UNITED WAY
Midlands

2026-2029

# COMMUNITY IMPACT PLAN

# INTRODUCTION
## & CORE PRINCIPLES

**"As we look at the next few years, we know the funding landscape of the non-profit sector will continue to change. Non-profits must prepare and react to maintain their ability to deliver robust services."**

At United Way of the Midlands our goal is to create generational cycles of success and opportunities for everyone to thrive. We serve six counties in the central Midlands of South Carolina addressing basic needs and opportunities to build resiliency. Our 2026-2029 Impact Plan is intended to be a roadmap for our direct initiatives, programs we coordinate with partners, and investments into programs to create lasting change.

The Plan is grounded in what we learned from the 2021 and 2025 Community Assessments that merged community voice with data to review our most pressing community needs that United Way has an opportunity to impact change. Our Midlands non-profit community does important, critical work each day.

Many significant changes and trends have affected the nonprofit sector this decade, and as we look at the next few years, we know the funding landscape of the non-profit sector will continue to change. Non-profits must prepare and react to maintain their ability to deliver robust services.

**Core Principles of Our Work**

1. Encourage collaboration and coordination of services among community non-profits to promote maximum efficiency of service delivery.
2. Identify and improve operating efficiencies of local non-profit partners.
3. Support organizations with robust outcomes and healthy, diversified funding sources.
4. Use a data- and community voice-informed approach to prioritizing community issues.
5. Support organizations that have engaged leadership and strong plans for maintaining financial health.
6. Directly operate and coordinate programs when there is a compelling gap or community need that aligns with our goals for community change.
7. Support non-profits to be prepared, resilient, and able to respond to emerging community needs, such as natural disasters or community significant events.

**Background**

The Midlands area of South Carolina is a vibrant and dynamic region known for its diverse opportunities in education, career growth, and community involvement. At the heart of the area is Columbia, a thriving hub for young professionals, ranked as the #4 U.S. city for millennial movers. The Midlands is home to five 4-year colleges, one of the state's largest technical schools, and a nationally renowned research university with law and medical schools, creating an academic community of over 50,000 students each year. Notably, the region also hosts four Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Benedict College, Allen University, Claflin University, and South Carolina State, which educate over 8,000 undergraduates annually.

The area's economy is bolstered by Fort Jackson, the nation's largest military basic training center, contributing to a strong military presence and a supportive community for veterans. Columbia also offers a favorable business climate, with South Carolina ranked #1 in the U.S. for corporate incentive programs. The South Carolina Women's Business Center, backed by Google and the S.C. Department of Commerce, empowers female entrepreneurs, further enhancing the economic landscape.

Despite its growth and vibrancy, the Midlands faces significant challenges. Housing affordability is a pressing issue. Educational disparities also persist, with many students falling behind in reading proficiency by third grade, a key predictor of future academic success. Workforce development is another concern, particularly for young men, as college enrollment rates decline.

United Way of the Midlands and community partners are actively addressing these challenges through our work to build strong foundations of support for individuals and families with children to ensure everyone can thrive. The region's potential is vast, and with community support, the Midlands can continue to grow and thrive. The focus of our work is cradle to career by creating stronger foundation for families with children, opportunities for youth and teens to develop and grow, improve our stock of affordable housing, and improve health and well-being.

**Community Data**

Systemic, generational poverty is a prevalent issue in South Carolina. The state ranks 38th in child well-being with 19% of children living in poverty (Kids Count 2025). Here in the Midlands, county childhood poverty rates range from 14% to 42%. The barriers faced by families in our community include a lack of affordable housing, limited access to living-wage jobs, inadequate transportation, and insufficient health coverage. According to the 2020 SC Self-Sufficiency Standard, a single parent with two children must earn $24.49/hour to meet basic needs – over three times the amount of the current minimum wage.

Furthermore, South Carolina's eviction rate is nearly triple the national average (23% vs. 8% according to an Eviction Lab at Princeton University study) with more than 400 evictions daily, making homelessness and housing instability a concern for families. During the 2023-24 school year, 2,807 Midlands students were identified as homeless using McKinney-Vento standards, though estimates suggest the actual number exceeds 10,000 due to underreporting (2025 SC State of Homelessness Report).

