STORIES OF SUCCESS

AT UNITED WAY OF NEW YORK CITY, OUR PURPOSE IS TO HELP LOW-INCOME NEW YORKERS MAKE MEASURABLE AND MEANINGFUL PROGRESS TOWARD SELF-SUFFICIENCY.

To fulfill that purpose we work to convene communities and sectors around a shared agenda for learning and impact, and we strive to change policies and systems that will help low-income New Yorkers. It’s no easy task. But seeing the success from just a few of the many we help, makes it all worth it. In the following pages, you will get a glimpse into the impact you help create, and see the progress our New York neighbors are making toward achieving self-sufficiency.

Collaborating to Fuel Self-Sufficiency

Since 2000, every four years, United Way of New York City, and its partners from the University of Washington, Women’s Center for Education and Career Advancement, City Harvest, and the NY Community Trust come together to publish the Self-Sufficiency Standard report—a detailed analysis of what income is necessary to live in New York City neighborhoods, and what it costs to be able to afford the basics, broken down by family composition.

This report is critical to shining a light on a tremendous population in our City—the 905,000 households who are overlooked and undercounted. These are our families, friends, co-workers, and neighbors who struggle to afford the basics, but are above the Official Poverty Measure.

For the 2018 report, United Way of New York City took a greater investment into the issues, outcomes, and process. With a goal to raise awareness of the issues and strategically make recommendations and potential policy changes, UWNYC knew they needed to create a plan to bring subject matter experts together to create the best advocacy recommendations.

Using our extensive list of Community Based Organizations, United Way searched for expert policy makers, with extensive knowledge in community challenges surrounding basic needs and self-sufficiency, who were in our City, and had deep roots to the community. These experts came together to form working groups for each major topic discussed in the report: food, childcare, healthcare and housing.

By creating these groups, UWNYC helped generate interest and support of the report, and in turn created champions of the work. United Way supported each working group with the framework and direction for each meeting, collected and provided feedback, and served as the backbone, bringing additional experts to our table to do what they do best—synthesize data, and create recommendations to change policy.

United Way listened to people closest to the community’s challenges, engaged those who wanted to get involved, figured out the role that they could each play, and helped move our City closer to a solution. United Way of New York City doesn’t own this information. We served as part of this great collaboration. But if it wasn’t for United Way, we wouldn’t have so many people involved, so many expert opinions being shared, and so many thoughts being taken into consideration. This working group process is now serving as a model for community collaboration and success. And, in the first year since the report was launched, we have been able to build awareness around a critical issue, have the data to consider what is happening in our community, and empower change makers to talk about challenges in our City.
FeedNYC Empowering Providers, Expanding Services
West Harlem Group Assistance Inc. (WHGA) is a community development organization on a mission to strengthen the economic vitality of Harlem. One of their programs, Communities for Healthy Food, has been providing Harlem residents with client-choice pantry service, nutrition education, on-site Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps) benefits enrollment, and has a goal to address issues of diet-related disease.

As a recipient of United Way of New York City’s Hunger Prevention and Nutrition Assistance Program (HPNAP) Grant, WHGA was thrilled to be able to purchase fresh and frozen produce to provide balanced and nutritious food package to clients.

Each month, WHGA serves more than 5,000 clients, but the limitation of their pantry size only allowed them to bring six people inside at a time—making it a slow process to meet the demand. Through their personal relationship with United Way’s HPNAP team and attending a HPNAP workshop, the pantry learned about the Plentiful App—a free, mobile reservation and communication tool for food pantries and clients.

"With Plentiful, we can now service 20-30 people at once," said Antaeus Turns-Ashcraft, Communities for Healthy Food advocate. “The line complaints have reduced tremendously, and people are able to move inside much more quickly. Through Plentiful we have all the client information and can easily search for clients and verify family sizes.”

Clients love Plentiful too! The messaging feature allows the pantry to communicate quickly with their clients, and can translate into nine different languages. With the funding WHGA receives from United Way, they can purchase fresh produce, and with Plentiful they can alert clients when fresh produce and other perishable items are available outside of the regular pantry operating time. “For someone who needs food, getting a message that there is extra food available outside of pantry times is like a surprise gift and something clients love,” said Turns-Ashcroft.

The relationship with United Way of New York City was instrumental in growing the capacity of WHGA and allowed them to service up to five times as many clients during a visit. "If we hadn’t partnered with United Way of New York City, perhaps we could have found a solution to our service problem, but it would have been much harder and taken much longer," said Turns-Ashcroft. "Now our pantry runs smoothly and operates more effectively.”

ReadNYC: Living Up to Full Potential
“The support through Equity Scholars has impacted my practice, myself, and my students in empowering ways,” shared Kelly Jo. “I had to acknowledge and dispel the myths about students and families that simply are not true. Myths that students from the Bronx have parents that don’t care, that all fathers are in prison, and kids are unmotivated. Acknowledging this allowed me to drop my savior complex and see these kids for who they are as individuals and to have nothing but the highest expectations for each of them.

