

THANK YOU

FOR HELPING YOUR NEIGHBORS BECOME FINANCIALLY STABLE

United Way of Pickens County Financial Stability Impact Report 2024



United Way
of Pickens County

www.uwpickens.org



HOW DID YOU LEARN ABOUT MONEY?

The foundation of “financial literacy” often begins with structured education. In the decades that United Way of Pickens County has helped struggling, hard-working families, we know that so many of them don’t have a solid base in practical personal finance.

It took a pandemic, and a couple that was gravely worried about low-income families unable to work and survive, to show us that our bold goal to end poverty was really about teaching financial literacy to adults and children alike.

Where did YOU learn how to manage your money? From your parents? In school?

For our neighbors in Pickens County who grew up in poverty, strong role models in managing money didn’t exist. Their families were unable to model good money behavior for them, and personal finance wasn’t taught in school.

When the Pickens County community told us we needed to address “poverty,” we realized that education was the most critical thing we had to do. Financial Literacy helps ALICE. It helps Free File tax clients. It helps young children. That is the focus of this impact report written especially for you, because it is your incredible generosity that makes this amazing work possible.

Thanks to you, we’re starting early and making a difference!

WHO IN THE WORLD IS ALICE?

It could be a relative, a friend, someone you love... or even YOU! ALICE could also be your health care provider, teacher, retail clerk, sanitation worker or others who are the backbone of our economy. ALICE is an acronym for **Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed**. **The ALICE population earns just above the Federal Poverty Level but less than what it costs to make ends meet.** They are members of our essential workforce...cashiers, waiters, child care providers, and other members of our community that are critical to our well-being.

The driving force behind ALICE is the data. *Let's get real about Pickens County!*

Pickens County has a 19% poverty rate, but 31% of households in Pickens County are ALICE. When you combine these two statistics, it means that **50% of Pickens County are under the ALICE threshold**. Over half of our families struggle to secure life's essentials.

Let's get REALLY real about Pickens County!



69% of ALICE households that rent are rent burdened. This means that rent occupies too much of their monthly budget.



53% of ALICE households do not have high-speed internet.



47% of full-time employees in our region can't afford the essentials.



These facts are alarming. For many ALICE households, this means working more than one job, even if one of them is full-time. The strain placed on the family is huge when you consider the associated expenses like childcare, transportation and food.

Your support of United Way is addressing this critical issue.

UNITED FOR ALICE is a movement representing United Ways, foundations, and public officials at all levels of government, businesses large and small, and individuals who want to make a difference in our communities.

United Way of Pickens County is proud to join all of our South Carolina sister United Ways and United Ways across the United States to bring awareness and change for ALICE. Together, we are sharing data with our legislators, organization heads, and employers to acknowledge ALICE and find solutions. Many of the solutions can be quick fixes like education on available resources. However, some of the solutions are long-term and require major restructuring to ensure success for ALICE.

ALICE lives and works here! Maybe you are ALICE or were ALICE sometime in your life. You know ALICE. Together, we can stand United for ALICE.



FREE FILE IS MORE THAN JUST TAXES

SCAMMED!

This year, the Free File volunteer tax preparers have worked with many clients -many who are elderly- who have been fraudulently signed up for Marketplace health insurance.

Here's why! The federal government is paying a portion of the premium for this insurance, and requires anyone who has a policy to file a tax return. Rates are based on household size and income, and applicants are required to report that information and the premium portions on their tax returns. If the amounts reported are incorrect, their return is automatically rejected and there is a chance they could owe back money to the government for the portion it paid.

When this happens, the Free File volunteer jumps into action. An office visit or a call to assist the client in reporting the fraud results in Marketplace flagging their account and voiding the policy. The tax payer is not liable.

But if the tax payer doesn't report the Marketplace insurance- because they didn't sign up for it!- their tax return does not get processed and the policy stays active, which then makes them liable for the policy.

This is what happened to George, an older gentleman who has been coming to our tax sites for years. This year he was rejected and upset. George never had this policy in previous years and he couldn't have signed up online... because he doesn't even have a cell phone. George gave Resource Coordinator Jennifer Brown permission to speak to Marketplace on his behalf and in just one day, the problem was fixed and George's return was accepted.



THE SWEETEST SUCCESS

Last tax season, a young couple had their tax returned prepared by David Coyle, a Free File volunteer serving at the Central-Clemson library. They asked some questions on how to handle their finances and David provided them with some advice and then referred them to Pathways, our amazing financial literacy coaching program.

They met with just once with Jennifer Brown, Resource Coordinator and accredited financial coach. The advice she gave them worked! They came back to have their taxes done again this year bursting with excitement over their news... they purchased their first home, partly in thanks to the financial advice and education they received from United Way of Pickens County. SWEET!

A VOLUNTEER PERSPECTIVE

Volunteers are the heartbeat of Free File, United Way of Pickens County's free tax preparation program. This year, we asked Curtis Curry to provide you with an insiders perspective and to share his experience as a Free File Site Coordinator. Here is what Curtis had to say:

"I have been involved in tax preparation since my high school days, about fifty years ago. In 2022, while browsing through the Clemson Community Paper, I stumbled upon an opportunity to volunteer to help people file their tax returns- a field I am quite familiar with. I decided to meet with Nicole Zeiset, United Way of Pickens County's Free File Manager, to learn more. During our discussion, she proposed that I take on the role of Site Coordinator. Given my recent retirement and the desire to fill my time meaningfully, I gladly accepted. My motivation stems from a genuine desire to assist others.

