funding, complex community needs, staff vacancies, compliance expectations, and public or policy pressures at the same time. Over time, this level of strain can affect decision-making, organizational culture, succession planning, and long-term sustainability.

ADDRESSING WORKFORCE CHALLENGES

What strategies have you employed to retain staff?

Respondents also identified the strategies that help retain staff. The most commonly cited retention strategy was offering a flexible work environment, followed closely by providing competitive wages. Respondents also pointed to offering competitive PTO or sick leave policies, benefits, training opportunities, and hybrid or remote work options. These responses show that retention depends not only on mission commitment, but also on practical workplace supports.

The survey results do not suggest that workforce challenges are limited to organizations of a particular size, nor that larger organizations are necessarily more able to attract and retain employees simply because they have more resources or larger staff teams. An interesting pattern emerges: the smallest nonprofits report fewer management challenges and are also less likely to pursue formal staff retention strategies. As organizational size increases, both the prevalence of management challenges and the use of retention strategies appear to increase, suggesting that larger organizations may face more complex staffing and management demands. This is an important distinction. While collaboration, shared services, or mergers may be appropriate in some cases, the data does not support the assumption that size alone mitigates workforce challenges.

Ultimately, workforce sustainability is service sustainability. Health and human services organizations cannot fully meet community need without enough skilled and supported staff, strong operational infrastructure, and leaders who have the capacity to guide their organizations through uncertainty. Addressing workforce challenges will require more than encouraging nonprofits to hire creatively or do more with less. It will require community investment in wages, benefits, training, leadership development, administrative capacity, and funding models that reflect the true cost of helping people thrive.

ORGANIZATIONS ARE MANAGING THROUGH FINANCIAL UNCERTAINTY

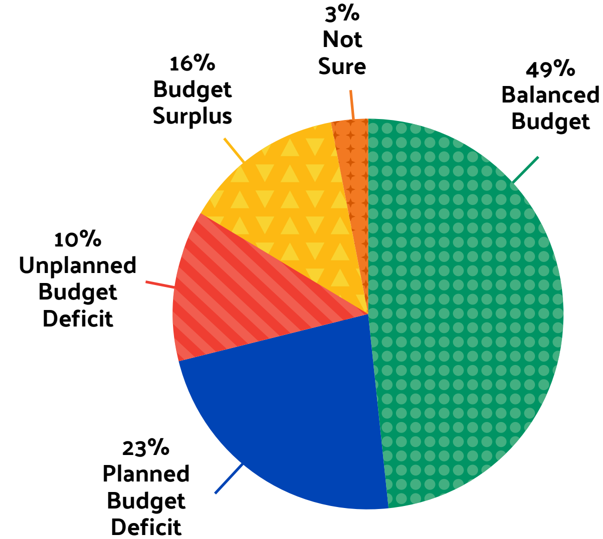
Financial health is complex and cannot be captured through a single measure. To better understand how health and human services nonprofits are managing financially, the survey examined several indicators: whether organizations balanced their most recent budgets, how much cash they had available for operating expenses, and how leaders themselves characterized their current financial stability. Together, these measures provide a more complete picture of both an organization's immediate financial position and its perceived ability to adapt to changing conditions, sustain services, and plan for the future.

The results showed that health and human services nonprofits continue to demonstrate careful financial management in a challenging environment. Nearly half of respondents reported a balanced budget in their most recently completed fiscal year, suggesting that many organizations are working deliberately to align expenses with available revenue while continuing to serve the community. An additional 23% reported a planned deficit, suggesting a long-term planning strategy that, while perhaps not sustainable long-term, is intentional and may indicate careful management and strong reserves.

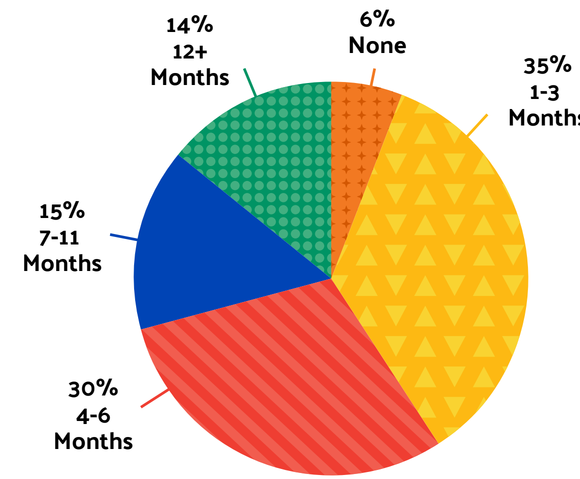
Cash-on-hand levels provide useful context about an organization's financial flexibility, but they should be interpreted alongside its size, operating model, funding structure, payment cycles, and ability to manage unexpected costs. Forty-one percent of respondents reported having three months or less of cash on hand, and 71% reported having six months or less. For some organizations, particularly those with smaller budgets, predictable revenue, or lower fixed costs, several months of reserves may be sufficient to operate responsibly. For others, similar reserve levels may leave little room to absorb delayed payments, unexpected expenses, or shifts in demand. Rather than establishing a single benchmark for every organization, these results point to the importance of assessing whether each organization has adequate financial flexibility for its particular circumstances.

