



## Safety Net Messages

**What is the safety net?** The safety net encompasses programs and policies designed to care for and protect the vulnerable in our community, and provides pathways and opportunities for the disadvantaged to help them become contributing members of society.

- **The well-being of our neighbors is vital to our own well-being.** We are all members of a community so when those most vulnerable are not cared for, we are all affected. We must work together to ensure the long-term survival of the safety net in order to guarantee a strong community in the future. This means supporting elected officials who value the safety net, as well as doing our part as individuals and through the organizations and faith-community where we participate.
- **The safety net benefits all of us.** The safety net is not some abstract concept discussed only within the confines of Washington or Topeka. And because it exists for everyone's benefit, funding it should not be a partisan issue. Programs like early childhood development, school nutrition, elder care, and unemployment all fall under the definition of the safety net and many of us and our family, friends, neighbors are one crisis away from needing the safety net to catch us.
- **Investing in the safety net now prevents higher costs later.** We've all heard the old maxim that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. In this case, the data proves it. Spending a relatively small amount on services like job training, school nutrition, and mental health services now prevents spending exponentially more on health care and incarceration further down the road.
- **Safety net programs give children an equal opportunity for success.** Children lack the public voice to speak for themselves, so it is our responsibility to speak up for them. The safety net provides for early learning, childhood development, and school nutrition programs that are vital to counter the effects of poverty. With these and other key safety net programs in place, we can give all kids an equal opportunity for success from pre-K through college.
- **Investments in the safety net result in a healthier, better educated, and highly-skilled workforce.** A community's workforce provides the foundation for a competitive economy and an attractive quality of life.
  - Giving children basic supports for healthy development results in better health and education outcomes.
  - Help from the safety net for school age children and youth improves the likelihood that they will be successful in school; as a result more young people are better able to contribute to the workforce.
  - Safety net programs can help when individuals face barriers to employment, such as health issues, child care needs, or concern for personal safety.
- **The safety net doesn't just help the poor.** People's perception of the safety net is often characterized by images that seem so distant from our own lives. But the reality is that programs under this umbrella help thousands in our own community. What about the frail senior who can no longer live alone, the recently unemployed middle class parent that needs to provide for his or her family, or the young child that has been abused? The safety net affects all of us and those we know, so we must stand together to protect it.

- **Poverty is a reality even in an affluent community like Johnson County.** Poverty has become a concern that touches us and those we know. The social safety net is not an abstraction; it provides assistance to nearly everyone in our community, some of whom may be your relatives, neighbors, co-workers, and friends. In Johnson County, 36,000 residents live in poverty, making the number of poor the third highest in the state. A family of three earning less than \$19,000 a year is considered poor.

### **How to Use the Messages Effectively**

By design, the new messages give safety net advocates an easy way to incorporate the importance of the safety net into regular communications with stakeholders.

“It’s not enough to promote the good work of a single organization or program – advocates need to speak to the importance of the entire safety net,” said Karen Wulfkuhle, UCS executive director. “We hope that people will include the messages in their organization’s overall communication strategy including presentations, press releases, text messages, social media posts, and websites. “We also encourage organizations when speaking to community groups and businesses about program offerings, to use the messages to help portray a given program’s role within the safety net and its overall value.”

The messages can also help foster relationships with legislators by providing opportunities to work the importance of the safety net into the conversation. It’s also a good idea to ask candidates for office about their stand on committing public resources to support the safety net. “Elected officials and candidates need to know more than just what you do,” Wulfkuhle said. “They need to know how the public safety net plays a role in improving people’s lives and strengthening the community.”