As part of United Way of New York City’s ReadNYC program, we ensure that teachers are equipped with the resources and support they need to teach students facing so many challenges. Barber has been receiving coaching support from ReadNYC through the Equity Scholars Program, run by one of our partners.
“The support through Equity scholars has impacted my practice, myself, and my students in empowering ways,” shared Barber. “I had to acknowledge and dispel the myths that students from the Bronx have parents that don’t care, that all fathers are in prison, and kids are unmotivated. I had to drop my savior complex and see these kids for who they are as individuals.”

The coaching also helped Barber trust her students more. Teachers need to talk less, and let their kids talk more. Through the Equity Scholars Program, Barber learned that in order for kids to make progress they must feel empowered. As a result, Barber created her classroom library by areas of interest instead of reading level. “I strive to have a library in which my kids see themselves reflected,” shared Barber. “This work has made my students’ interest in both reading and writing increase. Every year since working with equity scholars my students learn to identify themselves as readers by finding books that they truly love, books that leave them thirsty for the next book.”

When asked how the support from ReadNYC has impacted her classroom, Barber replied, “My work with equity scholars has empowered both myself and my students to live up to our full potential as humans and learners.”

**Inspiring Families through Reading**

Reina is the proud mom of two beautiful children, Sofia, a seven-year-old second grader, and Johan, five years old and in Kindergarten. Reina’s family lives in the South Bronx, and is struggling to make ends meet, even though Reina’s husband works six days a week as an electrician. Reina’s first language is not English. For a while, Reina was working for a cleaning agency, but if the kids were sick or school was closed, it was difficult for her to find childcare, and the family decided it was best for her children if she stayed home. She is dedicated to her children, their education, and even volunteers at their school.

Understanding how critical it is for her children to have a good education, Reina does all she can to make sure they have the tools and resources they need to learn. But, with finances being tight, money was needed to pay rent and buy groceries. Books became a luxury they just couldn’t afford.

Thankfully, ReadNYC is partnered with Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library that provides families with free books delivered to their home helping to build their at-home libraries and encourage a love for reading! Reina was able to sign up both Sofia and Johan for the program and now they each receive one book per month, at no cost to the family.

“My kids get so excited when the box arrives,” shared Reina. “To have their name on something, to own their books, is really special.”

Receiving these books is creating a love of reading, expanding vocabulary, allowing mom and her children to read together each day, and even helping Reina expand her knowledge of the English language.

“For me, it’s important that all children in our community are helped by this program,” said Reina. “If our children learn more and are more advanced in reading, then they become more intelligent children, their vocabulary is enriched, and they arrive at school with a reading-level perhaps much higher than other schools in other places.”

“As a mom, it’s important to me that my children are reading above grade-level. They are having fun while learning, and it helps develop them to expand their knowledge of everything, not just the books.”
Most importantly, programs like this are helping low-income children gain access to opportunities, and putting them on the path to success. A few books each month are doing more than just building an at-home library, they are building a future community. And Reina has seen this first hand as her son entered school and this program at the same time.

“The program is helping Johan be a better student, brother, son, and eventually a better person. In the future, he will contribute to his community and become a good professional, all because his mind is full of so much more knowledge,” Reina stated.

BenefitsAccessNYC: Preventing Crisis for our Neighbors in Need

Food Support Connections (FSC) is a program of United Way of New York City’s BenefitsAccessNYC Initiative that helps connect hungry New Yorkers to healthy food. And through grant funding and partnerships it refers, screens, and submits applications for SNAP assistance.

One of our FSC partners is Hunger Free NYC, a division of Hunger Free America. It is through this program that we met Lorena, a 72-year-old, single, and retired woman. Living on her fixed income, Lorena has struggled to put food on her table. Her finances only allowed her to pay for rent, utility bills, and medical expenses with little to spare. For many years Lorena depended on eating potatoes and rice, because it was the most inexpensive food and it lasted the longest. Eating fresh fruits and vegetables, meats, and other critically nutritious foods was just not an option with her financial constraints.

One day while Lorena was out for a walk in the neighborhood she came across a Hunger Free NYC benefits specialist at a community based organization. Her curiosity intrigued her to start a conversation, and it was then that she learned about the SNAP program. To her pleasant surprise, once she was screened she was eligible to receive $192 per month. Lorena was so grateful and immediately applied for SNAP benefits. Within 30 days of the application, she was approved and began receiving the monthly benefit. Lorena now has the funding she so desperately needed to purchase fresh, healthy foods for herself, and as an additional resource knows she can visit local food pantries and soup kitchens. Lorena is now enjoying retirement much more than before, and received the help she needed to continue on her path toward self-sufficiency.