



Framework for  
**Reducing Poverty and  
Creating Opportunity**

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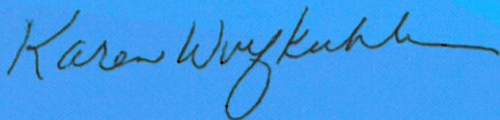
**Dear Friend,**

Since 1967, United Community Services (UCS) has worked to keep the community focused on important human service needs that might otherwise be ignored until they reach crisis levels. Over the past several years, much of our work has centered on understanding and creating strategies and partnerships to address Johnson County's increasing poverty levels. Recent UCS Human Service Summits have explored how other communities experiencing similar trends have responded. Starting in 2015, we are putting what we've learned into action.

To guide our thinking about possible solutions, UCS staff spent the better part of a year conducting in-depth research. The culmination of that work was presented at the 2015 Human Service Summit with the unveiling of a Framework for Reducing Poverty and Creating Opportunity. As part of this process, we presented three complementary action strategies that we hope the health and human service sector will embrace to achieve our shared goals and set an example that others in the community can follow.

UCS is working in partnership with Johnson County government. Please join us as we strive to make a collective impact to reduce poverty and create opportunity. A detailed summary of the framework and the associated strategies are outlined on the following pages.

*Sincerely,*

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Karen Wulfkuhle". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

**Karen Wulfkuhle**

Executive Director

United Community Services of Johnson County

# About the Framework

Designed to provide a roadmap for our collective efforts, the Framework for Reducing Poverty and Creating Opportunity outlines the key components needed in any strategic approach to successfully reduce poverty in Johnson County. This framework emerged from research studied and conducted by UCS.

Analysis of local and national data available through the U.S. Census Bureau laid the foundation. In addition, UCS staff studied the work of researchers at universities and national think tanks (e.g., Brookings Institution, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, and the Center for Law and Social Policies) who have examined the evidence for what works in reducing poverty. Perhaps most important, we listened to what stakeholders had to say about poverty in our own community.

*The framework that emerged from these efforts has three areas of focus:*

1. Household-sustaining jobs that contribute to and meet the needs of the local economy and enable employees to regularly meet their household needs and maintain a healthy work-life balance.
2. Opportunities for healthy development and learning for all ages – from infancy when brain development is at its greatest into adulthood when skills and knowledge are critical to employment and advancement opportunities.
3. A strong safety net to meet and sustain basic needs of individuals and families in crisis or on the edge of poverty.

For each area of focus, UCS chose one action to issue to the health and human service sector. These three actions can improve lives today and build a stronger foundation for the future. The actions are outlined in *About the Action the Strategies*.

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## Why People Seek Assistance

To learn more about why county residents seek assistance from a human service provider, five organizations tracked all clients' reason for service during the first week of May, 2015. The data was collected using the Mid America Assistance Coalition online information system. Overall people reported asking for assistance or services due to one of the following five reasons:

1. Unemployment or working underemployed
2. A family member had a significant medical issue or long term disability
3. The household had been significantly disrupted due to death, divorce, or the loss of a wage earner
4. Loss of eligibility for safety net assistance (such as SNAP or TANF)
5. Unable to meet basic needs with their limited or fixed income.

*NOTE: The first two reasons accounted for 60 percent of the requests.*

## A Snapshot of Poverty in Johnson County

Nearly 36,000 Johnson County residents live below the federal poverty level, a 6.6 percent poverty rate. Thousands more live in a state of near poverty, earning just enough to avoid the technical definition of poverty but far below the cost of living. In total, 98,000 Johnson County residents are poor or near poor. Following are a few of the facts about the county's poor residents:

*The majority are white and U.S. citizens, according to data from the U.S. Census Bureau (American Community Survey, 2009-2013).*

*Nearly one in three are under the age of 18, while almost half of the poor population are between the ages of 25 and 64.*

*The majority of working-age adults worked at least part time in 2013, while 10 percent worked full time.*

It's important to note that temporary or part-time work opportunities often come with unpredictable schedules and most likely do not offer benefits such as health insurance and sick leave. This means that, even though the poor are working, they do not have enough income to meet basic needs such as safe housing, reliable transportation, affordable health care, nutritious food and quality child care.

# About the Action Strategies

Although understanding poverty and advocating for policy changes to reduce it and create opportunity are vital, grassroots approaches also can be effective in making positive changes. With this in mind, UCS selected three actions that could be embraced by the health and human service sector (e.g., nonprofit organizations, faith community and local government). By adopting these strategies, health and human service organizations will provide the momentum for other sectors to follow.

Each of the strategies was guided by the local conditions, best practice research and opportunity as outlined in the About the Framework section. UCS also sought to ensure that the local actions could to be broadly endorsed and widely implemented by asking the question, "What action could every health and human service organization take that would achieve a measurable outcome?" The resulting strategies follow.

## **ACTION 1: Make every health and human service sector job a good job.**

As a major employer in Johnson County, the health and human service sector should strive to pay a living wage and help employees successfully balance work and family. If every job in this sector was a "good job," thousands in our community would be better off than they are now.

Research indicates that a significant number of the poor are employed but earn low wages, have unpredictable schedules and lack benefits including paid sick time, family leave or vacation. Many must juggle the demands of work while caring for families, working second jobs or going to school.

