

Op-Ed 2016

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DO YOU KNOW ALICE?

ALICE may have brought your food at lunch, checked out your groceries, or taken your blood pressure at your recent doctor's appointment. Or you might be ALICE. These hardworking folks, and many others like them, are in a group called ALICE - Asset Limited Income Constrained Employed. ALICE makes up almost a quarter of Whatcom households, works hard to earn above the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), but not enough to afford the basic household budget of housing, child care, food, transportation, and health care.

What it takes to make it by

You may have seen in the press recently that United Way released a groundbreaking ALICE study that is an in-depth look at this population in our community and displays a more accurate measure of poverty. A face of poverty that is very different from the long thought of stereotypes of individuals on the streets. The study shines a light on a larger group of people struggling daily to make ends meet. You can access the entire report along with shorter excerpts on Whatcom and Washington on our website at www.unitedwaywhatcom.org.

ALICE works and makes more than the FPL of \$11,490 for a single adult (\$23,550 for a family of four), which means that often times ALICE is not eligible for support from government programs that use the FPL as a determiner for services. But ALICE does not make enough money through work alone and falls short of reaching a basic household budget. In Whatcom County a survival budget for a single individual is \$18,396 and for a family of 4 it is \$57,672, but 42 percent of our local households do not reach these budget thresholds. This is why United Way does the work that we do and why we are committed to giving hard-working families a hand up to achieve a better life.

Who is ALICE?

ALICE is men and women, young and old, of all races, largely mirroring the state's basic demographic make-up. More than one third are within their prime wage-earning years of 45 to 64. In order to reach a survival budget in Whatcom County an individual supporting a family of 4 would need to make \$28.84 an hour. The top 3 types of jobs in Washington are: retail salesperson, cashiers, and a variety of jobs in the food service industry. On average, these positions pay less than \$12 an hour. More than half of all jobs in Washington pay less than \$20 an hour (\$40,000 a year) and most pay between \$10 and \$15 an hour. This means that with the combination of ALICE's wages and some public assistance, ALICE households still fall 25 percent short of reaching a survival budget. Thanks to support from United Way funded projects and programs we are able to

help fill this gap for thousands of local families and make it possible for them to work towards financial independence.

We all benefit when ALICE is doing well

When ALICE has stable housing, childcare and education, food, transportation, health and healthcare, higher wages, and savings we see the effects in: less stressed workers who are more productive at work, less burden on education and social services, increased economic productivity, increased spending in our economy, reduced need for homeless shelters, and less burden on our foster care and emergency health systems. ALICE is a vital part of our community and economy. We are all interconnected and our success depends on ALICE's ability to reach his or her potential. Strengthening ALICE strengthens you, me and our entire community.

United Way is committed to improving life for ALICE

ALICE is struggling to afford child care, rent, food, and health care. There isn't one program that can help with all these aspects, it takes a variety of programs working on different aspects of the issues to make real change for ALICE and our community. That's why United Way partners with school districts, non-profits, and for-profits to tackle challenges from a 360 degree view. We focus on education, income, and health because we need all three of these basic building blocks in order to thrive. In Education, we are helping ALICE by: providing free kindergarten readiness calendars, supporting access to early learning/childcare for kids of all learning levels, and investing in alternative and after school programs for kids from low-income families and at-risk youth. In our Income focus area we are supporting food and assistance to offset the cost of monthly bills, increasing access to skill building to attain better jobs and better income, and focusing on housing support and financial literacy. Through our health focus area we are providing access to reduced cost prescription drugs, increasing access to health care and advocacy for vulnerable populations of all ages, and helping survivors of violence and abuse.

Progress – You can help!

Over the past few years we have seen an increase in early literacy, an increase in medical access and insured individuals, more kids accessing crucial after school programs, and more people being able to access important food assistance. We all have a role to play in advancing ALICE. Friends, family, employers, non-profits, and government agencies can work together to increase economic stability. The ALICE report includes possible strategies these various sectors can use to make an impact.

Our combined work focusing on households below the ALICE threshold has already produced some amazing results. If you are currently a United Way donor, you are already helping this crucial group in our community every day. If you aren't a current supporter and you want to be a part of helping ALICE I encourage you to make a contribution to United Way of Whatcom today. The more funds we raise the more programs we can partner with and the more lives we can change. The data from the recent ALICE study will help us continue to focus our work and sharpen our priorities. Working together we can improve life for ALICE and build a stronger community for us all.

Peter Theisen
President/CEO
United Way of Whatcom County

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VOLUNTEER.

United Way of Whatcom County



About United Way of Whatcom County

United Way of Whatcom County runs more than 150 workplace giving campaigns during the fall to benefit Whatcom County's Community Impact Fund, which focuses on education, income, and health. For more information about conducting a United Way workplace campaign or for more information about United Way of Whatcom County, go online to www.unitedwaywhatcom.org

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