

COMMUNITY IMPACT HELP US FOCUS SESSIONS REPORT

July 2025



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In July 2025, United Way Fox Cities hosted five *Help Us Focus* sessions to engage donors, nonprofit partners, volunteers, and community members in shaping our next priorities. These interactive sessions explored current data, community needs, and future priorities across three of United Way’s impact areas: **Healthy Community, Youth Opportunity, and Financial Security.**

Community members completed activities to allocate funding, rank priorities, and share narrative input. This summary highlights key findings and provides recommendations to guide the implementation of a balanced and community-informed funding and engagement strategy.

Key Findings

1. Financial Security received the highest allocation in Activity 1, largely driven by concerns about housing instability, homelessness prevention, and basic needs.
2. Healthy Community was also prioritized, with mental health, access to healthcare, and food security consistently named as urgent issues.
3. In Youth Opportunity, participants leaned toward long-term solutions for the future but recognize the current childcare crisis as central in keeping kids safe while parents work.
4. Participants across all three impact areas valued crisis response and daily essentials for investment in the 2026 funding cycle and showed a clear preference to shift future strategic engagement efforts toward prevention and systems change.
5. Open-ended responses emphasized the importance of balancing investment in urgent needs with engagement of Community Impact in long-term problem-solving strategies—a “both/and” approach rather than “either/or.”

Considerations for 2026

We are ‘meeting a moment’ in 2026 (shifts in ecosystem of safety net programs and threats to affordability) where prioritization of funding for crisis response and daily essentials is necessary to meet our mission to improve lives.

Considerations for the future

Balance crisis response investment with upstream and systems-focused engagement across all impact areas – allowing partners to align based on impact area, synergy in the ecosystem, collaboration opportunities and readiness.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Approved by the board August 5, 2025

The community input gathered through the Help Us Focus sessions strongly indicates that all three investment impact areas—Healthy Community, Youth Opportunity, and Financial Security—remain essential. Participants consistently valued investment in crisis response and daily essentials, while also expressing support for strategic engagement in prevention and systems change in the long-term. To reflect this “both/and” perspective, we recommend the following actions for implementation in the 2026 funding cycle:

1. FUND ACROSS ALL THREE IMPACT AREAS

Input affirmed the importance of United Way’s focus areas. The 2026-27 funding cycle should invest in all three—with proportional emphasis based on need and urgency.

2. PRIORITIZE CRISIS RESPONSE AND DAILY ESSENTIALS

Given the current affordability crisis and stress on local safety nets, immediate needs such as food, housing, childcare, and mental health must remain central. This includes crisis response and basic needs across all three impact areas.

3. BEGIN STRATEGIC EXPLORATION OF UPSTREAM PREVENTION, PATHWAYS & SYSTEMS WORK

While participants acknowledged the importance of upstream efforts, especially Pathways & Potential and System Solutions, many noted that United Way Fox Cities may not yet be the right funder for multi-year, systems change investment. The Community Impact team should play a lead role in the community engagement work of advancing systems change solutions including potential support staffing, resourcing, back-boning and convening roles.

FULL REPORT | HELP US FOCUS SESSIONS: JULY 2025

- Tuesday, July 8th (In-Person)
- Wednesday, July 9th (Virtual)
- Monday, July 14th (Virtual)
- Tuesday, July 15th (In-Person)
- Wednesday, July 16th (In-Person)

Help Us Focus was a series of five interactive sessions hosted by United Way Fox Cities in July 2025, designed to engage donors, volunteers, nonprofit partners, and community members in identifying what is most urgent and what is most strategic for our community as we prepare for the launch of UWFC’s new annual Impact Based Funding model.

These sessions invited participants to consider:

- Community data
- 211 caller needs and service gaps
- Landscape analysis
- Forces of change

Over 100 community members helped assess where we should focus and how we can make the greatest difference within three of United Way’s four core impact areas: Healthy Community, Youth Opportunity, and Financial Security. While Community Resiliency, the recently added fourth impact area, was not a

direct focus of these sessions due to the way its programs are funded, relevant insights (such as 211 data and cross-cutting trends) were integrated into the early framing and discussion.

The community members contributed both quantitative input (ranking priorities and identifying intensity of need) and qualitative insight (open-ended reflections on emerging issues, needs, and opportunities). This document synthesizes those inputs to guide future strategy, funding decisions, and community conversations.