"In November 2022, I started volunteering at the library to assist people with their tax filings. As the Site Coordinator, my responsibilities include ensuring the site's readiness by arriving early to stay ahead of tasks, and reviewing the work of the tax preparers to ensure accuracy.

"This year I passed exams and became certified to assist international students with their taxes, so now I provide support in that area. Recently, I used my new international student tax certification at the tax site in Pendleton, which presented some challenges, but I found the experience quite rewarding. There was added complexity due to the additional forms that these students needed to fill out, but I managed to assist around thirty individuals within a five-hour span. Many of the students spoke decent English, which helped the process. After leaving the site, I was very satisfied with being able to provide valuable assistance to numerous people. Helping others is a passion of mine, and while the task was more demanding, it was also extremely fulfilling."

Thanks to Curtis and 33 other amazing Free File volunteers, **more than 2000 tax payers were assisted this year.**



UNITED WAY OF PICKENS COUNTY

FREE FILE

Total Returns Filed: 2,092

\$1,587,588
in total refunds

\$477,250
saved in fees

\$832
average refund

Total Community Impact: \$2,064,938

Who We Served

\$21,350 Average Income

137 Veterans

204 Disabled

465 Non-Resident Students

970 Age 60+



SHOW ME THE MONEY!

Meet Mr. and Mrs. Money, AKA Ray and Lucia Cohen. He calls himself Mr. Money. We call Lucia Mrs. Money because she's been with him every step of the way. He's retired and the model of success... an expert on how to earn, save and wisely spend your money. One of his passions is to teach 4th graders about money... how to EARN it, how to SAVE it, how to SHARE it, and how to SPEND it smartly.

After years of United Way advocacy, in 2022, South Carolina passed a bill requiring a completion of a personal finance course to graduate from high school. Yahoo! While this is wonderful news, but it is likely too late. By that time, studies show that most money management habits (good or bad) have already been ingrained.

Managing money is best learned when students are in elementary and middle school. When you were that age, did you have an allowance? Were you required to do chores? Did you earn money by cutting grass or babysitting? What did you do with the money you earned?

Ray and Lucia, generous friends and major donors to United Way of Pickens County, created "Show Me the Money", or SMT\$\$\$\$, an after-school club at McKissick Academy of Science & Technology in Easley (MAST). Ray designed an innovative and fun curriculum, funded the program, and taught it this Fall to fifteen 4th grade students. Lucia was his muse, testing out all the games and activities. Parents were required to register their children and attend two parent meetings.

The underlying theme of the SMT\$\$\$\$ club was "earning, saving, sharing and spending money." We talked about ways to earn money even though you are only in the 4th grade. The kids were mesmerized to meet Lucas Durham, who owns a very successful local landscaping company called Landscape Perceptions. He shared that he was a student at MAST and coincidentally, when he was in the 4th grade, he started mowing lawns and earning money. The rest, they say, is history.



Ray and Lucia Cohen, center, received the United Way Dolly Parton Legacy Award for their work with financial literacy in Pickens County.



As they started to earn money, the students deposited it into Mr. Money's "Money Jar" every week. An IOU was issued, and the children learned how to keep a ledger. When the Fall semester ended, they received their cash back with interest! They graduated with a Money Master certificate, and were so proud to get their green Money Master hat. Best of all, they got to keep the money they earned... with interest!

The evaluations from both the parents and children were fantastic. Each and every one of the parents and children said they learned new skills and benefited so much from the SMT\$\$\$ experience.

Mr. Money returned for the second semester to address spending. Guest speaker Melissa Howard from South State Bank visited the classroom to teach the children about banks, checking and savings. I won't go into details, but after the very first week, I spent an hour at Publix comparison shopping instead of running down the aisles throwing whatever into my buggy ... and saved \$30.

Because the pilot program of SMT\$\$\$ was a complete success, the team at UWPC plans on teaching these vital skills and habits at additional elementary schools. We will also be working with state representatives to pass new legislation requiring financial literacy courses throughout grade and middle school.

If we can teach ALL young Pickens County students how to earn and manage their money, we will have taken a big step forward in our effort to cure poverty in the years ahead.





YOU CREATED A BEAUTIFUL PARTNERSHIP

United Way of Pickens County has partnered with the School District of Pickens County's Adult Education program to offer two financial literacy classes per month for students who are interested in learning about money. Taking our financial literacy classes is not a requirement, so the 5-10 students who show up each time are keen to not only earn a GED, but get a good paying job, where they can be self-sufficient and financially astute.

Some of the topics covered included Budgeting, Debt Reduction, Credit, Taxes, and Financial Institutions. And yes, some were even taught by our very own "Mr. Money."

Each class starts with a pre-assessment and discussion about the topic. After making a relevant connection to the students, the class focuses on improving skills and knowledge through practice, usually in the form of a game and treat. Class ends with post-assessment and a charge to put their new-found knowledge into practice and to discuss what they learned with their friends and family.

YOUR SUPPORT IS NEEDED

Many people in our community need financial literacy education. You have the power to expand successful United Way financial literacy programs and provide classes through non-profit partners, government institutions, and more schools in the future. The interest is already blossoming. We can't wait to get started, **but we need your help.**

It is only with YOUR support that we will be able to expand our outreach, cultivate both relationships and resources, and continue to provide financial education to people in Pickens County.

Please visit www.uwpickens.org/donate, or scan the QR code to the right to provide financial literacy classes for students, young and old, in our community. You can also mail your check- made out to United Way of Pickens County- to the address below.

Thank you for making a difference!



Donate

United Way of Pickens County | PO Box 96 | Easley, SC | 29641 | 864-850-7094 | www.uwpickens.org/donate