CAREFUL FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT HELPS NONPROFITS NAVIGATE UNCERTAINTY

In your most recently completed fiscal year, did your organization have a...



How many months of cash-on-hand do you have available for operating expenses?



FINDING 3

More than half of respondents reported concerns about their organization's financial stability, and more than four in 10 characterized their current financial stability as weak or fair.

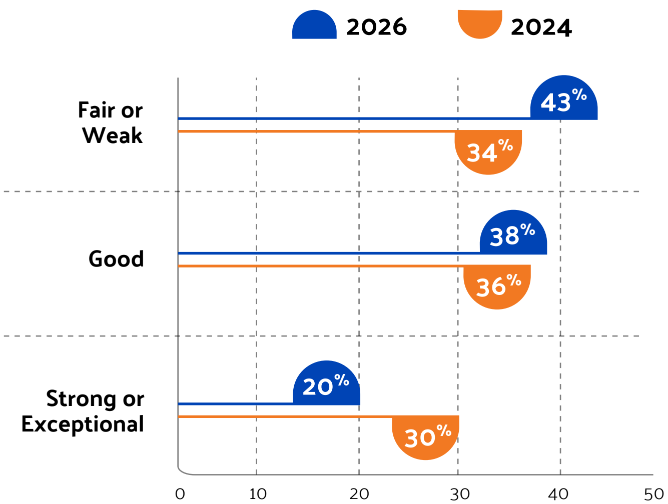
The three-year outlook also appears more cautious than the 2024 health and human services comparison points. A larger share of respondents now expect their financial stability to worsen, suggesting that organizations are looking ahead with concern about the combined effects of rising demand, uncertain funding, increasing costs, and workforce pressure. This does not mean the sector lacks resilience. Rather, it could indicate that resilience is being tested by conditions that many organizations cannot solve through internal management alone.

Rising costs are part of this financial pressure. Health and human services nonprofits are experiencing many of the same cost increases as the households they serve, including higher costs for supplies, facilities, insurance, technology, transportation, and staffing. At the same time, growing community need may require more intensive services, longer engagement with clients, or additional coordination across providers. This creates a dual challenge: organizations are being asked to do more for people facing greater hardship while also absorbing higher operating costs themselves.

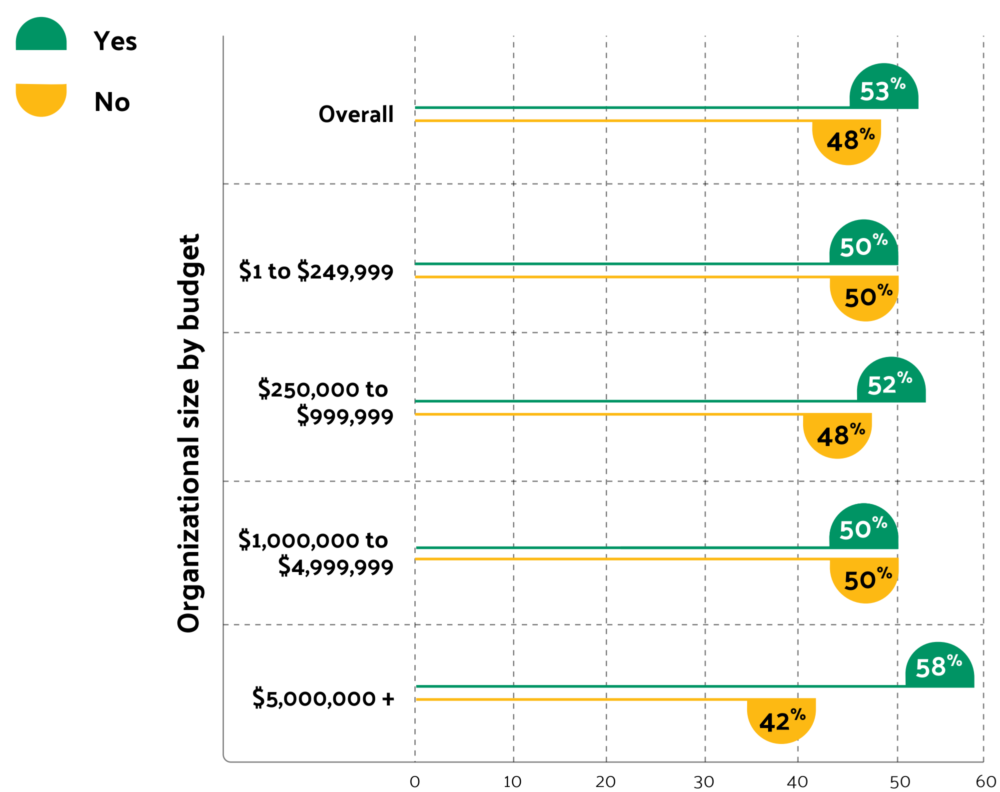
The data does not suggest a consistent relationship between organizational size and stronger financial stability. Larger organizations are not necessarily more stable simply because they have larger budgets, and smaller organizations are not automatically less sustainable. Financial strength appears to depend on a more complex mix of factors, including funding structure, reserves, administrative capacity, staffing model, program requirements, and the level of demand an organization is trying to meet.