We’re deeply grateful to everyone who joined us in focusing on what matters today and for the future, in both funding and engagement strategies.

ACTIVITY 1: PARTICIPANT ALLOCATION ACROSS IMPACT AREAS

Description: Each participant was given a hypothetical \$100 (in \$10 increments) to distribute across the designated impact areas: Healthy Community, Youth Opportunity, Financial Security.

Purpose: To understand which areas participants believe should receive the most investment and how they prioritize United Way’s core impact areas relative to one another.

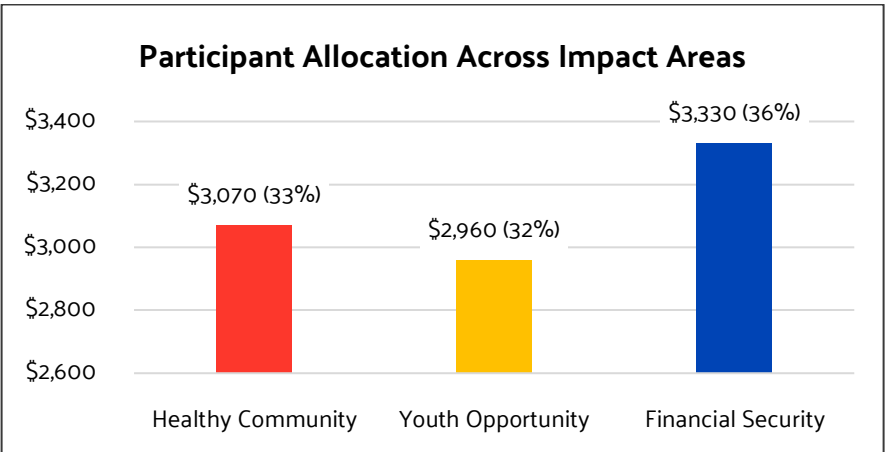


Figure 1. Participant Allocation Across Impact Areas

Analysis: As shown in Figure 1, Financial Security received the largest share of participant allocation (36%), followed closely by Healthy Community (33%, and Youth Opportunity (32%). While the differences are not dramatic, they suggest a slight preference toward investing in programs within the financial security impact area.

Open-ended responses (Activity 3b) suggest that this may be largely driven by concerns around housing instability and homelessness prevention, both of which fall under Financial Security. Several participants mentioned the urgent and visible nature of housing-related crises in the community, especially for ALICE families.

In parallel, the strong investment in Healthy Community likely reflects the importance participants placed on mental health, substance use, and access to healthcare, which were consistently named in narrative

feedback. Interest in Youth Opportunity was highly focused on the issue of childcare and ensuring safe places for children while parents are at work.

ACTIVITY 2: ALIGNING INVESTMENT WITH INTENSITY OF SUPPORT

Description: Participants, grouped into teams, were given \$100 (in \$10 increments) per impact area and asked to allocate those dollars across five areas of investment for need intensity:

- Crisis Response–immediate support to ensure safety, stability, and survival.
- Daily Essentials–supporting ongoing access to core needs that support daily life & wellbeing.
- Upstream Prevention–helping prevent crises by promoting long-term health and wellness.
- Pathways & Potential–ensuring skill-building and development opportunities for long-term self-sufficiency.
- System Solutions–facilitating efforts to address root causes, shift structures, and improve community-wide systems.

They repeated this activity for each of the three impact areas from Activity 1, encouraging them to think deeply about how funding should be used, not just where it should go.

Purpose: To assess how participants believe United Way should approach community issues—whether by addressing urgent needs, meeting daily essentials, or focusing on longer-range solutions such as prevention, opportunity-building, and system-level change.

