



*“To strengthen the capacity of United Ways to be leaders in achieving results that improve the lives of all New Yorkers.”*

## **UWNYS’s Mission Statement**

## **2025 Public Policy & State Budget Priorities**

The past few years have proved to be very turbulent for New Yorkers, with many facing housing and food insecurity, economic and social injustices and devastating losses from weather-related events. These issues, combined with several other factors, have resulted in an increase in economically disadvantaged households, particularly those that are at or below the Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) threshold. Despite an overall decrease nationally, New York’s numbers have continued to rise, with 46% of New York households living at or below the ALICE threshold as of 2022.<sup>1</sup>

While New York is a state rich in resources, individuals and families continue to struggle, encountering numerous barriers as they attempt to connect to the programs and services they need most. To help alleviate some of these issues, it is essential that we work together, utilizing a common strategy at all levels, to provide the necessary information and resources at the moment they are needed.

United Way of New York State (UWNYS) and our 32 local organizations serve as the central hub for many of our communities, providing hot meals, a safe space and connections to essential public and private services across New York. Due to our unique role and intricate

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.unitedforalice.org/state-overview/new-york>



understanding of the needs across the State, UWNYS has engaged in a number of exciting initiatives that, in conjunction with the work in local communities, provides a basis for our 2025 Public Policy & State Budget Priorities. Priority requests include:

- \$2.8 million investment in the Enacted State budget to maintain and expand 211.
- \$7 million for the Dolly Parton Imagination Library as proposed in Governor Hochul's Executive Budget.
- Fully funding Universal Healthy School Meals for All, providing free breakfast & lunch for the 2.7 million Students in NYS

### **211: Maintaining & Expanding**

211 is a statewide free and confidential health and human services referral helpline that is administered by 2-1-1 New York, Inc. which is affiliated with UWNYS. 211 is accessible 24 hours a day/365 day of the year and enables residents to be connected with a trained Community Resource Specialist who evaluates their needs, accesses a database that contains information on programs and services in their local community, and refers them to the best possible solution.

211 provides connections to government agencies and non-profits that provide support in the areas of social services, housing, food & nutrition, health and mental health, legal assistance, disaster services, temporary and disability services, and more.

**211 is not directory assistance, it's a conversation with a real live person** who helps identify needs, assists in problem-solving and eligibility determinations, connecting New Yorkers to services ranging from food pantries to civil legal services to support for early childhood. In our



increasingly complex and ever-changing social service system, **the 350 highly trained 211 Community Resource Specialists are critical to ensure that New Yorkers get the help they need and are entitled to in an efficient and empathetic manner.**

New Yorkers are using 211 every day. **In 2024, the 211 NY Network, handled over 2 million phone calls statewide.** It's the number the Governor's office relies on to handle non-emergency situations during major weather events; it's the number individuals turn to when they have no place to sleep, and the local social services district (LSSD) has closed.

Over its 20+ year history, the 211 system has created local partnerships, as well as partnerships with the State, to leverage the system and ensure that New Yorkers have access to the critical information and referrals when they need it most.

- **211 Contributes to Disaster Planning, Response and Recovery Efforts.** During Hurricane Sandy, Tropical Storm Lee, the Oneida/Herkimer County flooding, Western New York snowstorms, and more recently the tornados last summer in Rome and Canastota as well as flooding in the Southern Tier, 211 provided access to reliable, up-to-date, relevant information for those impacted, first responders, and long-term recovery groups. In many counties, 211 is recognized as a member of disaster operations for training, exercises, and response. FEMA promotes 211 as the number to call for help after a disaster.
- **211 Helps our Fiscally Strapped Counties.** Several LSSDs use 211 for pre-screening, and to provide after-hours on-call services for adult/child protective and homeless/food emergencies. In Erie, Monroe, Onondaga, and Oswego Counties, 211 is the first point of contact for the homeless, shelters and services after hours.



Making full use of the infrastructure of 211 can enhance a broad range of programs, improving effectiveness and lowering costs, while offering a simplified process for the public. Continued State support for 211 will have a lasting and far-reaching benefit.

**Request: \$2.8 million investment in the Enacted SFY 25-26 budget to maintain and expand access to 211.** As a public-private partnership, it is critical for state support to be maintained. Without state support, the partnership and opportunities that we have built with the state, local counties, and residents will be in jeopardy.

### **Dolly Parton Imagination Library**

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library is a no cost book gifting program providing high-quality books to children from birth to age five, no matter their family's income.

After launching in 1995, the program grew quickly, initially only distributing books to children living in Sevier County, Tennessee where Dolly grew up. However, the program became such a success that in 2000 efforts to replicate the program nationally began. By 2003, Dolly Parton's Imagination Library had mailed one million books. It would prove to be the first of many millions of books sent to children around the world.

After the United States, the program launched in Canada in 2006 followed by the United Kingdom in 2007, Australia in 2013 and the Republic of Ireland in 2019. This program is made possible through Dolly Parton Foundation funding and funding provided through the United Ways in the regions across New York.



**Request: \$7 million investment in the Enacted SFY 25-26 budget to maintain and expand the Dolly Parton Imagination Library Initiative.**

### **Universal Healthy School Meals for All**

The Governor announced a historic initiative to ensure every single one of New York's over 2.7 million students can receive both breakfast and lunch for free at school. This landmark initiative builds on the Governor's affordability agenda and will help save parents money, address food insecurity among New York kids, and create more opportunities for students to succeed.

**Request: Fully fund the investment to provide Universal Healthy School Meals for All, providing free breakfast and lunch to all/2.7 million students.**

### **Empire State Child Tax Credit**

UWNYS is incredibly supportive of the expansion of the Empire State Child Tax Credit. We are grateful to Governor Hochul for enhancing the tax credit, providing families with credits up to \$1000 when fully phased in. As noted by the Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council, this will potentially reduce child poverty by 9.7%<sup>2</sup> However, if the State intends to reach its goal of reducing child poverty by 50%, more work needs to be done. As UWNYS reported in our ALICE report, in 2022, 40% of families with children in New York were below the ALICE Threshold. Living in poverty has long term impacts on children, resulting in an increased likelihood of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), poor physical and mental health, behavioral issues and impacts on their educational development, to name a

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<sup>2</sup> Child Poverty Reduction Advisory Council 2024 Recommendations and Progress Report, pg. 17



few. New York's children deserve better and look to the Legislature to expand the tax credit, as recommended by the Advisory Council, including making the changes permanent, increase the amount to \$1,5000 per child per year from birth to age 18, eliminate minimum income requirements and phase-ins and index the credit to inflation.

**Request: Enacting this expansion will allow more than one million families to receive this financial assistance and allow individuals to have a direct payment of up to \$330 per child.**

### **Income Disregard Legislation**

The FY 2023-24 Enacted State Budget included a one-time six month earned income disregard for recipients of public assistance whose income doesn't exceed 200% of the federal poverty level (FPL) and such income was derived from participating in a qualified work activity or training program for purposes of mitigating the "benefits cliff."

UWNYS is in support of the earned income disregard, but we are concerned that language limits the number of people participating due to the 200% FPL cap.

**Request: We are asking that the 2025-2026 Enacted Budget please remove the following language that states a recipient's total income shall not be more than 200% of the federal poverty level or alternatively, increase the FPL to 400%**

*Any questions please contact President & CEO Therese Daly at [dalyt@uwnys.org](mailto:dalyt@uwnys.org) OR Janet Silver, Esq. at [jsilver@hinmanstraub.com](mailto:jsilver@hinmanstraub.com).*