

United
Way



United Way
of the Midlands



THRIVING

The 2021 Community Assessment



This Community Assessment was completed by a dedicated group of professionals, volunteers and local leaders. Across eight months, this report to the community was created by listening to a broad, diverse group of individuals throughout the Midlands.

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**United Way
of the Midlands**

LETTER TO THE COMMUNITY

To our Midlands community,

We are pleased to share the United Way of the Midlands 2021 Community Assessment—our first such assessment in more than 10 years. Over the past eight months, through the most difficult time in many of our lives, we worked to listen to hundreds of voices from across our six counties, review data, and find ways we can work together to improve community well-being.

Earlier this year, our Board of Directors adopted a new strategic plan to guide our work for the next three years. This plan called for a more data-driven approach in our community investments and fundraising. But we knew that data alone wasn't enough. We wanted our staff and volunteers to go out into the community to see and hear firsthand how everyone is doing. We wanted to ensure we heard voices from all six counties, from people of all walks of life, and from a range of ages, ethnicities and socioeconomic status. We launched the Community Assessment, blending data with community conversations to understand our most pressing needs and how we can collectively pull together toward common goals. This assessment was completed during the pandemic. You will feel the stress that uncertainty has created in us all, but you will also hear the hope and aspirations that people have for their communities. We learned so much from this process, and found the experience so valuable, that we plan to conduct assessments regularly.

In the coming months, we will release our community investment plan for the next few years in response to this Community Assessment. We hope you will support our work as an advocate, volunteer and donor, and we also hope each of you will find a personal call to action to (re)connect, engage, and build toward a community where we all can thrive.

A community where no one gets left behind. A community where each of our neighbors has a strong start, a good education, access to health care and a safe place to call home.

Thank you for lending your voice, your attention and for Living United.



SARA FAWCETT
PRESIDENT & CEO



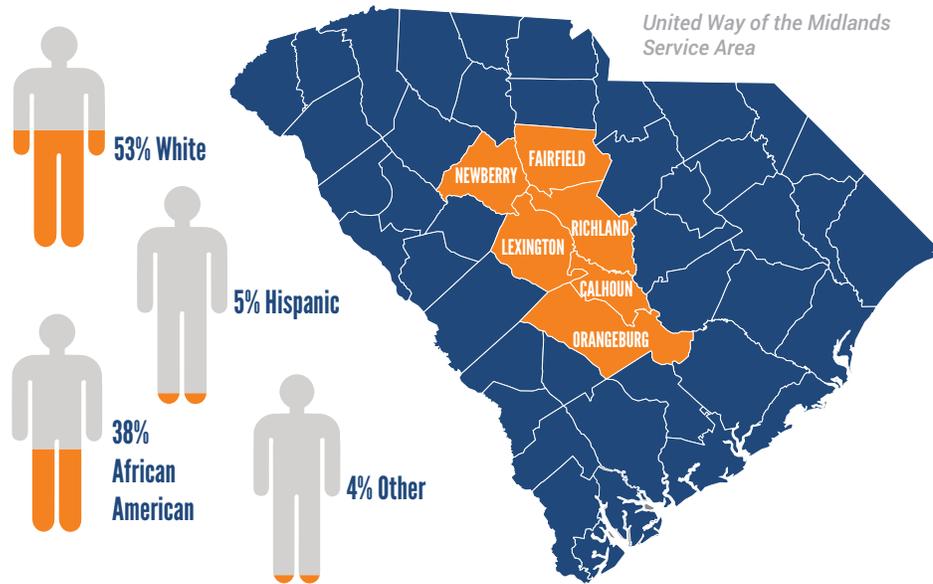
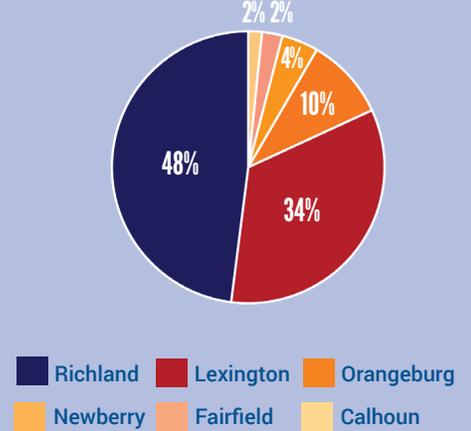
JASON WOLFE
BOARD CHAIRMAN
FOUNDER & PRESIDENT
WOLFE SOLUTIONS

OUR FOOTPRINT

SOURCE: US CENSUS

The United Way of the Midlands footprint encompasses six counties in central South Carolina: Calhoun, Fairfield, Lexington, Newberry, Orangeburg and Richland. According to the 2020 Census, nearly one in five South Carolinians (17%) live in these six counties. Three counties in the region—Calhoun, Fairfield and Orangeburg—have lost population while Newberry County’s population has remained level. Lexington and Richland counties are the only two counties that have seen measurable population growth since 2010 and make up 82% of the population in the six-county region.