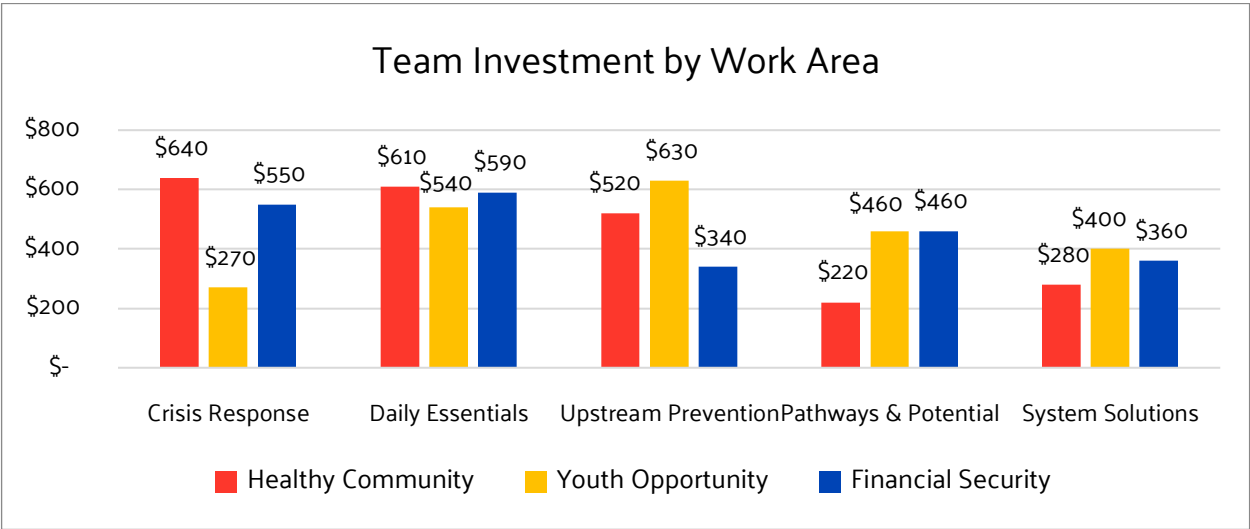


Figure 2. Team Investment by Work Area

Analysis:

Healthy Community

Participants invested most heavily in Crisis Response (\$640) and Daily Essentials (\$610), signaling a strong emphasis on meeting basic and immediate needs. This aligns with qualitative responses highlighting mental health and food access. Some participants explicitly mentioned the need to support those in crisis while also beginning to “shift the system.” Upstream Prevention also received a substantial

portion (\$520), suggesting recognition of the importance of early intervention in public health. Investments in Pathways & Potential (\$220) and System Solutions (\$280) were comparatively lower, indicating a lesser—but still present—focus on long-term approaches within this area.

Youth Opportunity

Again, Daily Essentials (\$540) saw a strong investment, emphasizing the need for childcare options in supporting parents' ability to work and provide basic needs for their families.. But, in this impact area, Crisis Response (\$270) and System Solutions (\$400) were somewhat lower, suggesting a general preference for prevention over response in youth programming. The distribution of funding leaned toward Upstream Prevention (\$630) and Pathways & Potential (\$460), in recognition of the fact that childcare solutions cannot fully be met by accessible, available childcare – but require advocacy for systems solutions. Participants recognized the difference between family needs in the 2026 cycle and required upstream investment for future solutions to the childcare system.

Financial Security

Funding in this area was a more balanced distribution across all five levels of work. However, Daily Essentials (\$590) and Crisis Response (\$550) received the most investment, affirming concerns about basic economic needs like housing and emergency financial support. One participant summed this up well: “Immediate needs, but in a way that is sustainable.” Pathways & Potential (\$460) and System Solutions (\$360) also received meaningful support, indicating an appetite for addressing long-term financial mobility and system-wide change. Upstream Prevention (\$340) was the lowest, perhaps reflecting the challenge of defining “prevention” in economic contexts or a perceived need for more immediate intervention.

Key Takeaways:

- Across all impact areas, Daily Essentials and Crisis Response consistently received significant investment, underscoring ongoing concerns around access to basic needs.
- Youth Opportunity was the only area where Upstream Prevention and Pathways & Potential received higher investment, suggesting participants view youth support as a forward-looking, growth-oriented strategic priority for the future.
- System Solutions, while generally receiving the lowest investment, still drew notable support, especially in Financial Security and Youth Opportunity, indicating a growing interest in long-term structural change, despite being a lower funding priority.

ACTIVITY 3A: WHERE SHOULD WE FOCUS—NOW AND IN THE FUTURE?

Description: In this final exercise, each participant was asked to reflect on five types of need intensity funding that United Way engages in—Crisis Response, Daily Essentials, Upstream Prevention, Pathways & Potential, and System Solutions. For each, they indicated how they perceive United Way's involvement today and what they believe it should be in the future. Responses were categorized as:

- **Somewhat Our Work**

- **Our Work**
- **Mission Critical Work**

This allowed participants to express both the current alignment and the desired future focus of United Way’s work across the continuum of reactive to proactive strategies, in investing and in strategic engagement.

