



A Call to Action to the Health and Human Service Sector

We all know that advocacy is a critical strategy to enact local, state and federal policies that support poverty reduction and increased opportunity – but we also know that collectively we have very limited ability to influence those decisions. That is not to say that we should not continue to engage in policy advocacy. Our collective voices must be heard at the local, state and federal level. But while we wait for positive action on policies, we can take action locally to improve lives for some of our community’s most vulnerable residents.

For local action to have an impact, UCS believes that it must be broadly endorsed and widely implemented. The question asked by UCS was, “what action could every health and human service organization take that would achieve a measureable outcome?”

Guided by local conditions, best practice research and opportunity, UCS chose three actions to issue to the health and human service sector. The term is used broadly to include not only nonprofit organizations, but the faith community and local government.

UCS is not calling for sweeping reform or the creation of new programs. While admittedly, that’s what is needed for systemic reform, this call to action is more pragmatic. The focus is intentionally focused on solutions that can be implemented locally, within the context of current programs and activities. Collectively, these actions could improve thousands of lives today and in the future. Successful implementation by the health and human service sector could provide the momentum for other sectors to follow.

CALL TO ACTION: Make every health and human service sector job a good job.

The health and human service sector in Johnson County is a major employer, and as such should strive to pay a living wage and help employees successfully balance work and family life. If every health or human service related job was a “good job,” thousands in our community would be better off than they are now.

What makes a “good job”?

- Good starting wages and an opportunity for wage growth
- Gender equity in pay
- Opportunity for advancement or job growth
- Predictable hours of work - advance notification of schedules, guaranteed minimum hours
- Flexible scheduling to provide better work-life balance for employee
- Positive work environment
- Earned sick days to provide paid leave for employee/family medical needs, health insurance
- Retirement savings plan

What can your organization do?

- Review and adjust salary ranges.
- Examine work schedules.
- Assess policies and practices.
- Assess work environment.

Why UCS selected this action strategy: Despite what some policymakers and pundits might have us believe, a significant share of the poor work. What the data tell us is that most of the working age poor are doing just that – working. For adults ages 16 to 64 in Johnson County with income below the federal poverty level, more than 6 in 10 worked. Of those that didn't work, more than one-third were people with disabilities who self-reported being unable to work. More than half worked part time or part year. More than 1 in 10 poor adults worked full time, year round. This means that policies that boost employment and wages are important tools for reducing poverty.

Current Kansas policy links the state minimum wage to the federal minimum wage, which is \$7.25 an hour. In the absence of federal action to increase the minimum wage, many cities across the country are enacting their own higher wage – however this is not an option in Kansas as a law was passed in 2013 prohibiting counties and cities from passing ordinances that set higher compensation or require paid leave time. Nearly half of all U.S. workers in the lowest 25 percent of wage earners have no paid personal time, sick time, family leave, or vacation, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

In addition to wages paid and paid leave time, other work policies benefit employees and make a job a “good job.” For example, predictable and stable work schedules can help workers plan for and meet personal and economic responsibilities. Many workers are juggling the demands of their jobs while also caring for families, working in second jobs, or going to school. Wages, benefits and practices that maintain an already delicate balance of work, family, education, and more, are good for the employee and good for the employer.

While local communities have little influence over federal or state policies, or employment practices of all employers, the wages, benefits and work conditions for thousands in Johnson County can be improved by making every job in the health and human service sector a “good job.”

CALL TO ACTION: Promote “Talk, Read, Play” with employees, clients, and stakeholders

Intentionally talking, reading and playing with children daily improves brain development, self-esteem and vocabulary — key predictors of success in school. “Talk, Read, Play” is an education campaign that translates neuroscience studies about brain development in young children to a

simple message every parent and caregiver can use to help support a child's early development and later success. This is especially relevant among children born into low-income families who on average hear roughly 30 million fewer words by the age of three and thus have more limited vocabularies than their more affluent peers. The Family Conservancy leads this campaign in the Kansas City metropolitan area.

What can your organization do?

- Make a commitment to support the "Talk, Read, Play" education campaign.
- Distribute fliers to your clients.
- Publish an article in your organization's newsletter.
- Invite The Family Conservancy to make a presentation to your board and/or other community partners.

Why UCS selected this action strategy: Balancing work and family life can be a challenge for parents at any income level. But for low-wage earners the rigors of daily life can take a toll, leaving little time for positive interaction with their young children. Research has found children born into low-income families heard roughly 30 million fewer words by the age of three than their more affluent peers. This word gap leads to an alarming achievement gap – in school and life – between poor children and those born into more well-to-do families.

There are nearly 50,000 children under the age of six living in Johnson County. Nearly 1 in 10 lives in a household with income below 100% of the federal poverty level. What's most troubling is that the number of very young children living in families with income below 50% of the federal poverty level increased 138% between 2000 and 2013, compared to an overall 17% increase for the age group. This means more of this county's youngest residents are facing significant barriers to success at the most crucial point in their neurological development.

Quality early learning programs can mitigate the factors that place children at risk of poor outcomes. Yet in Johnson County, only 20 Head Start slots are available for every 100 children age 3 and 4 living in households with income below 100% of poverty. For early head start, fewer than 4 slots are available for every 100 poor children ages 0-3.

While local communities have little influence over the availability of quality early learning for all children, this community can help close the gap between rich and poor children by helping close the work gap. Studies show that talking, reading and playing with a child every day is proven to increase that child's vocabulary and school success. Talk, Read, Play is a unique educational program designed to support a child's early development. Locally, The Family Conservancy is promoting this message.

CALL TO ACTION: Increase access to safety net supports for adults without children and transitional age youth.

The public and private safety net offers a range of services and supports for families with children. While these supports are typically not sufficient to meet all needs, they do help many families in crisis. However, fewer safety net supports are available for individuals without children, particularly youth transitioning to adulthood and working-age adults. Individuals who do not live with family members account for more than two of five Johnson County residents with income below the federal poverty level. Assuring assistance to the underserved populations would improve their long-term stability and reduce more costly interventions in the future.

What can your organization do?

- Examine your eligibility guidelines to determine how you might expand services to single young adults and working age adults, or families without children.
- Participate in future UCS-led discussion about adult-only households.
- Connect to efforts supporting youth aging out of the foster care system.

Why UCS chose this action strategy: While few families with children are eligible for public safety net programs, the options are even more limited for adults who are under age 65 and without children under age 18 in the home. The Kansas General Assistance program, which was time limited cash aid for childless adults has been scaled back under the current state administration. And, the program will be completely eliminated in July 2015, as a provision of the Hope Act (HB2258). A combination of federal and state actions will result in new restrictions on SNAP eligibility for childless adults. There is now a three month time limit during any 36-month period unless the individual is working or participating in a qualifying work activity at least 20 hours a week.

This lack of safety net supports for childless adults is a concern. County-level poverty data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows nearly half of the poor in Johnson County are child-less adults. Of that group, nearly 9 in 10 are “unrelated individuals.” Unrelated individuals is a term used by the Census Bureau to define people that live alone or with others who are not family members.

Those under age 24 account for 30% of unrelated individuals – those who could be considered in a life-transition period. Nearly 60% are between age 25 and 64. Childless adults under age 65 total more than 15,000 of the county’s 36,000 poor, yet limited public or private help is available to them.

While local communities have little influence over the federal and state policies that shape and fund the public safety, communities do offer a significant amount of supplemental support. A stronger community safety net can be created by offering a range of assistance to not only families with children, but to transition age youth and childless adults.