Wages, benefits and practices that enable a balance are good for the employee, employer and the community at large. Research has shown that employees who enjoy a healthy work-life balance are more productive, motivated and stay longer in their jobs. In addition, they have less absenteeism and lower health care costs.

### **Characteristics of a "good job" include:**

- 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 YOUR ORGANIZATION CAN DO**

### **EVALUATE SALARY RANGES**

Research market data to ensure that you are paying a competitive wage to employees. Regularly examine the cost of living to determine if the basic needs of your employees can be met.

### **ASSESS LEAVE POLICIES**

Consider paid leave options such sick leave, parental leave, or care leave. Investigate opportunities to offer leave for emergency situations, public service commitments, and studying for a degree or certification.

### **TALK TO EMPLOYEES**

Ask employees what kinds of work arrangements and benefits they prefer. A survey or focus group could help determine the best policies to pursue.

### **EXAMINE WORK SCHEDULES**

Assess the feasibility of flex-time, or working from home, and job sharing.

### **REVIEW PERSONNEL POLICY**

Review organizational policies to ensure that the organization is maximizing equity, access, and opportunity for all employees.

## **ACTION 2: Promote “Talk, Read, Play” with employees, clients, and stakeholders.**

Studies show that talking, reading and playing with a child every day increases the child’s vocabulary and school success. By promoting the “Talk, Read, Play” campaign, the health and human service sector will create opportunities for children and their families.

Nearly one young child out of every 10 in Johnson County lives in poverty. Yet only 20 Head Start slots are available for every 100 poor children age three and four. For Early Head Start, fewer than four slots are available for every 100 poor children ages zero to three. Early, high-quality education builds a strong foundation that enables children to enter school ready to learn, which positively impacts future education, employment and health outcomes. Without learning opportunities, these children are more likely to experience poverty as adults.

Research also shows that children born into low-income families hear roughly 30 million fewer words by the age of three than their more affluent peers. This is due in large part to the time limitations of parents who are working to try and make ends meet. This word gap leads to an alarming disparity in achievement – in school and life – between poor children and those born into higher-income families.

Significant changes in policy and funding are needed to guarantee access to quality, affordable early education for all children. However, the “Talk, Read, Play” education campaign translates neuroscience studies about brain development in young children into a simple message parents and caregivers can use to support a child’s early development and later success. The Family Conservancy, a nonprofit agency, leads this campaign in the Kansas City metropolitan area. The Family Conservancy can be reached at 913.642.4300 or [thefamilyconservancy.org](http://thefamilyconservancy.org).

### **WHAT YOUR ORGANIZATION CAN DO**

PROMOTE INTERNALLY	Share the “Talk, Read, Play” message within the organization through newsletters and fliers. Invite The Family Conservancy to make a presentation to staff and/or board.
TALK WITH CLIENTS	Talk with clients about “Talk, Read, Play” when you are meeting with them. Catalog all “touchpoints” to ensure maximum reach.
USE SOCIAL MEDIA	Use social media to spread the “Talk, Read, Play” message.
UTILIZE EXISTING RESOURCES	Partner with organizations that are already focused on early learning and development (such as the Johnson County Public Library). Attend a screening of <i>The Raising of America</i> to start the conversation.
COLLECT CHILDREN’S BOOKS	Make books available in your waiting rooms, provide books to children or organize a book drive.

## **ACTION 3: Increase access to safety net supports for adults without children and transitional age youth.**

Adults without dependent children are a significant portion of our population, yet those who live in poverty are often not eligible for programs and services to assist them. A stronger safety net can be created within the health and human service sector by offering a range of assistance to transitional age youth and households without children.

Nearly half of the poor in Johnson County are adults without children in the household, according the U.S. Census Bureau. A third of them are under age 24, a transitional phase in life where financial stability is critical to ensuring future success. Meanwhile, state and federal assistance programs have limited resources available to serve this population, primarily due to eligibility restrictions. The safety net is therefore largely inaccessible to childless adults and transitional age youth.

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These residents are the “hidden poor.” They are not likely to seek assistance, especially early in their crisis. Nonetheless, they may need services such as nutrition and food access, financial literacy/education along with financial assistance, rapid re-housing and integrated community health services. Providing assistance to this group would improve their long-term stability and reduce future, more costly interventions.

## WHAT YOUR ORGANIZATION CAN DO

EXAMINE GUIDELINES	Look at your eligibility guidelines to determine how you might expand services to single young adults and working age adults, or families without children.
REQUEST FUNDING SUPPORT	Ask funders to expand eligibility to childless adults. Amend grant proposals to include this population.
GATHER DATA	Track the demographic and household information of those who do not qualify for services. Use the Arizona Self-Sufficiency Matrix to evaluate the needs of your clients.
LEARN MORE	Participate in future UCS-led discussion about adult-only households. Learn how the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act might provide new options for serving this population.
PARTNER WITH OTHERS	Connect to efforts supporting youth aging out of the foster care system and adults leaving incarceration.

## About UCS (UCSJoCo.org)

United Community Services of Johnson County (UCS), a nonprofit 501c3 agency, provides data analysis, leads collaborative planning and mobilizes resources to enhance the availability and delivery of health and human services. Founded in 1967, UCS’s work is primarily in Johnson County, Kansas. Human service planning support is provided to United Way of Greater Kansas City for the metropolitan area.