Purpose

To identify shifts in perception about which types of work United Way should prioritize in the future, offering insight into where community stakeholders see the greatest opportunity—or responsibility—for impact.

Analysis:

Figure 3 (*Average Net Change of Work - Need Intensity - Types*) captures the overall directional trend for each work type, indicating the average shift in work area from “Now” to “Future” across all participants. Notably, System Solutions emerged with the most significant net positive shift (+62%), followed by Pathways & Potential (43%) and Upstream Prevention (+39%). These results signal growing interest in long-term, upstream, and system-level solutions that address root causes rather than symptoms.

In contrast, Daily Essentials and Crisis Response exhibited small or negative directional trends, with Crisis Response showing the largest net decrease (–24%), suggesting that some participants see this work as less central to United Way’s strategic future, despite our foundational mission focus on this intensity of need. However, the interpretation is more nuanced than a simple reprioritization.

Note: the net change model in Figure 3 captures directional movement but does not reflect the number of respondents who indicated no change.

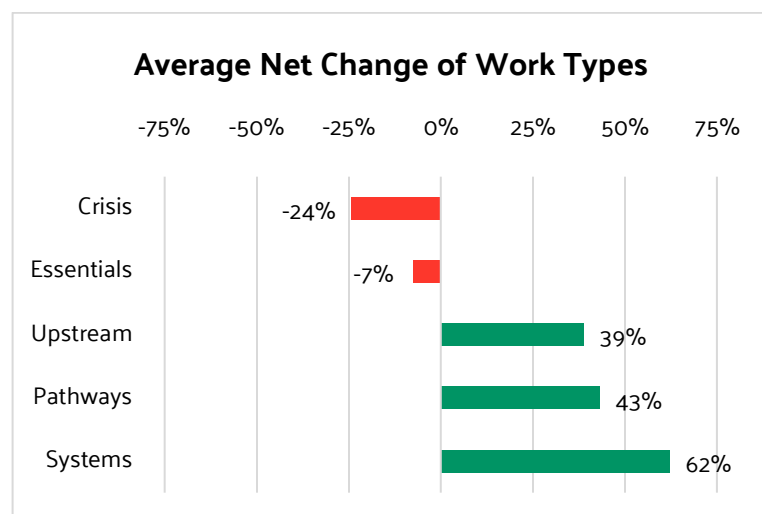


Figure 3. Average Net Change of Work Types

Figure 4 provides greater detail, showing how many participants recommended increasing, decreasing, or maintaining focus on each area. For example, 59% of participants supported increased emphasis on

System Solutions, while 57% felt that Crisis Response should remain unchanged, indicating that while fewer participants want to grow crisis response efforts, many still see it as the core of United Way’s investing role.

Qualitative responses reinforce this balanced perspective. Many participants advocated for a shift toward proactive and systemic approaches, emphasizing the need to “move upstream” and “address root causes, not just symptoms” through strategic engagement efforts. At the same time, respondents cautioned against neglecting investment in crisis and basic needs, particularly in areas like housing, mental health, and food access—issues that continue to place urgent demands on the community. Several comments underscored the idea that investing funds in immediate intervention remains vital, even as we invest more strategic capacity in prevention and systems change.