Affordable housing remains scarce in our community, with 90% of lower-income households spending more than 30% of their income on housing and over half of renters in five of six Midlands counties considered housing cost burdened. The region faces a shortage of approximately 42,000 affordable units, while renting costs for a one-bedroom apartment in Richland County have risen by 48% from 2019 to 2025 (Census ACS Survey Data).

Frequent moves and unstable housing create toxic stress that disrupts learning and development among children. This is further exacerbated by the limited access to quality childcare and early education. All our service counties contain areas defined as childcare deserts, where supply falls far short of demand. In Calhoun County, 35% of census tracts qualify as deserts; in Fairfield, 43%.

Without early learning opportunities, many children start school behind in reading and math (SC First Steps). Only 35–54% of Midlands students meet kindergarten readiness standards, and statewide only 27% of children who do not participate in a full-day 4K program demonstrate readiness (SC First Steps). These early education gaps often persist through elementary school.

Reading at grade level by third grade is a key

Spearheaded by the Mental Illness Recovery Center, Inc. (MIRCI) in collaboration with many other partners – including a $200,000 gift from United Way of the Midlands, made possible by philanthropist MacKenzie Scott – Millwood Place is a new transitional living home for young women experiencing homelessness in Columbia.

predictor of long-term success, such as graduating high school and college and career readiness. Students not reading proficiently by this point are four times more likely to drop out of high school. In Midlands school districts, between 28% and 81% of second graders are not on track to meet this indicator in English Language Arts (2022 SC School Report Cards). Under South Carolina's Read to Succeed law, third graders who fail summer reading programs may be retained, reinforcing the urgency of early literacy intervention.

Long-term educational outcomes are closely tied to earning potential. People with bachelor's degrees earn about $68,000 annually, 70% more than those without a degree (Brookings Institute). Yet, many South Carolina students leave high school unprepared for postsecondary success: only 25% meet college readiness benchmarks in science and 33% in reading. At the same time, 60% of jobs in the state now require a degree or certification, particularly in STEM fields that are growing twice as fast as others.

Despite this need, college enrollment has declined, particularly among men, whose enrollment dropped 3.7% from 2011 to 2020, reducing pathways to higher earnings and stability (SC Commission on Higher Education).

Housing instability also affects physical and mental health. Substandard housing conditions, such as the presence of mold or overcrowding, contribute to chronic conditions and poor health outcomes among children and families.

Additionally, national data show children who move frequently are more likely to experience chronic illness and inconsistent healthcare coverage (Maternal and Child Health Journal). Research further indicates that people moving from high- to low-poverty neighborhoods before age 13 are more likely to attend college, have higher incomes, and live in stable communities as adults (American Economic Review).

Health disparities compound these challenges. Sixty percent of South Carolina adults have been diagnosed with one or more chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension, or heart disease, and many of these conditions disproportionately affect low-income and Black communities (SC Department of Health). One-third of adults have hypertension, including 45% of Black adults and 41% of those earning under $15,000 annually. Chronic diseases not only limit quality of life but also increase vulnerability to other health challenges, including poor oral and vision health.

# VISION FOR COMMUNITY IMPACT

## HOW WE WILL WORK

1. **Grantmaking support to programs that align with our community outcome measures.**
2. **Coordinating initiatives with community partners: Whole Family and homeless systems.**
3. **Direct initiatives: Midlands Reading Consortium and Young Men United.**

## GRANTMAKING

Competitive grants to Impact Partner agencies in good standing are available annually. The cycle typically opens in late January for grants commencing July 1st with the start of the next fiscal year. Grants must align with UWM's catalog of outcomes and indicators (Appendix A) to make progress towards our community goals.

### FOCUS AREAS

**Youth Opportunity**

1. Early childhood education including parental engagement, childcare, and kindergarten readiness.
2. Literacy development including programs that help children meet academic standards; preferably reading on grade level by third grade.
3. College and career readiness including youth development programs that support achieving high school graduation and enrollment into post-secondary education.