NONPROFITS ARE STABLE BUT CONCERNED

How would you characterize your current financial stability?



Do you have concerns about your organization's financial stability?



FINDING 4

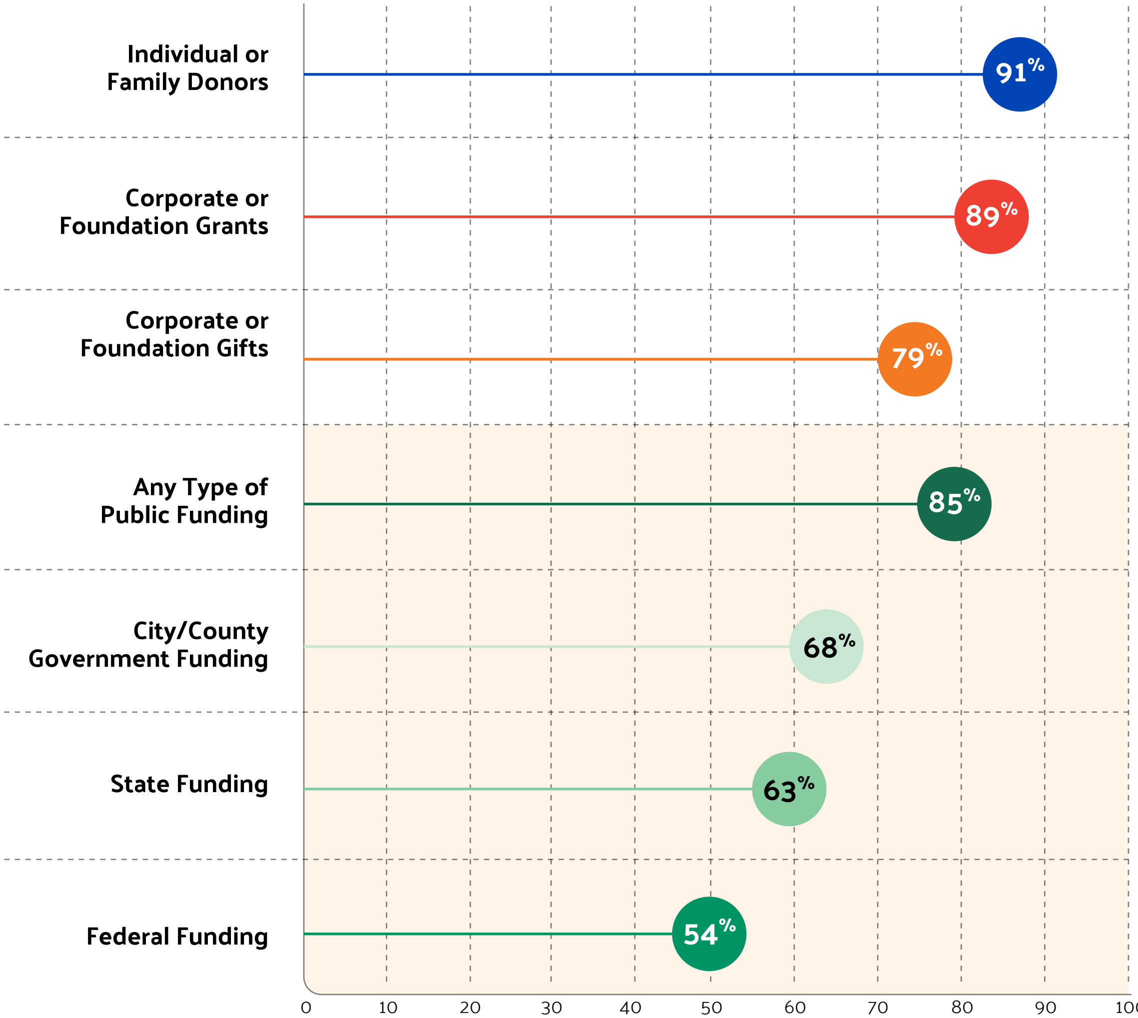
FUNDING STREAMS ARE SHIFTING, AND ORGANIZATIONS ARE WORKING TO DIVERSIFY REVENUE