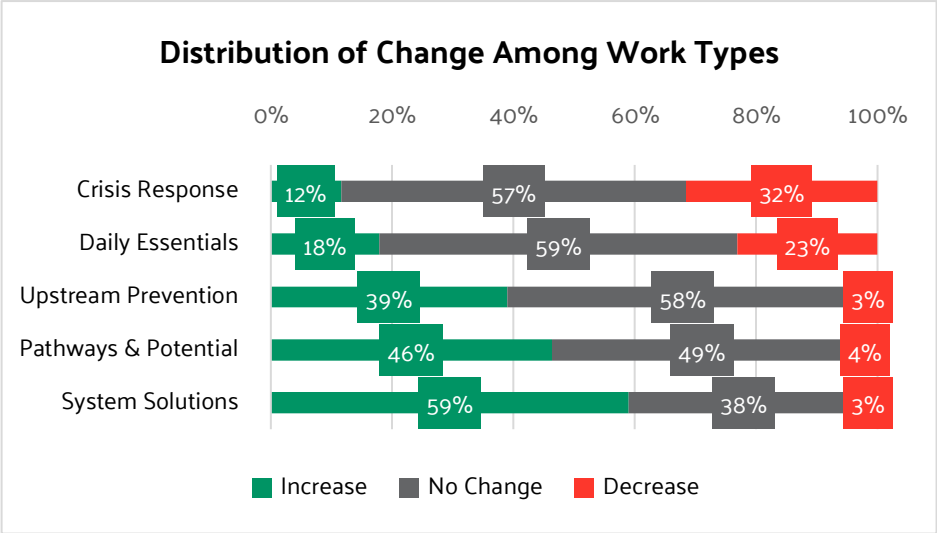
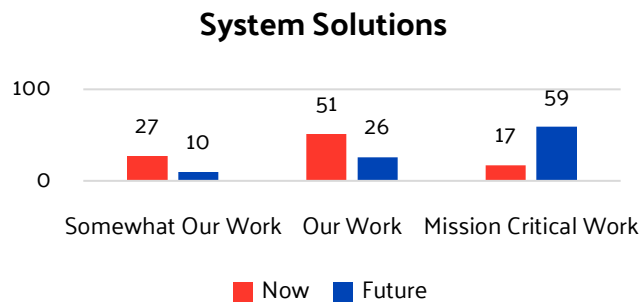
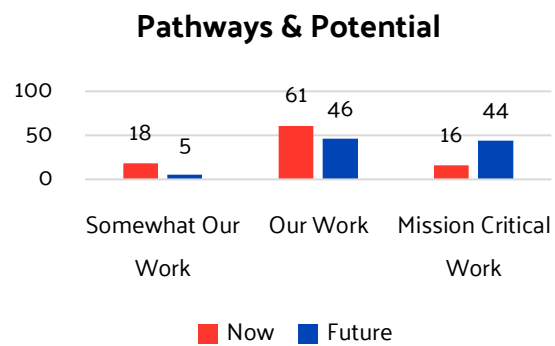
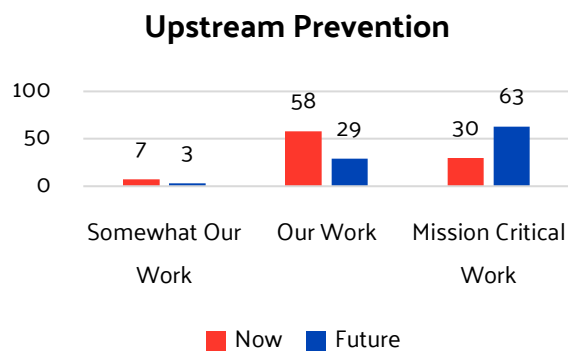
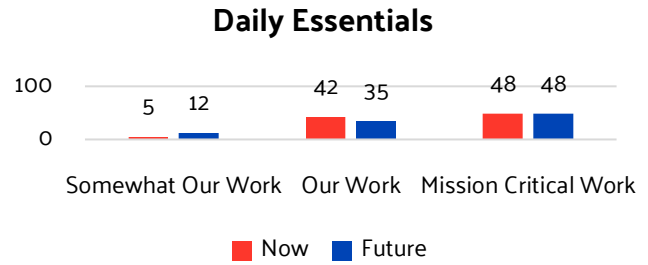
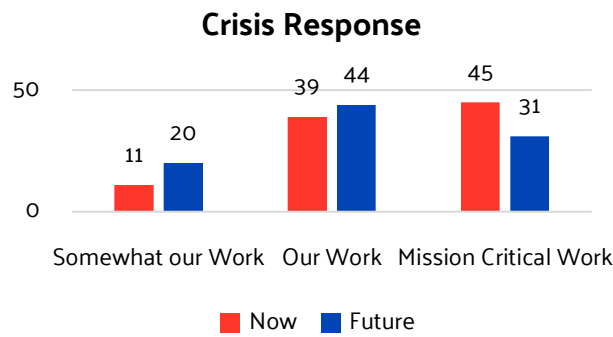


Figure 4. Distribution of Change Among Work Types

This duality—urgent response and sustainable transformation—is reflected in the five detailed charts that follow. Each visual compares how participants currently perceive United Way’s engagement in a specific type of work versus how they believe future focus should shift. These charts illustrate not just directionality, but also intensity of sentiment across the three levels (Somewhat Our Work, Our Work, and Mission Critical Work), offering a more complete view of evolving community expectations – for both investment and engagement strategies.