% POPULATION BY COUNTY



POPULATION CHANGE 2010-2020

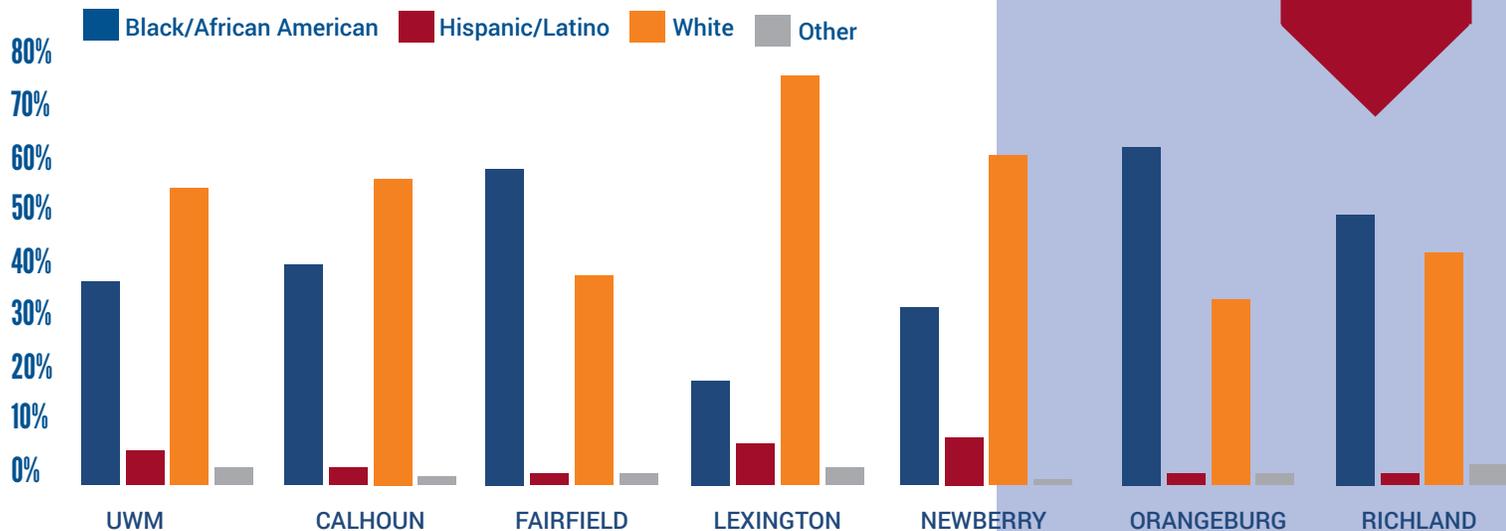
Growing

Lexington
Richland

Declining

Calhoun
Fairfield
Orangeburg

RACE/ETHNICITY BY COUNTY

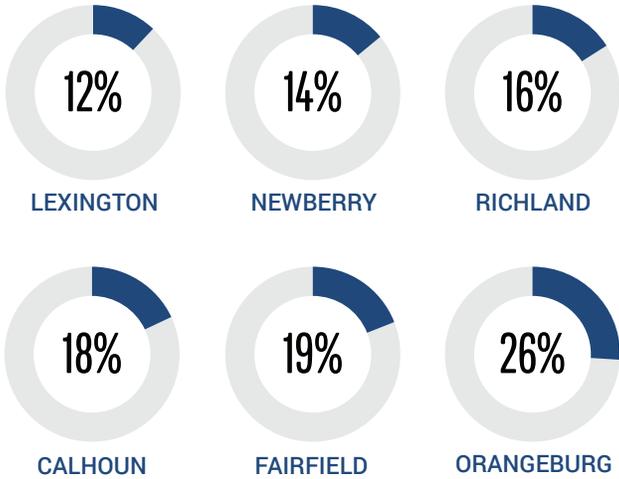


SOURCE: US CENSUS (UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED)

For almost 100 years, United Way has been the one to catch problems that fall through the cracks here in the Midlands, addressing them effectively and efficiently. We do this through three primary causes.