Revenue uncertainty continues to shape the health and human services sector, especially for organizations that rely on a combination of public funding, grants, philanthropy, fee-for-service revenue, and individual giving. The survey results suggest that organizations are not facing a single, uniform funding challenge. Instead, they are navigating a complex and shifting environment in which some revenue sources are growing for certain organizations while declining or remaining flat for others.

Public funding is a critical part of the health and human services funding ecosystem, and changes in federal and state funding can have significant consequences for organizations serving people with the greatest needs. Nationally, Candid reports that about 30% of nonprofits receive government funding, and among human services organizations that receive government grants, 40% report that those grants are their primary revenue stream. In comparison, 85% of respondents to this survey reported receiving some type of federal, state, or local public funding, and 57% of those organizations said public funding is their primary revenue stream. While the share of total revenue varies by organization, these funding streams often support core services, reimbursement-based programs, staffing, infrastructure, and services for households experiencing poverty or financial instability.

85% OF NONPROFITS RECEIVE PUBLIC FUNDING

Percent of Organizations With Each Type of Funding Stream

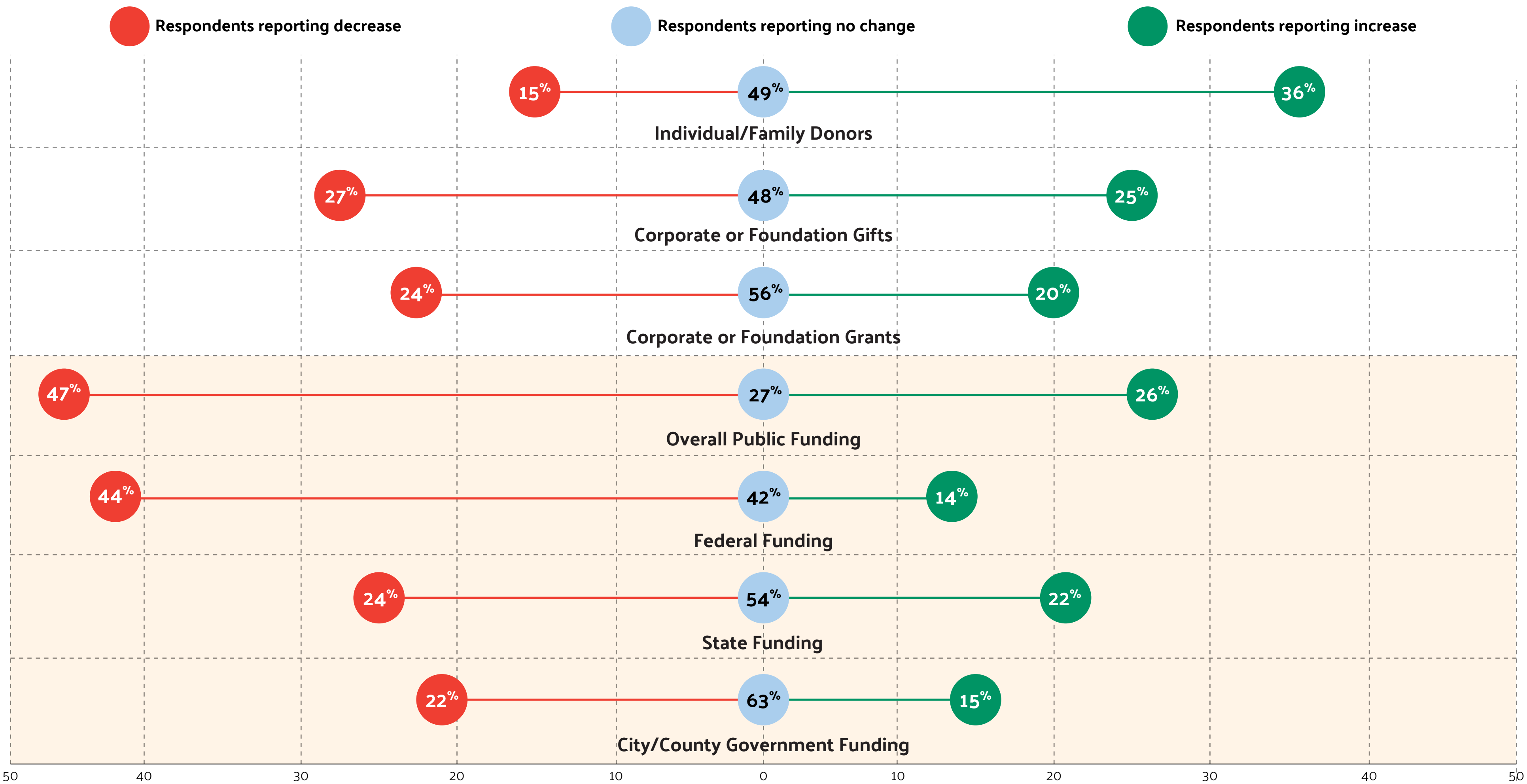


Federal and state funding decreases are especially consequential because public dollars have traditionally been viewed as one of the more stable sources of support for essential services. Increasing uncertainty in public funding changes that calculation for health and human services organizations that rely on these dollars to support public health programs, housing assistance, food access, workforce services, early childhood programs, behavioral health care, and other critical supports. When public funding becomes less predictable or declines, organizations may not be able to replace those dollars through donations, events, or corporate sponsorships. The result can affect staffing levels, service availability, wait times, geographic reach, and the intensity of support available to clients.

In response, most organizations are actively developing strategies to diversify revenue and enhance financial stability. Respondents most commonly reported plans to increase individual gifts, grant funds, corporate gifts, private foundation gifts, special event revenue, and fee-for-service revenue. This shows that health and human services nonprofits are working proactively to adapt to uncertainty and reduce reliance on any single funding source.