Together, these quantitative and qualitative insights suggest that stakeholders envision a “both/and” approach: sustaining critical response efforts while investing in longer-term strategies that can prevent future crises and advance equity.



Figures 5-9, Current vs Future Perceived Role by Work Area

ACTIVITY 3B: SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK: OPEN-ENDED RESPONSES

As part of the final activity, participants were invited to share open-ended reflections (n=83) on what they believe United Way Fox Cities should consider when prioritizing its work. The responses reflect thoughtful, varied perspectives and reveal several consistent themes.

A central theme across many responses was the need to **balance short-term crisis response with long-term systems change**. Participants consistently acknowledged the importance of investment in meeting

immediate needs—such as housing, food, childcare, and mental health support—while also emphasizing the need to engage strategically in upstream efforts that address root causes. There was recognition that both approaches are necessary and that United Way Fox Cities plays a unique role in bridging these strategies across the continuum of care. Some noted the challenge of distinguishing what constitutes a “crisis” versus a long-term issue, particularly in today’s evolving landscape.

Participants also strongly emphasized the importance of **collaboration and alignment among funders, nonprofits, and systems partners**. Several noted that other philanthropic partners are engaging in similar strategic exercises and expressed a desire to see greater coordination, shared funding strategies, and aligned priorities. Some responses highlighted the stress nonprofits face when funding priorities shift or when funding becomes siloed, urging attention to sustainability and the risk of funding cliffs.

In addition, there were repeated calls to **center the voices not in the room and representation**. This included support for culturally specific organizations, attention to ALICE families and other underrepresented populations, and the importance of inclusive decision-making processes. Participants encouraged United Way to consider the **interconnectedness of community challenges** and to use **data and shared outcomes** to inform strategy.

HIGHLIGHTED PARTICIPANT REFLECTIONS

Some edited for clarity and readability.

1. Balancing Urgency with Long-Term Strategy

“When I think United Way, I don’t think short-term/band-aid. United Way has always, in my opinion, balanced the need between crisis response and longer-term sustainability well... Plenty of funders are poised to support crisis, but we need to also support the future. Be mindful of funding cliffs... Some agencies may not need support now, but they will later.”

“The number of families experiencing ALICE is increasing...it will be CRITICAL in the next few years to provide Basic Needs / Daily Essential support so folks can keep on keeping on without completely falling apart.”

2. Culturally Grounded Solutions

“It is important to take into consideration access to funding for culturally based organizations... The way work needs to be done in cultural communities is very different than mainstream approaches... Systems change needs to be redefined to reflect what long-term success looks like for these communities.”

“The health and well-being of families is essential as health impacts every aspect of our lives, especially lives of underrepresented communities. Culturally specific resources and advocacy services help ensure that their needs are met as well.”

3. Investing in Resilient Infrastructure

“Short-term crisis response will be crucial. But long-term, we need to adapt our built environment... Streets should be built to promote safety and community wealth/beauty—not traffic speed and volume. These solutions build resilience.”

“Outdoor physical activity is one of the most important prevention activities for mental and physical health, but our daily life is not built to promote it for the majority of residents.”

4. Collective Impact and Sustainability

“Immediate needs, but in a way that is sustainable. Oftentimes services are developed that can’t be sustained—and that can be more detrimental. Collaboration is key and should be resourced. I see United Way as a foundation that can help others collaborate.”

“Few thoughts, just went through a similar exercise at the Community Foundation...Is there a possibility for collaboration on short- and long-term funding? Such as pooling a crisis fund for those unexpected needs. Also pooling for systems change, which is a long game.”

5. Inclusive Decision-Making and Systems Leadership

“Disaggregate data by demographics—race, age, gender. Take a targeted universalism approach. Get input from people who aren’t in the room today....”

“If everyone shifts to systems solutions while de-emphasizing crisis response, it creates a gap. How can United Way become the source for planning and developing the ‘work’ within our community?”

NEXT STEPS

The Community Impact Team looks forward to sharing these results, through this report, the Board-approved priorities for investment in the 2026 funding cycle and our future focus for strategic engagement with all participants and the community at large. Community input opportunities will continue as the Team begins to focus on the application, reporting, volunteer engagement and review processes for the upcoming funding/investment cycle.