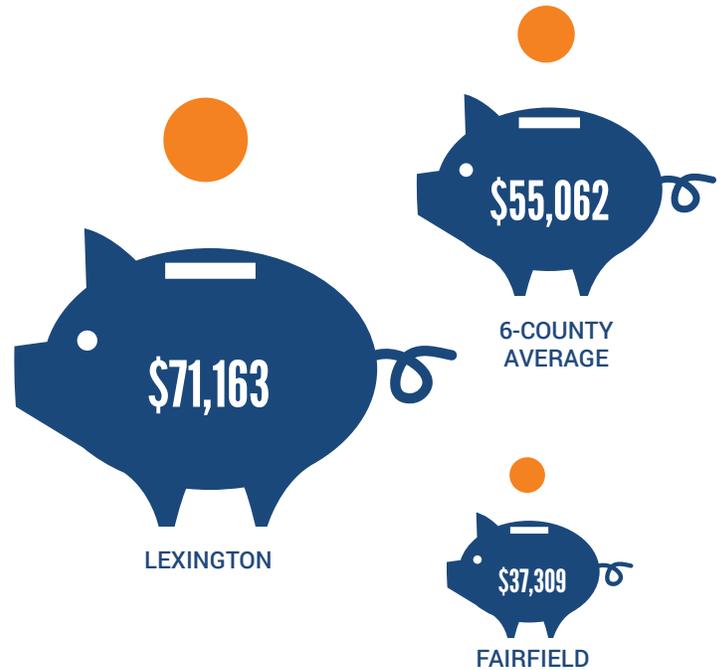
PROMOTING STABILITY

Persons living in poverty



Disparities in median household income

(families with own children in home)



ENHANCING EDUCATION



The good news...

Nearly 9 in 10 persons living in the six-county region have a high school diploma.



The not so good news...

In Calhoun, Fairfield, Newberry, Orangeburg—only 20% (or less) residents have at least a bachelor's degree.



The bad news...

In those same 4 counties, fewer than 70% of households have a broadband subscription.

ADDRESSING HEALTHCARE

LIFE EXPECTANCY COMPARED TO THE STATE

Higher than SC: Newberry, Richland, Lexington

Lower than SC: Calhoun, Fairfield, Orangeburg

SOURCE: COUNTY HEALTH RANKINGS



SOURCE: US CENSUS (UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED)

THE PROCESS

Developing a New Community Assessment

In spring 2021, we launched a new community assessment to inform our investments and initiatives. UWM partnered with the University of South Carolina (UofSC) Department of Psychology to review data of our six counties based on local, state and federal sources. UofSC compiled data in UWM's focus areas to review needs, gaps in services, and opportunities for community investments to improve well-being.

To complement the quantitative data, staff and volunteers conducted 40 community conversations with over 400 participants during the summer of 2021. To prepare for these conversations, UWM staff participated in The Harwood Institute's Public Innovators Lab which emphasizes the practice of "Turning Outward" through community conversations, which relies on the community, not conference rooms, as the reference point for creating change. Using the Harwood Institute model, conversation participants included community and elected leaders, non-profit leaders, people who use our funded programs and other stakeholders.

The conversations were designed to be aspirational on how we can work collectively to address needs and find opportunities for improvement. To schedule the conversations, UWM staff and volunteers identified local hosts across the six counties and asked them to invite up to 20 community members who they felt understood their community's needs.

We believe that no one knows our communities and neighborhoods better than the people who live and work in them every day. UWM tracked demographics on race, gender, ethnicity, and location of the conversations.



ABOUT UNITED WAY OF THE MIDLANDS

United Way of the Midlands (UWM), established in 1925, serves Calhoun, Fairfield, Lexington, Newberry, Orangeburg and Richland counties in central South Carolina. Our mission is to address community challenges by connecting people and resources to improve the quality of life in our community.

Unlike smaller nonprofits who often have a very defined focus, we take a multifaceted approach to some of the biggest problems facing our society by reducing homelessness, increasing children's literacy, and providing access to healthcare. Because we are a larger organization, we have the ability and expertise to pool resources and conduct research to determine where our efforts can make the biggest impact.

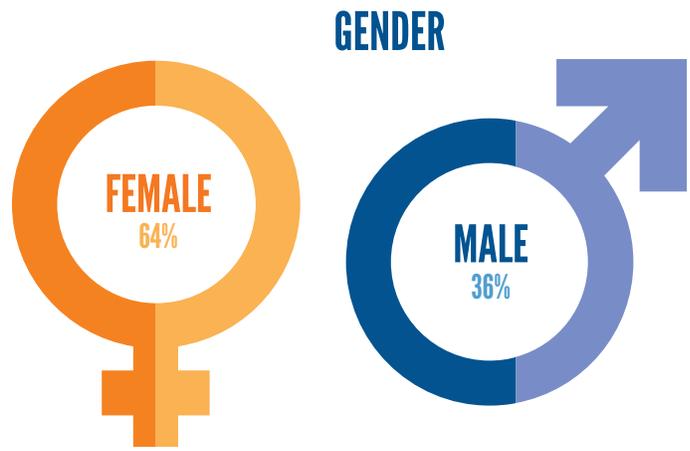
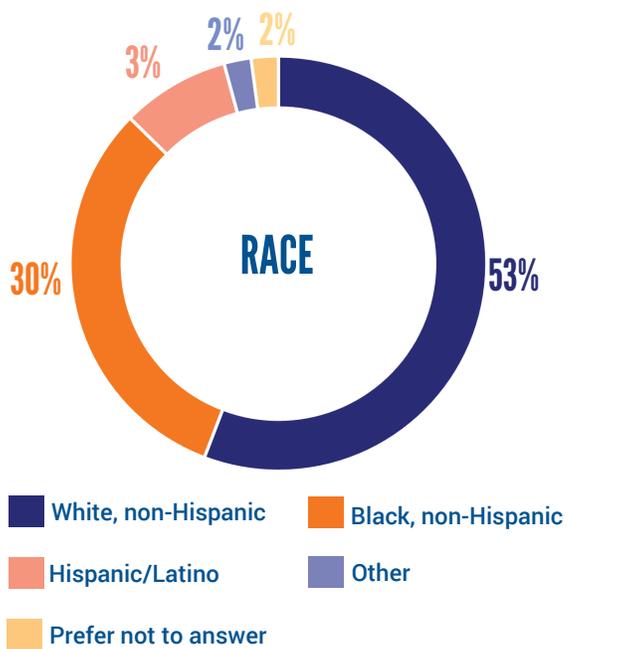
We invest in community programs and operate programs directly, such as the Midlands Reading Consortium, a K-2nd grade tutoring program, as well as two free dental and eye clinics, called WellPartners. We serve over 40,000 individuals annually through initiatives and partnerships.