**Healthy Community**

1. Healthcare access including medical, dental, and vision care.
2. Food security including food pantries and delivered meal programs that include services to enroll participants in support programs (such as SNAP).
3. Mental health including supportive housing, engagement, and care for people living with serious and persistent mental illness.

**Financial Security**

1. Homelessness including sheltering, transitional and supportive housing programs, support services, and homeless systems.
2. Housing including investments in innovative affordable housing solutions with a primary focus on the creation and preservation of rental units. Rental assistance when deployed within the Whole Family approach.
3. Career development including programs that help upskill, assist with job placement, and support programs that help parents maintain employment.

**Community Resiliency**

1. Support 211 resource and referral assistance.
2. Support volunteer deployment and partner agency engagement during periods of immediate response, including work with agencies that serve unsheltered people.
3. Support disaster preparedness and development of business continuity plans for non-profits.
4. Support long-term recovery with a focus on home repair for low-income, low-resource homeowners.

## COORDINATING INITIATIVES WITH

# COMMUNITY PARTNERS

**UWM coordinates strategies to improve systems in the Midlands. In this role, UWM serves as the backbone agency working with community partners rather than directly implementing programs.**

### Whole Family Strategy

Four years ago, UWM began a new path to addressing family stability. We adopted a Whole Family Strategy to create generational cycles of success and improve opportunities for long-term economic self-sufficiency. When deploying support for families facing a housing or financial crisis, this means working with the adults in the household to increase income through workforce development opportunities while also providing educational services to the children.

Our approach is also focused on longer-term solutions beyond typical short-term intervention with families experiencing a housing crisis and works to address the underlying root cause of their instability.  This work is implemented by Impact Partners coordinated by UWM.

**Key Outcomes measured (among the families served):**

1. Improving household income.
2. Increasing housing stability.
3. Reducing disruptive school moves during the school year.

**Our approach is also focused on longer-term solutions beyond typical short-term intervention with families experiencing a housing crisis and works to address the underlying root cause of their instability.**

### Homeless Systems

UWM serves as the administrative lead for the local homeless Continuum of Care (CoC). While leadership of the CoC is housed at a separate non-profit, UWM's role is to ensure federal compliance, coordinate partners, operate the community's homeless data system, and measure community success in making homelessness brief and rare.

**Key Outcomes measured (across the community):**

1. Reducing length of time homeless.
2. Improving exits to permanent housing.
3. Reducing returns to homelessness.
4. System participation of local providers.

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# DIRECT INITIATIVES

**UWM operates direct initiatives to fill specific community needs. To implement programs, we partner with community organizations ranging from Impact Partners, school districts, institutions of higher education, local businesses, faith-based organizations, and more.**

## Midlands Reading Consortium

For over 20 years, UWM has focused on improving and supporting education in our community. Midlands Reading Consortium (MRC) began in 2007 as a small pilot program in two elementary schools to help increase the number of children reading at grade level by the start of fourth grade.

In 2022, MRC expanded its focus to science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). MRC's STEM component follows the STEM Learning Ecosystem approach to preparing our youth for the global economy through STEM afterschool engagements and programming while developing growth and computational thinking mindsets.

MRC offers one-on-one reading sessions, guest reading opportunities, partner school family engagement event support, STEM Girls, STEM summer camp activities, and book donations. MRC operates in 17 schools across 8 school districts to serve over 5,000 students annually (across all interventions).

**Key Outcomes measured (among children served):**

1. Improved reading scores from standardized tests
2. Increased engagement in reading and learning
3. Increased knowledge of STEM concepts
4. Increased STEM Identity/Confidence

## Young Men United

Young Men United (YMU) is an evidence-informed initiative designed to create pathways for young men to reach their academic and career goals by bringing wrap-around supports to college-capable high school students starting in the tenth or eleventh grade.

YMU guides participants through high school graduation, into and through their chosen post-secondary pathway, and supports their transition from their post-secondary pathway to the workforce.

Program components include professional development workshops, mentorship, paid internships and job shadowing experiences, college and workplace tours, high school and college navigation, and wraparound emergency family supports.