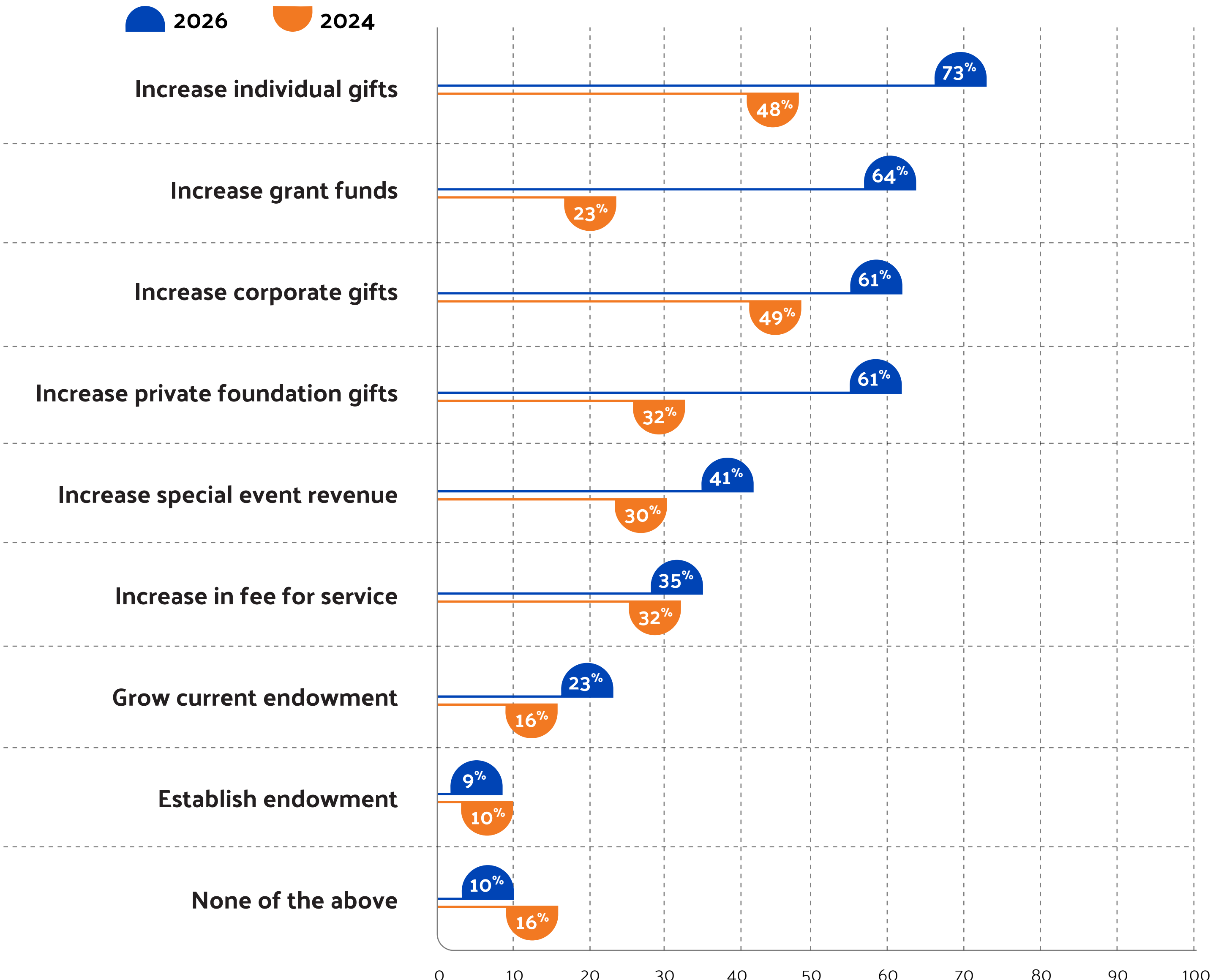
PRIVATE GIVING MAY NOT OFFSET PUBLIC FUNDING LOSSES

Did you experience any change in your funding sources in the last fiscal year?



EFFORTS TO DIVERSIFY REVENUE RAMP UP

Are you actively developing a plan/strategy to diversifying revenue and enhance the financial stability of your organization in any of these areas?



However, diversification is not a simple replacement for public funding. Private fundraising also requires staff time, donor relationships, communications capacity, grant-writing expertise, data systems, and administrative infrastructure. Organizations already stretched by rising demand may not have the resources to pursue new revenue strategies at the scale required to offset public funding losses.