We created a standard set of questions for each session (adapted from the Harwood model), trained over 20 volunteers and staff to facilitate sessions, and ultimately analyzed data to identify themes. All sessions were conducted by facilitators in pairs using a standard reporting format to record key conversation points, frequency of topics mentioned and examples of issues that affected specific geographies. These session notes were ultimately reviewed by the internal UWM report team and themes were jointly identified by staff and the 1000 Feathers consulting group.

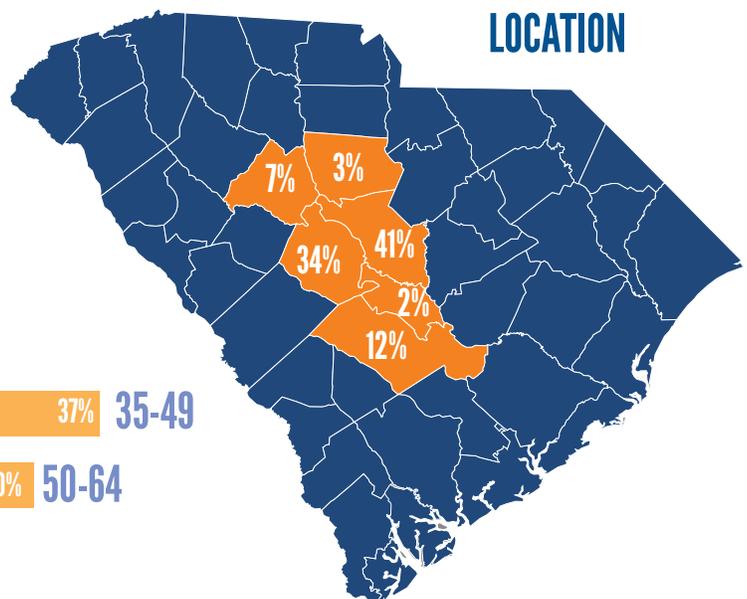
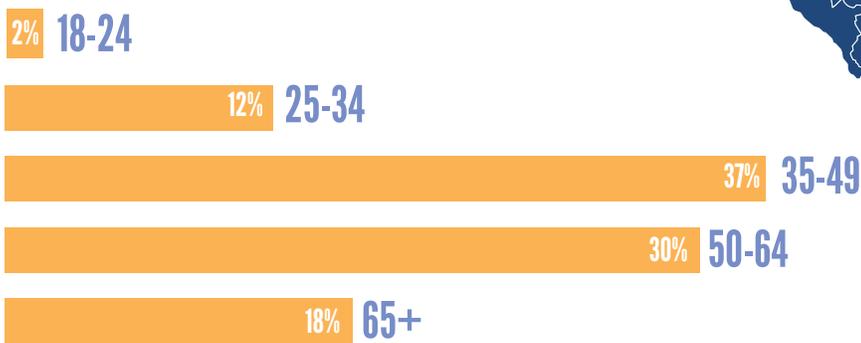
Limitations

UWM held the community conversations in summer of 2021 during the peak of the Covid Delta variant. While most conversations were in person, we also held virtual conversations. Both formats held value, but the virtual conversations naturally had more limitations, especially with participant engagement. While we were pleased with the overall geographic diversity, we struggled in some rural areas to identify local hosts and at times technological barriers (like inconsistent broadband or access to technology) limited participation for those who could not attend in person.

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION PARTICIPANTS



AGE



IDEAL COMMUNITY

"What kind of community do you want?" is the first question we asked in every Community Conversation, and in each one people described their desire for "complete" and "thriving" communities where people can live, work and participate in recreational activities. Attributes discussed were being inclusive, safe and family-oriented, where everyone is seen and heard, where people help each other, and where access to resources is equitable. Also, during the conversations, we asked about concerns, opportunities for improvements and strategies to build stronger communities. The following reflects a summary of the 40 community conversations and their key points.

