



*“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**

## **UWNYS 2026 Public Policy Priorities**

United Way of New York State (UWNYS) sincerely appreciates the continued support shown by Governor Hochul and the New York State Legislature for programs that directly strengthen the well-being and economic stability of New Yorkers. The investments in Universal Healthy School Meals for All, sustained funding for 211 New York, Inc., and the Governor’s broader efforts to put money back into New Yorkers’ pockets, demonstrate a clear and meaningful commitment to affordability, stability, and community resilience. These actions are making a real difference for families across the State.

However, New Yorkers continue to struggle. Costs continue to rise, wages have not kept pace with basic needs, and too many households are being pushed to the financial brink. It is against this backdrop that we present our **2026 Public Policy Priorities**.

The past few years have proved turbulent for New Yorkers, particularly those that are considered ALICE—Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. In our 2025 ALICE report, we found that **48% of households in New York State are struggling to make ends meet**. This fact is the cornerstone that has guided our focus for the 2026 Legislative Session.

Despite thousands of services being available, people still struggle to find the right kind of help when they need it. Government programs and departments are essential, but helping families and individuals achieve success requires information, resources, and strategies that must occur at all levels—local, regional, statewide, and national.

UWNYS has engaged in a number of initiatives that, in conjunction with local United Ways, form the basis of our 2026 Public Policy Priorities. Our priority requests include:

- **\$2.8 million in the State budget to maintain 211 New York, Inc.**
- **\$7 million in the State budget for the Dolly Parton Imagination Library to increase access across New York State**
- **Passage and enactment of the Working Families Tax Credit (S.2082/A.3474)**
- **Passage and enactment of an Income Disregard for Recipients earning up to 400% Federal Poverty Level (FPL) (A.4317/S.182)**
- **Passage and enactment of the Hunger-Free Campus Act (S.2637/A.1724).**



## 211 Funding Appreciated and Request to Maintain Funding Levels

211 is a statewide free and confidential health and human service referral hotline that is administered by 211 New York, Inc., a subsidiary of UWNYS. 211 is accessible 24 hours a day/365 day of the year and enables residents to connect with a trained community resource specialist who evaluates the caller's needs, accesses a database that contains information on programs and organizations across NYS, and refers them to the best possible solution.

211 provides information on the work of public agencies and private organizations in the fields of social services, public health, law enforcement, homeland security and emergency services, legal assistance, corrections, temporary and disability services, and more.

New Yorkers are using 211 every day. In 2024 there was an average of 2.5+ million phone calls made statewide.

But 211 is more than a telephone number. 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 information and referrals when they need it most. For example:

- **211 Contributes to Disaster Planning, Relief and Recovery Efforts.** During Hurricane Sandy, Tropical Storm Lee, the Oneida/Herkimer County flooding, Western New York snowstorms, the most recent tornados last summer in Oneida and Madison County, flooding in Steuben County, and other disasters, 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. Both the Governor's office and FEMA promote 211 as the number to call for information and referral during emergencies.
- **211 Helps our Fiscally Strapped Counties.** Local Depts of Social Service use 211 as the primary referral for additional concrete support like food, housing, utility assistance, etc. when the community members' needs exceed the supports government can offer. **This was emphasized during the recent federal government shutdown.** In Erie, Onondaga, Oswego, and Steuben Counties, 211 provides after hours emergency housing and shelter services on behalf of the county.

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

**Request: \$2.8 million investment in the SFY 26-27 budget to maintain and make necessary investments 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. The continuation of funding will also enable the 211 network to make necessary investments to improve system operations and coordination among the various call centers.

### **Dolly Parton Imagination Library**

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

After launching in 1995, the program grew quickly. First books were only distributed to children living in Sevier County, Tennessee, where Dolly grew up. It became such a success that in 2000, a national replication effort was underway. 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 the Dolly Parton Foundation funding and funding provided through the United Ways in the regions across New York. Last year, in the 2025-2026 Enacted Budget it was funded in the amount of \$1 million.

**Request: \$7 million investment in the SFY 26-27 budget to maintain funding for the current sites and to expand the Dolly Parton Imagination Library Initiative to new communities.**

### **Working Families Tax Credit (S.2082/A.3474)**

Using the 2025 ALICE (Asset, Limited, Income, Constrained Employed) data and looking at the various challenges New Yorkers are experiencing, it is critical to understand how to make day-to-day life easier, not harder. Tax credits allow money to stay in New Yorkers’ pockets and allow for understanding and reassurance. It is critical for New York to utilize a multi-pronged approach to help achieve financial security, and expanding the working families tax credit, as proposed in S.2082/A.3474, would have a positive impact on the families who need it the most. Our goal is to help individuals and families achieve and maintain independence. Expanding and strengthening tax credits is one important means of building financial stability and economic mobility.

**Request: Pass and enact the Working Families Tax Credit (S.2082/A.3474).**

This bill would create a working families tax credit and allow for direct quarterly prepayment of the credit and would provide for a sliding reduction in the credit for incomes which exceed a certain threshold.



## **Income Disregard Legislation (A.4317/S.182)**

The FY 2023-24 Enacted State Budget included a one-time earned income disregard for public assistance recipients after obtaining employment. The one-time disregard was capped at income that was at or below 200% federal poverty level (FPL.) This allowed public assistance recipients to maintain their benefits for six months while working at their job, allowing them to build up savings with the ultimate goal of individuals no longer needing assistance and avoiding the “benefits cliff.” While we are in support of the one-time earned income disregard provided upon job entry, UWNYS is concerned that the language limits the types of employment that could be obtained by recipients due to the 200% FPL cap.

**Request: Increase the FPL cap to be 400% in social services law relating to the one-time earned income disregard provided upon job entry opportunity by passing and enacting (A.4317/S.182).**

## **Food Insecurity (S.2637/A.1724).**

A recent report identified 39% of college students face food insecurity. The high cost of college tuition can make the ability to afford adequate meals difficult. Many students are faced with the difficult decision of whether they should pay their tuition, buy textbooks, pay rent, or purchase food, a tough decision that college students should not have to make. Here at UWNYS, we believe that no student can learn successfully if they do not have food and housing. Therefore, we strongly encourage the passage of the “hunger free campus act.” (S.2637/A.1724).

This legislation aims to address that concern by creating a hunger task force, designating a staff member as a SNAP point person, making SNAP more readily accessible on campus, creating campus food pantries, creating a student meal credit sharing program, as well as creating an annual student survey on hunger on campus. California, New Jersey, and Minnesota have already passed similar legislation. New York State is deeply rooted in academia and higher education, and so should our support of students in New York State. UWNYS, in collaboration with 211 sees alignment with this priority and the possibility of participation of helping mitigate campus hunger.

**Request: Pass and enact the Hunger Free Campus Act (S.2637/A.1724).**

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