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JOIN UNITED WAY'S
YEAR-ROUND COMMITMENT
TO IMPROVING
OUR COMMUNITIES

BY DONTAIRA TERRELL



he holidays often shine a spotlight on generosity and good-heartedness. But across the country, the need for the spirit of giving extends long after all of the presents have been opened and decorations are returned to storage.

United Way carries that spirit forward. A global nonprofit with deep local presence, the organization mobilizes communities so everyone can thrive. What begins with seasonal giving campaigns continues all year, connecting people with resources to support their families and strengthen their communities. For 138 years, United Way, which is the recipient of numerous charitable endorsements and recently landed the top spot on the Chronicle of Philanthropy's 2025 America's Favorite Charities list, has partnered to meet immediate needs, sharing local lessons to inspire action across its network.

By providing access to educational tools, financial assistance, quality health care, career training, homelessness prevention, mental health counseling and much more, United Way's efforts are aimed at bridging gaps and building pathways to creating a stronger tomorrow for generations. And its mission couldn't come to life without the collective support of partners and volunteers working with over 1,100 United Ways in more than 30 countries and territories.

"They do so much behind the scenes to help our community that you don't even realize," says Lauren Phillips, Title 1 coordinator and instructional coach at McKissick Academy of Science & Technology in Easley, South Carolina, which partners with United Way. "From providing food and shelter all the way up to helping people with their finances and getting them into a financial planning class or workforce training, they care about our kids, our families and they



want our community to be better." She continues, "All of the money you give is truly being used to impact our community and if you look around you can see that impact."

EMPOWERING AND EDUCATING YOUTH

The programs offered at the McKissick academy are just one example of United Way's youth opportunity impact pillar that also leans into the areas of early childhood education and college career readiness programs. The outcome? Helping students fully realize their greatest potential. Instilling knowledge is only half the battle, and these programs also nurture self-esteem, social-emotional skills, cognitive development and most importantly, the foundation for becoming contributing members of their communities.

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With U.S. public schools educating almost 1.4 million homeless students, according to research by the National Center for Homeless Education, there is no denying that education lays the groundwork for improved outcomes, and that strong, equitable futures for young people depend on more than academics alone.

According to a 2024 Pew Research study, about half of U.S. adults believe the K-12 public education system is headed in the wrong direction. United Way-supported efforts such as book donations, reading comprehension programming and intimate learning environments greatly increase the likelihood of student success.

Programs such as Camp iRock, a four-week summer literacy development initiative made possible through United Way of Pickens County, South Carolina, the local school district, YMCA partners and Clemson University, show what's possible when intervention happens early. In addition to free bus transportation, meals, swimming lessons, field trips, character development and more, the camp's curriculum is designed to help close the education achievement gap and prevent vulnerable children from falling behind over the summer months. Camp iRock doesn't just boost reading skills, it helps shape a child's social and professional trajectory.

"Up until the end of third grade, you're learning to read. But after third grade, you're reading for information," says Julie Capaldi, president and CEO of United Way of Pickens County. "So, if you don't read at grade level by the end of third grade, half of what you're taught in fourth grade will be incomprehensible.

That's why early intervention is so incredibly important." >

Logan Hunter, a Clemson University elementary education major and Call Me MiSTER program intern reads to Camp iRock students.

Bolstering food security

As the founder of the La Cosecha/ Harvest food pantry in Tulsa, Oklahoma, Rita Gallardo has witnessed countless stories of personal hardship and perseverance. It warms her heart and strengthens her resolve when she is able to provide vital assistance — with a funding boost from the local United Way — to those in need.

"There was this young lady (who) came to pick up groceries on her break," Gallardo says. "The young lady told me she had a very good job but also had a chronic illness and needed dialysis every week. She said, 'It's either I buy my medication, or I buy healthy groceries.'

"We were there to provide for her and that always touches me and makes me say, 'Good. This is why we do what we do.' Again, I cannot stress enough that United Way's support has been amazing. I feel like I'm not doing it alone and there is someone who really cares."

Helping communities rebound

These stories remind us that perseverance isn't just about surviving hardship. It's also about communities finding the strength to recover, adapt and move forward together. That's why United Way's focus on community resiliency is especially crucial. Life can change instantly and drastically for anyone, so whether it's preparing families for these unexpected crises, responding to natural disasters or strengthening the safety net, resilience is what ensures people can weather challenges and still press on.

There seems to be a common theme and it's when people are in need, United Way shows up and is there every step of the way. Just ask Naeem Wright, a community resource specialist with United Way of the Midlands in Omaha, Nebraska, who works with 211, a free 24/7 confidential helpline supported by United Way. It is available in the U.S. and across Canada, connecting callers with vital community resources and services.

"I was a medic in the military and when I got out, I was trying to find my way," says Wright, a United States Army veteran who served for eight years. "I was just milling around searching in the dark, then I became a paramedic in civilian life, Rita Gallardo is the founder of the La Cosecha/The Harvest food pantry in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

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and then I got injured. Now I live with paralysis, and I wondered how I was still going to help and serve people as someone who lives with a disability."

211 helps ease stress and add an extra layer of reassurance that help is only a call away. United Way reports that in 2024, 211 responded to more than 16.8 million requests for help, with housing and utilities support topping the list of needs.

"I found United Way, and after taking calls with 211, I received a vast understanding that everyone always has something that they are working on or working through," Wright says. "It gives me a way to help the communities, serve and go beyond that stigma about people with disabilities. Since I've worked with United Way, it's afforded me opportunities to shed light on everything that is going on with

people with disabilities, and just that everyone has a need for something."

It takes a village

Every volunteer, every dollar and every community effort assisted by United Way is evidence that the organization's impact is only possible because of the intentional, collective support of the community.

Even with generous financial support from United Way, individuals such as Wright, Phillips and Gallardo can't tackle all of their communities' challenges alone. It takes the proverbial village to combine efforts, unselfish contributions of time, talents and, yes, charitable donations to make a difference.

True to its mission of improving lives by "mobilizing the caring power of communities around the world to advance the common good," when needs arise, United Way will be there — and you can, too. ■



How You Can Help

The season of giving may come just once a year, but the need and the opportunity to make a difference exists every day. If you've ever wondered how to make a real change in your own backyard, here are some ways you can lend a helping hand:

Donate: You can make monetary contributions at unitedway.org, donate securities or unused retirement assets, or leave a legacy gift via a will.

Volunteer: Get involved in programs and projects ranging from organizing food drives and mentoring young people to joining volunteers across the country on United Way's annual Day of Action in June.

Advocacy support:

Encourage legislators to support policies that strengthen communities and advance health, youth opportunity and financial security for all.

Partnerships: United Way works with companies, governments, nonprofits and other organizations to address complex challenges — from helping parents train for jobs to driving policies that make sure no kid goes to bed hungry — via financial contributions, ideas, in-kind support and more.