We should acknowledge the overall stress that has been created by a pandemic. We were 18 months into the Covid-19 pandemic at the time of the Community Conversations (Summer 2021), and the widespread and significant impacts of Covid-19 were ever-present. People talked about isolation, anxiety and a general sense of uneasiness toward the future created by the pandemic. Mental health stress lurked beneath the surface for many; adults expressed uncertainty and anxiety about the safety of work conditions and social situations, and concern for the disruption in their children's education and day-to-day routines.

Despite this additional stress, community members enthusiastically conveyed their visions for thriving communities; however, they also shared their concerns about the lack of a unified vision for the Midlands. Participants commented on natural barriers, such as rivers between counties, but also noted that competition and siloed efforts between geographic areas, rather than cooperation and collaborative efforts, hold us back; working together to drive economic and community development would lead to greater advancement throughout the Midlands.



“**THE PANDEMIC HAS LEFT A LOT OF PEOPLE WITH DEPRESSION. YOU ARE SCARED TO GO OUT TO EAT OR INVITE ANYONE OVER TO YOUR HOUSE.**”

RICHLAND COUNTY RESIDENT

“**GROCERY STORES MAKE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT PEOPLE BASED ON THEIR INCOME LEVEL AND HAVE PROCESSED MEATS BUT NO FRESH FRUITS AND VEGETABLES.**”

RICHLAND COUNTY RESIDENT

KEY ASPIRATIONS & CONCERNS



Connectedness and Engagement

Describing a thriving community, residents expressed a desire for greater empathy toward and connection with each other. Currently, many felt their community was unaware of or even apathetic to others' needs. People want to live in a place where everyone is seen and heard. "Welcoming", "friendly" and "open" are words participants frequently used to describe their ideal community.



Development and Infrastructure

Residents noted the importance of feeling proud of their communities and having flourishing downtowns. Additionally, residents noted the need for strong and economically stable business communities that are able to attract and retain businesses and generally support the local infrastructure needs, including transportation, childcare, broadband and cultural and recreational opportunities. These infrastructure needs were noted as critical to attracting and retaining young professionals to stay in the community and raise families. Importantly, some noted the need for development to be equitable, with recruitment being a mix of both local "mom and pop" businesses and national employers. Participants also noted the need for comprehensive planning to review effects of development on the whole community (e.g. traffic and school enrollment).



Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Many residents wanted to feel greater sense of inclusion in their communities but were not always sure how to bring about that change. Predominantly black communities reported unequal economic development, noting a particular lack in infrastructure and access to quality housing and fresh food. Hispanic communities also reported gaps in access to quality housing and services, and generally not feeling welcomed by service providers (English-only materials) or at broader community events. Some participants noted inequities in employment opportunities and salaries for women. Other participants mentioned the potential for increased equity and opportunity if elected and governing officials were more diverse.



Safety

Safety was generally described as being free of crime and drugs, expressed as a desire for communities where children are protected and people feel safe in their homes. Participants also mentioned safety in the sense that they need to feel supported by systems and people with authority.



Basic Needs

When basic needs are met, people can thrive and access opportunities. In conversations, there was a sense that many in the community were unaware of ways to get help, suggesting an enhanced need for navigation to resources. The 2-1-1 resource line was not widely known to conversation participants, and many expressed concerns that resources for basic needs (especially rent and utilities) were not always available or easy to access. We also heard concern with pockets of homelessness and people living in clearly substandard housing.

These hopes and visions are only achievable with a strong collective effort. Hence, nearly every conversation highlighted residents' desire for all of us to come together in a collective effort to improve the Midlands. **There was also clear recognition that our path must include tackling significant and systemic issues that are currently holding us back from being the type of thriving communities we want to be.** Top of mind among these are:

ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Residents discussed several concerns related to economic opportunity, including the inability to attain a good paying job, the impact of poverty and generational poverty, and the impact of the wealth gap. Participants also noted that people were unaware of available job training programs or were unable to access them due to time and money constraints. Discovering how to bridge these gaps so people can obtain good paying jobs with benefits is key to developing a path to sustainability.

HOUSING

Residents stated general challenges with the availability and quality of affordable housing. More specifically, they pointed to how the availability of affordable housing impacts a community's ability to attract and retain young professionals, as well as provide stability for families and low-wage workers, and ensure seniors have secure, physically safe housing. School district leaders discussed recruiting and retaining teachers, especially in more rural areas, and pointed to gaps in entry-level housing. Others mentioned difficulties staffing service industry jobs when employees cannot not live close by.

EDUCATION

While a variety of education system concerns were raised in all conversations, many conversations noted challenges associated with schools that were unevenly funded or supported. School choice was mentioned in the context of families who are able to provide transportation or long distances children traveled to attend better performing schools.

A STRONGER NONPROFIT & PUBLIC SECTOR

Collaborative, accessible and well-resourced non-profits are part of the vision of thriving communities. In most community sessions, participants identified specific community programs or services and lamented that, too often, people simply don't know about the variety of available resources. Participants also discussed the need for non-profits to work together more rather than compete. A number of conversations also noted that small or primarily rural non-profits face challenges scaling their work to meet their communities' needs.