Nonprofits are responding to financial uncertainty by pursuing many of the same revenue strategies. Nearly three-quarters plan to increase individual giving, while more than six in ten intend to pursue additional grant funding, corporate giving, and private foundation support.

Ultimately, the survey findings point to the need for a broader community response. Health and human services nonprofits are actively working to strengthen their financial models, but they cannot replace public funding losses through fundraising alone. A stronger funding ecosystem will require coordinated investment, realistic expectations about what private philanthropy can replace, and a shared commitment to funding the true cost of meeting community need.

FINDING 5

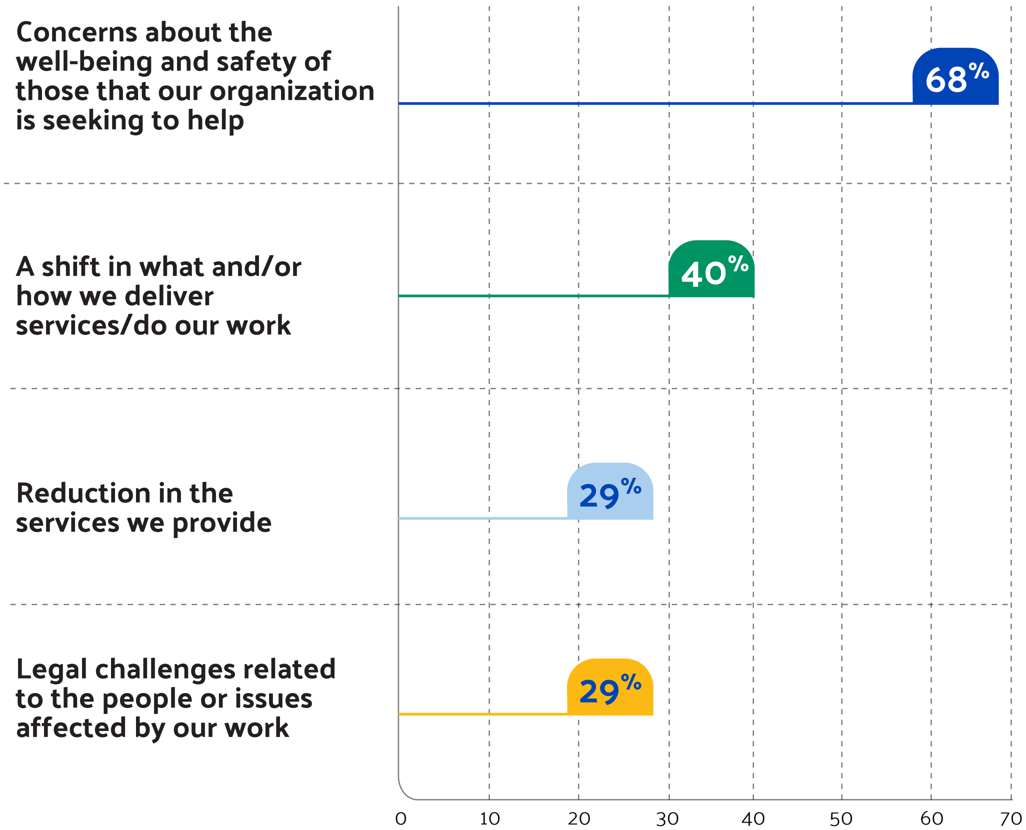
EXTERNAL PRESSURES ARE IMPACTING THE WORK OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES NONPROFITS