**Key Outcomes measured (among young men assisted):**

1. High school graduation rates.
2. Enrollment in an institution of higher education or starting a career within six months of high school graduation.
3. Percentage of students who return to their institution of higher education each academic year.


## CLOSING

We are deeply grateful to our donors, volunteers, community partners, and advocates who make this work possible. Together, we share a common vision: a stronger, more equitable Midlands where every individual and family has the opportunity to thrive.

As we look toward 2026–2029, United Way of the Midlands is committed to leading with collaboration, innovation, and accountability. We will continue to listen to our community, use data to guide our investments, and strengthen the non-profit sector to ensure services are coordinated, efficient, and responsive to emerging needs.

Our collective efforts will help create pathways for families to achieve stability, empower youth to reach their full potential, and build communities that are healthy, resilient, and prepared for the future. This plan is not simply a roadmap–it is an invitation for everyone in the Midlands to join us in creating generational cycles of success and opportunity for all.

Together, we can build a future where every person has the resources, support, and opportunity to live a life of dignity, stability, and promise.

*For more information, please visit our website at uway.org or contact Jennifer Moore, Vice President of Community Impact, at jmoore@uway.org.*

# APPENDIX A

| Pillar | Outcome | Measures/Indicators |
|---|---|---|
| Youth Opportunity | Early learners achieve developmental milestones through caregiver and/or teacher engagement. | Children demonstrate kindergarten readiness using a reliable measure. |
| | | Children demonstrate growth in early literacy, language, and/or numeracy skills using a reliable measure. |
| | | Children demonstrate skills necessary for success in a classroom setting (i.e. paying attention, following directions, curiosity, problem-solving, etc.). |
| | Youth achieve growth toward academic success. | Elementary school students demonstrate improvement in reading level using a reliable measure. |
| | | Students demonstrate improvement in one or more academic areas using a reliable measure. |
| | | Students are assessed and demonstrate improvement in skills necessary for educational success (i.e. appropriate classroom behavior, curiosity, problem-solving ability, attendance, etc.) |
| | Youth graduate high school prepared for college or career success. | Students meet benchmarks for college/career readiness using a reliable measure. |
| | | Students apply to/enroll in a chosen post-secondary education program. |
| | | Students complete an internship or job shadow. |
| Healthy Community | Low-income and/or uninsured community members have access to quality, affordable healthcare (medical, dental, or vision). | Patients maintain compliance with treatment plans during the funding cycle. |
| | | Patients demonstrate improved health outcomes during the funding cycle (i.e. blood sugar, blood pressure, cholesterol, etc.) |
| | | Patients follow through on health referrals. |
| | Community members have secure access to food. | Individuals enroll in food assistance as a result of participating in the program (i.e. SNAP, TANF, WIC) |
| | | Individuals receive meals through a meal delivery program. |
| | | Individuals receive food from site-based or mobile food pantries. |
| | Community members with significant and persistent mental illness have access to quality, affordable mental healthcare. | Individuals with persistent mental illness receive supportive housing during the funding cycle (i.e. transitional or permanent). |
| | | Individuals with persistent mental illness maintain compliance with treatment plans. |
| | | Individuals enroll in and/or complete a prevention or recovery program. |
| Financial Security | Community members who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness have access housing and support services. | Individuals who are provided shelter exit to a positive situation rather than returning to homelessness. |
| | | Individuals are placed in transitional or permanent housing during the funding cycle. |
| | Access to affordable rental housing is created, preserved, or maintained through innovative solutions. | Individuals receive rental/utilities assistance plus case management services to maintain housing stability. |
| | | Individuals are able to remain stable in housing due to repairs made to the home. |
| | | New affordable housing units are created during the funding cycle. |
| | Community members improve their income through workforce development. | Individuals complete a job training program during the funding cycle. |
| | | Individuals gain or reactivate a professional license or certificate during the funding cycle. |
| | | Individuals gain new employment as a result of job search assistance. |
| | | Parents/guardians increase work hours/opportunity through access to childcare. |

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