KIDS HAVING PARENTS WHO ARE ECONOMICALLY STABLE IS THE BEST WAY TO HAVE STABLE CHILDREN.

NEWBERRY COUNTY RESIDENT



PEOPLE WANT THINGS LIKE HOUSING TO BE SOLVED OVER THERE, NOT HERE.

LEXINGTON COUNTY RESIDENT



ALL KIDS WANT TO DO IS LEARN AND DO WELL, BUT SOMETIMES THEY DO NOT HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY.

FAIRFIELD COUNTY RESIDENT



THE ALIGNMENT

During the process, we reviewed data in the key community conversation areas to determine alignment with what was heard. We offer the following data points to support the experiences of our Midlands residents.

MAKE HOUSING AVAILABLE FOR EVERYONE

Rental housing: The South Carolina State Housing Authority's 2021 Needs Assessment reported that in 40 of our 46 counties a two-bedroom apartment is not affordable with the average hourly wage of a renter at \$13.52 (SC wage) compared to the \$17.30 needed. Those severely cost burdened, meaning they pay more than 50% of their gross income, range from a low of 21% in Lexington County to 32% in Calhoun and up to 41% in Fairfield County.

Each of our Midlands counties had a higher rent burden than the state average of 24%. With an average rent ranging from \$820 to \$1,040 per month for a one-bedroom apartment (National Low Income Housing Coalition) rental housing is out of reach for many. Further, units in the range of less than \$500 per month are difficult to find. For those who can secure one of the scarce housing vouchers, like those designed for people who are homeless or veterans, finding a unit that will fit within the voucher's price limit, pass a required quality inspection, and a landlord that will accept the voucher or tenant as a renter, can be almost impossible.

People don't want to admit that it happens in rural communities, but it does. Especially inadequate houses. We all know someone who stays in a house that looks abandoned and has no water or lights. If the neighbors know you they will feed or clothe you.

-NEWBERRY COUNTY RESIDENT

Home ownership/wealth creation: Data also supported the need for affordable entry level homeownership to attract and retain young professionals, especially teachers and people in less urban areas. In 2021, the average price of a home in Columbia rose to \$182,786, an 18.3% increase from the previous year (Zillow). Also, conversations cited housing near amenities like recreation, shopping and jobs as enhancements to economic development.

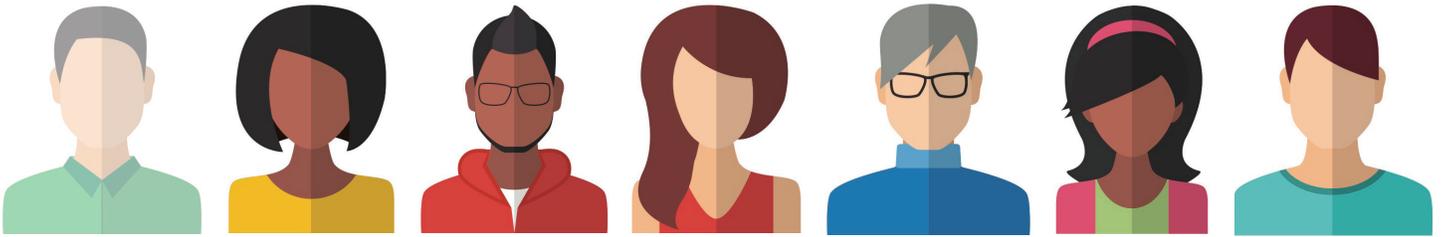


6.3%
**YEAR-TO-YEAR
INCREASE IN
ORANGEBURG.
AVERAGE COST OF A
HOME NOW \$110,120.**

SOURCE: ZILLOW

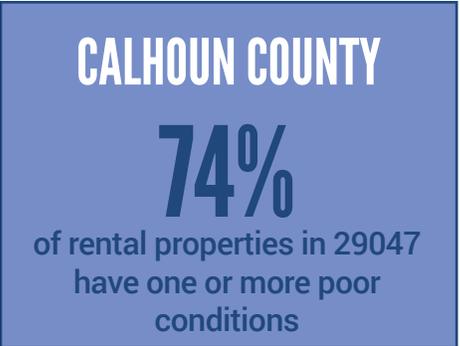
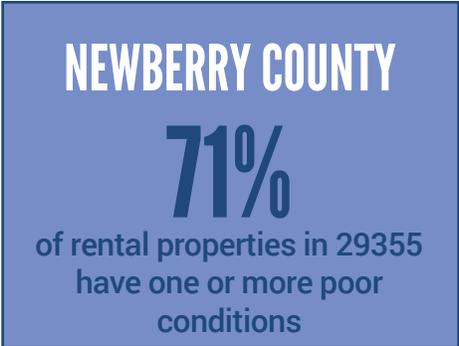