Beyond financial and workforce constraints, health and human services nonprofits are operating in an environment shaped by broader economic, policy, funding, legal, and social pressures. These conditions affect more than budgets or staffing levels. They can influence how services are designed and delivered, how organizations communicate publicly about their work, and how leaders support the well-being of staff, boards, and the people they serve.

More than two-thirds of respondents reported concerns about the well-being and safety of the people their organizations serve. This finding reflects the increasingly complex circumstances many households are navigating, including financial instability, housing challenges, food insecurity, health and behavioral health needs, safety concerns, and uncertainty about available supports. For organizations working with people already under strain, changes in the broader environment can quickly translate into deeper or more urgent needs. These conditions are also changing service delivery. Four in 10 respondents reported shifting what they do or how they deliver services in response to broader economic, policy, or funding conditions. Organizations may be adjusting program models, redirecting resources, expanding navigation and referral support, or responding to needs that extend beyond their original service model because other supports are unavailable or insufficient.

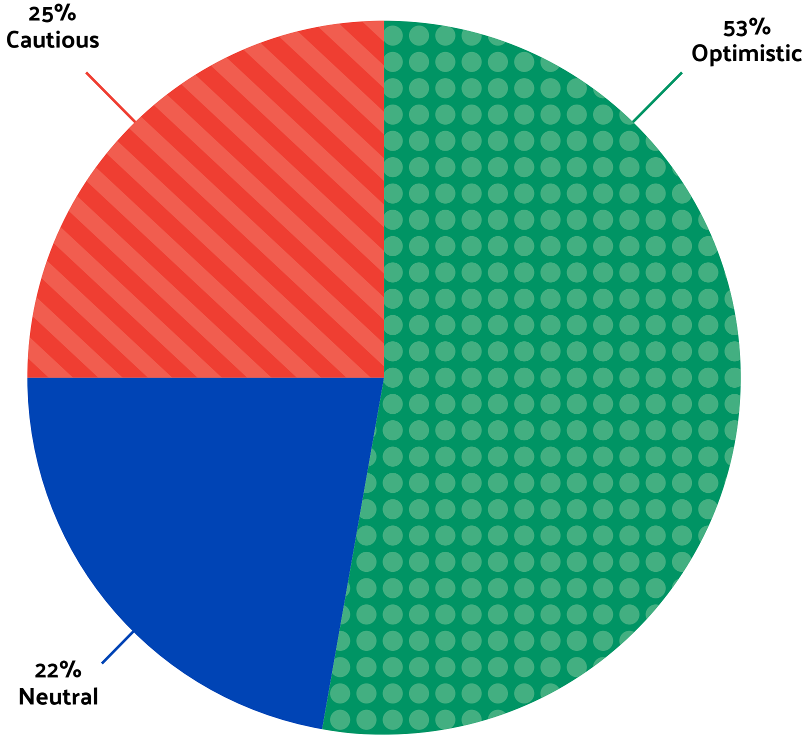
PRESSURES MOUNT

As a result of broader economic, policy, or funding conditions, has your organization experienced any of the following?



HOPEFUL DESPITE UNCERTAINTY

How do you feel about the future of your organization in light of any ongoing challenges?



Many respondents also reported pressure or opposition related to their mission or the way they publicly describe their work. This suggests that public narrative and communication have become operational considerations, not simply messaging decisions. Organizations may need to devote additional time and resources to explaining their role, communicating clearly about community needs, addressing misinformation, or navigating concerns about the language used to describe the people and issues they serve. The survey also points to the effects of this environment on nonprofit staff and leadership. More than one-third of respondents reported concerns about the well-being and safety of staff or board members. Nearly three in 10 reported reducing services, and a similar share reported legal challenges related to the people or issues affected by their work. These pressures can affect service availability, organizational decision-making, risk management, and the ability to respond flexibly to changing needs.

Despite the uncertainty caused by these external pressures, more than half of respondents said they remain optimistic about the future of their organization, demonstrating a continued commitment to their missions and confidence in their ability to adapt. At the same time, nearly half reported feeling neutral or cautious, underscoring that optimism is often tempered by ongoing concerns about the people they serve, changing funding and policy conditions, workforce strain, and the broader pressures shaping how organizations operate. Together, these responses suggest a sector that remains hopeful and determined, but is navigating an environment that requires continued flexibility, collaboration, and community support.

