



United Community Services
of Johnson County

CommunityREPORT

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UCS Releases *Framework for Reducing Poverty and Creating Opportunity* at 2015 Summit

Report outlines key components needed in any strategic approach to reduce poverty in Johnson County

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Over the past several years, much of UCS' work has centered on understanding and creating strategies and partnerships to address Johnson County's increasing poverty levels. This conversation started at the 2011 UCS Human Service Summit and each year since the annual event has focused on learning what works to reduce poverty. This year, putting this information into action was the theme of the Summit.

To guide our thinking about possible solutions to lower poverty and creating opportunity, 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, three complementary action strategies were presented as a roadmap for the area's health and human service sector to follow.

"If our own sector embraces these strategies it will set an example that others in the community can follow," said Karen Wulfkuhle, UCS executive director. "By 'walking the talk' hopefully our shared goals will gain momentum and really start to make a collective impact to reduce poverty and create opportunity in Johnson County."



United Way of
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About the Framework

The **Framework for Reducing Poverty and Creating Opportunity** emerged from research studied and conducted by UCS. Analysis of local and national data available through the U.S. Census Bureau laid the foundation. UCS staff also studied the work of researchers at universities and national think tanks who have examined the evidence for what works in reducing poverty. UCS representatives also interviewed local stakeholders about poverty in our own community.

These efforts were the basis of the framework, which has the following 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 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 (e.g., nonprofit organizations, faith community and local government) which are outlined in *Strategies for Local Organizations to Put into Action*.

Why People Seek Assistance

To learn more about why Johnson 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, but 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.*

Strategies for Local Organizations to Put into Action

Understanding poverty and advocating for policy changes to reduce it and create opportunity are vital. Even so, grassroots approaches also can be effective in making positive changes, which is what the strategic actions are designed to do.

“We needed to ensure that the actions we recommended could be broadly endorsed and widely implemented,” said UCS Community Planning Director Valorie Carson. “So we asked the question, ‘What action could every health and human service organization take that would achieve a measurable outcome and stand as an example to the rest of the community?’”

With this in mind, UCS asked members of local organizations to adopt the following three actions internally. Each action is associated with one of the three areas of focus presented in the Framework.

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 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. Many must juggle the demands of work while caring for families, working second jobs or going to school. 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. Wages, benefits and practices that enable a balance are not only good for the employee, but the employer and the community at large, too.



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 from birth to three years old. Early, high-quality education builds a strong foundation that enables children to enter school ready to learn – positively impacting 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 age 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.

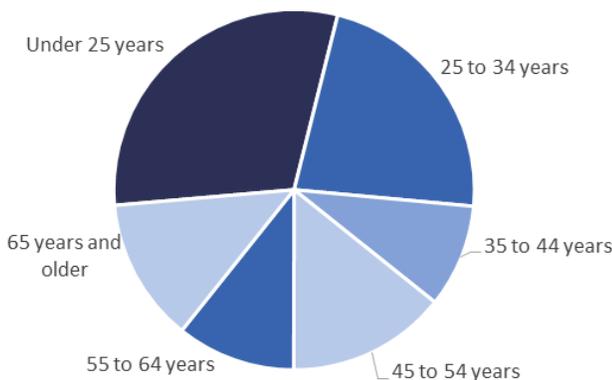
Significant changes in policy and funding are needed to guarantee access to quality, affordable early education for all children. However, the “Talk, Read, Play” education campaign translates neuroscience studies about brain development in young children into a simple message parents and caregivers can use to support a child’s early development and later success.



www.TheFamilyConservancy.org

The Family Conservancy, a nonprofit agency, leads “Talk, Read, Play” campaign in the Kansas City metropolitan area.

Poverty and Unrelated Individuals by Age



Total = 15,000 people

Source: American Community Survey, 5-year estimate 2009-2013

As the “hidden poor,” these residents are unlikely to seek assistance, especially early in their crisis. Yet they still may need services such as adequate food, 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.

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

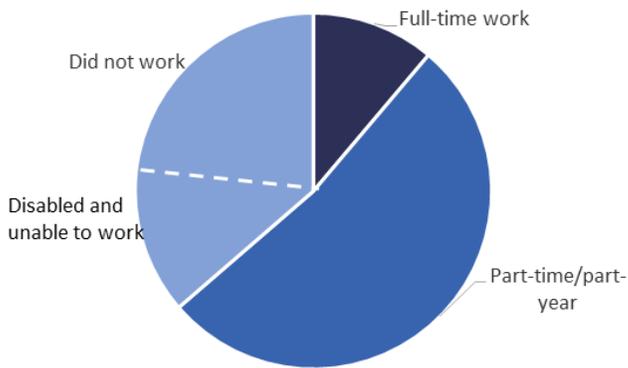
Nearly half of the poor in Johnson County are adults without children in the household, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. A third of them are under age 24, a transitional phase in life where financial stability is critical to ensuring future success. Even though adults without dependent children are a significant portion of our population, they are often ineligible for programs and services to assist them.

State and federal assistance programs have limited resources available to serve transitional age youth and households without children, primarily due to increasing eligibility restrictions rendering the safety net largely inaccessible to this population. A stronger safety net can be created by offering a range of community-based assistance to transitional age youth and households without children.

How Can You Help?

To find out more about how you or your organization can add to the collective impact on reducing poverty and creating opportunity, visit ucsjoco.org.

Poverty and Employment in Past 12 Months



Total = 22,000 people below poverty between ages 16 and 64
 Source: American Community Survey, 5-year estimate 2009-2013

Working Doesn't Always Prevent Poverty

Nearly 22,000 working-age adults (ages 16-64) in Johnson County live below the federal poverty level – \$11,770 for an individual or \$20,090 for a family of three. According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau, most poor adults work. Following are a few of the facts about poor adults in Johnson County:

- Greater than six in 10 of adults ages 16 to 64 in Johnson County with income below the federal poverty level worked.
- More than one in 10 poor adults worked full-time, year-round yet their full-time wages still kept them below the federal poverty level.
- More than half worked part-time or part-year.
- Of the 36 percent that didn't work, more than one-third were people with disabilities who self-reported being unable to work.

It's important to remember 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.

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