**IN 2015,
A 1,000 YEAR FLOOD HIT
THE MIDLANDS,
BRINGING TO LIGHT
SIGNIFICANT ISSUES WITH
DEFERRED MAINTENANCE
OF HOMES COMPOUNDED
BY THE DEVASTATION OF
THE NATURAL DISASTER.**



1 IN 7 SOUTH CAROLINIANS LIVE IN POOR HOUSING CONDITIONS.

Repairs/condition of housing: Maintaining home repairs was also a top need in several community conversations. According to the Census, one in seven South Carolinians live in poor housing conditions, and this can be more difficult for people who are elderly or living with a disability. During the community discussions, we heard the struggles of adapting homes to meet the needs of an aging parent or about unhealthy living conditions for those unable to maintain basic repairs causing greater damage over time. Data show pockets of deep need for repairs. In Richland County, more than 50% of rental property has one or more poor conditions, with deeper need in specific areas such as zip codes 29201/29202 (downtown Columbia) at 59% and 29052 (Gadsden) at nearly 73% of properties reporting poor conditions. Similar pockets of poor housing conditions were found in Newberry with zip code 29355 (Kinards) at 71% and Calhoun at 29047 (Ellore) at 74% of structures in poor condition.



SOURCE: US CENSUS - AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

CONNECT PEOPLE TO GOOD PAYING JOBS WITH BENEFITS

Many conversations talked about the inability to escape from generational poverty and day-to-day financial stresses of supporting a family, while still maintaining family bonds. In fact, 28% of children in the state live in households with parents who lack stable employment.

Conversations revealed an emphasis on the need for adults to access good paying jobs with benefits. There are 180,801 jobs in SC that require more advanced technical skills (like electronics technician and aircraft mechanic) paying an average of \$78,977, which is a 75% wage premium over the average SC job (SC Council on Competitiveness).

This number will continue to increase as industries requiring advanced skills grow in the region and state. There are opportunities available to increase skills through our Technical Colleges and other programs; however, there seems to be a gap in helping people navigate these programs and accessing financial supports to meet daily living expenses to increase program retention.



of children in South Carolina live in households with parents who lack stable employment.

SOURCE: KIDS COUNT

SELF SUFFICIENCY STANDARD

1 ADULT + 1 INFANT + 1 SCHOOL-AGED CHILD

(amount needed to support this family size without public assistance)



CALHOUN COUNTY

\$18.75 PER HR/\$39,596 PER YR



FAIRFIELD COUNTY

\$19.35 PER HR/\$40,863 PER YR



LEXINGTON COUNTY

\$24.09 PER HR/\$50,868 PER YR



NEWBERRY COUNTY

\$17.78 PER HR/\$37,559 PER YR



ORANGEBURG COUNTY

\$16.42 PER HR/\$34,679 PER YR



RICHLAND COUNTY

\$23.12 PER HR/\$53,062 PER YR



The 2020 Self-Sufficiency Standard, commissioned by United Way Association of South Carolina, reviewed wages needed to support different family compositions and geographies based on the living costs without government assistance or subsidies.

The Standard is different from the federal poverty measure, a calculation of daily living costs based on the rather than rapidly increasing costs like housing and childcare.



PEOPLE WANT TO WORK, BE GOOD PARENTS AND BE PART OF THE COMMUNITY BUT SOMETIMES THEY DON'T GET THE CHANCE.

ORANGEBURG COUNTY RESIDENT



IMPROVE SUPPORTS FOR FAMILIES AND YOUTH

Parenting/Childcare: Conversations focused on supports to build strong families, including childcare and opportunities for young adults. Increasing parent engagement was a common theme. Unmet needs included financial management skills, parental involvement in their child’s school, and improved mental health. Childcare was heard in nearly all conversations. The term “childcare desert” was mentioned more than once. Beyond cost, identifying safe, quality childcare was expressed in the community conversations and the stress of working parents and the lack of non-traditional hour care or childcare with later pickup.

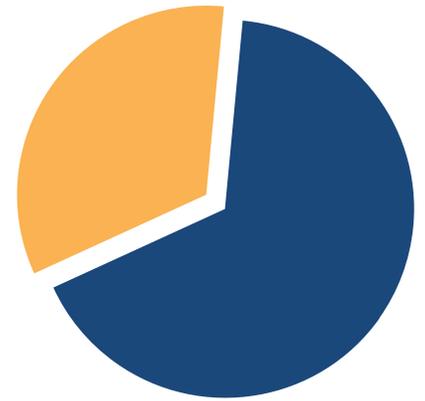
|| We live in a childcare desert.

LEXINGTON COUNTY RESIDENT

Older youth opportunities: We also heard about creating meaningful recreational and cultural opportunities for middle school age youth. During the community conversations we often heard that opportunities for after school were limited for older youth. People also saw expanded opportunities as ways to foster better understanding of people across racial and ethnic lines.