TURNING THE FINDINGS INTO ACTION

The survey illustrates the need to come together as a community to address increasing needs. Health and human services organizations are facing rising demand, staffing shortages, funding uncertainty, and new pressures that affect how they serve people. Helping central Iowa thrive will require people and organizations across the community to work together, focus on shared goals, and direct resources where they can make the biggest difference.

Focus investments on shared community goals.

The survey shows that when one part of the support system is stretched, the effects can spread quickly. A family struggling to find housing may also need food, childcare, transportation, health care, or help keeping a job. When an organization cannot meet demand in one area, other organizations often feel the pressure.

Funders, public agencies, businesses, nonprofits, and community members can work together to identify the biggest gaps in support and invest in solutions that help prevent problems from becoming crises. Shared data, community feedback, and the experiences of people who use these services can help guide those decisions.

Support the work behind direct services.

Direct services depend on more than the people meeting with clients or running programs. Organizations also need strong leadership, trained staff, technology, data systems, financial management, volunteer coordination, communications, and other support systems.

These behind-the-scenes functions make it possible for organizations to serve people well, meet funding requirements, track results, and respond when needs change. Community partners can help strengthen this work through strategic investments, technical support, shared learning, and opportunities for organizations to work together.

Make it easier for families to find connected support.

Many people do not need help in only one area of their lives. A parent who is struggling to afford rent may also need food, childcare, transportation, health care, or employment support. Requiring families to navigate many separate systems can make a difficult situation even harder.

Central Iowa can strengthen support for families by improving referrals, navigation, and coordination among service providers. When organizations communicate, share information when appropriate, and help people connect to the right support at the right time, families are more likely to find stability before challenges become more serious.

Plan together for changes in public funding.

Public funding has often been considered a stable source of support for essential services, but these findings suggest that it is becoming more volatile. When these funding sources decrease or become uncertain, organizations may have to make difficult choices about staffing, services, and how many people they can serve.

Strengthen the people who deliver essential services.

Health and human services depend on skilled staff and strong leaders. The survey shows that organizations are struggling with staffing shortages, burnout, skill gaps, and leadership strain. These challenges affect whether organizations can meet demand and provide consistent, high-quality services.

Building a stronger workforce will require attention to wages, benefits, flexibility, training, professional growth, and leadership development. Employers, funders, schools, colleges, and nonprofit leaders all have a role in helping people enter, stay in, and grow within health and human services careers.

Create a community where organizations can focus on their missions.

Organizations are facing pressures that go beyond funding and staffing. They are concerned about the well-being and safety of the people they serve, changes in policy and the economy, public pressure related to their work, and growing demands on staff and board members.

A thriving community needs an environment where organizations can clearly explain community needs, work with partners, and serve people safely and effectively. Government, philanthropy, businesses, faith communities, nonprofits, and residents all have a role in building trust, reducing barriers to collaboration, and supporting the services that help people move from instability toward long-term well-being.

Ultimately, the path forward is not asking organizations to do more with less. It is working together to strengthen the systems, partnerships, and resources that help individuals, families, and communities thrive.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Volunteer

United Way's Central Iowa Volunteer Hub can connect you with hundreds of volunteer opportunities posted by local nonprofits. You'll find ongoing initiatives like board positions and advisory committees to one-time opportunities and everything in between.

volunteer.unitedwaydm.org

Join a Board

LeadershipLink is an online portal that connects individuals in central Iowa seeking leadership roles to nonprofit organizations that have opportunities.

unitedwaydm.org/leadershiplink

Join a Workgroup

United Way of Central Iowa staff help eight work groups implement action plans and lead advocacy efforts with more than 2,000 individuals.

unitedwaydm.org/opportunity

Advocate

Subscribe to the United Way of Central Iowa's Advocacy Update newsletter for information about current issues, public policy, and priorities across central Iowa.

unitedwaydm.org/get-involved/advocate

Give

United Way of Central Iowa works together with our neighbors in Polk, Warren, and Dallas counties and more than 100 local partner organizations to create a future in which all central Iowans can reach their full potential.

unitedwaydm.org/donate

Get Social

Follow United Way of Central Iowa on social media to keep up with the events and opportunities that nonprofit organizations in central Iowa offer every day.

Facebook: @UnitedWayofCentralIowa | **Instagram:** @unitedwayci
LinkedIn: @unitedwaydsm | **YouTube:** @UWofCI | **TikTok:** @unitedwayci