Participants voiced the need to inspire young adults (high school age) to explore and dream beyond the boundaries of their current world through exposure to careers and professionals. We often heard the lack of opportunities for older youth to be exposed to professional or cultural opportunities.

Absenteeism: Data from the UWM Community Assessment 2021 reveal chronic absenteeism in several school districts. In particular, Lexington Four reported a chronic absenteeism rate of 23.3% while Lexington Two reported a rate of 19%. The third highest rate of chronic absenteeism was in Newberry District One with a rate of 15.4%. For suspension rates, Richland District Two had the highest suspension rate for the 2018-19 school year. Two of the school districts in Lexington County (Lexington One and Richland/Lexington Five) had a rate of 27 suspensions (SCDE).



A FAMILY TYPICALLY SPENDS 1/3 OF THEIR MONTHLY BUDGET ON CHILDCARE.

SOURCE: SELF SUFFICIENCY STANDARD



WE SPEND TOO MUCH TIME TRYING TO GET KIDS IN COLLEGE WHEN WE NEED TO OFFER BASIC SKILLS.

FAIRFIELD COUNTY RESIDENT



(MY IDEAL COMMUNITY IS) ONE WHERE YOU WOULDN'T HAVE TO MOVE TO GET INTO A 'GOOD' SCHOOL.

RICHLAND COUNTY RESIDENT

GRADUATION RATE < SC AVERAGE (85%)

LEXINGTON TWO = 76%

ORANGEBURG = 80%





IMPROVE ACCESS TO CARE

Navigation: We heard the need to improve understanding of community resources available, reduce the complexity of accessing services, and increase navigation to improve sustainability and reduce cycles of one-time assistance.

|| This pandemic proved we are a sick care system—not a health care system.

-RICHLAND COUNTY RESIDENT

Mental Health: As the emergency phase of the pandemic ends, experts worry what the long-term mental health impact of the pandemic will be. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2 in 5 adults reported struggling with mental or behavioral health problems connected to Covid-19 (anxiety, depression, increased substance use and suicidal thoughts). Certain groups were disproportionately affected by the pandemic-related stress, such as younger adults, Black and Hispanic individuals, essential workers, unpaid caregivers for adults and those receiving treatment for preexisting psychiatric conditions. Three of the counties (Calhoun, Fairfield, Newberry) reported having only one mental health facility. Orangeburg County reported three mental health facilities. Lexington County reported four mental health facilities compared to 13 facilities in Richland County (HRSA 2020).

Pandemic-related factors may also negatively impact children’s mental health (Kaiser Family Foundation). Social distancing and virtual learning could lead to loneliness and isolation among children, which are known risk factors for poor mental health. Income insecurity and poor mental health experienced by parents during the pandemic may also adversely affect children’s mental health and may be associated with a possible rise in child abuse.

Access: Additionally, medically underserved areas were noted in each of the counties. All areas of Calhoun, Fairfield and Orangeburg counties were designated as medically underserved areas (HRSA 2020). For Lexington, Orangeburg and Richland counties, one third of the county areas were underserved. Calhoun and Fairfield counties do not have a full-service hospital.

|| We are forgotten out in rural areas.

-ORANGEBURG COUNTY RESIDENT



Kaiser Family Foundation research from October 2020 showed that

31% of parents

said their child's mental or emotional health was worse than before the pandemic.

2 in 5 adults struggle with mental and behavioral health problems connected to Covid-19.

SOURCE: CDC

Yet, three Midlands counties (Calhoun, Fairfield, Newberry) reported having only

1 mental health facility.

SOURCE: HRSA 2020





COMMUNITY CALL TO ACTION

UWM can't address these findings alone. Everyone in the Midlands, including the private, public and non-profit sectors, has a part to play in building a complete and thriving community. Emerging from the pandemic, we must reconnect with each other to make collective change and create new solutions to long-standing issues. From our review of data and community conversations, we offer the following call to action:

- 1 Create** a more **unified vision** for growth and economic development.
- 2 Recognize** the **impacts of the pandemic** on us all by ensuring access to a range of mental health supports and destigmatize seeking care.
- 3 Expand** opportunities for children and youth to thrive, including **quality affordable childcare** and **after-school programs for older youth**.
- 4 Ensure** a strong safety net with an intentional focus on **addressing root causes** of instability.
- 5 Support** **deeper collaboration** across non-profit and public sectors and inclusion of community voices.
- 6 Identify and work** collectively to **remove barriers** to opportunity.
- 7 Make** **housing affordable for everyone** by increasing rental housing units at a range of pricing accessible for more people, entry-level homeownership and home repairs for vulnerable people.
- 8 Support** adults in upskilling and obtaining **better paying jobs**.

In early 2022, we will release a new Community Investment Plan for our UWM community programs and resources based on this Community Assessment. We are calling on the Midlands community to join us and find out how you can meet this call to action. You can be a vital force in building a resilient community where everyone can thrive. Every action, big or small, makes a huge difference in helping people in our community improve their life.

What part will you play?
To join us, visit www.uway.org.

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