

HOUSTON GIVES

# United Way of Greater Houston marks a century of service, helping families achieve a sustainable financial future

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This year, the United Way of Greater Houston blew out 100 candles as it celebrated a century of service, helping Houstonians in a four-county region negotiate pathways to greater financial stability.

As it marks its centennial milestone, the nonprofit has developed a new strategic plan for the future as it embarks on its 2022-23 annual community campaign, which kicked off Sept. 21 with a new campaign chair, Eric Tanzberger, senior vice president and chief financial officer of Service Corp. International.

With the campaign, United Way hopes to exceed the \$57.05 million raised in 2021-22, a period that saw it support more than 2 million households in a wide-ranging array of partner services, including health care, child care and youth development, education, workforce and financial coaching, domestic violence services, tax preparation and family counseling.

United Way's local goals will play out this year against a backdrop of increasing need in the community, brought on by the ongoing pandemic and national inflation that has made it more difficult for families to make ends meet. According to United Way's Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed report, 14 percent of Greater Houston's households are living on incomes below the federal poverty level and another 33 percent of working households don't earn enough to afford basic necessities.

## How to help

To donate to United Way of Greater Houston, visit [unitedwayhouston.org](https://unitedwayhouston.org).

The 211 Texas/United Way helpline is available for residents of Fort Bend, Harris, Montgomery and Waller counties. In 2021 the helpline, which operates 24/7, connected more than 1.1 million people with services. Dial 211 for assistance.

We asked Amanda McMillian, president and CEO of United Way of Greater Houston, about the organization's work, greatest needs and future goals as it begins its new campaign.

**Q: How have the pandemic and today's inflation (with rising food, rent and utility costs) affected local households and your strategy for helping families find their paths to financial stability?**

A: When the pandemic hit in early 2020, the sudden loss of jobs, wages and child care created an unprecedented economic crisis, especially for those in our community who were already struggling to make ends meet. In 2020 and 2022, research by Rice University's Kinder Institute for Urban Research reported that nearly 30 percent of all area residents couldn't come up with \$400 in an emergency. Now inflation, which has significantly increased the cost of basic necessities, puts an added burden on a family budget that is already stretched.

These recent economic events reinforce the critical need for United Way's role in helping families and individuals achieve a more sustainable financial future. As we unite donors, volunteers and community partners to remove barriers to a better future for these families and individuals, this work will have a lasting impact on our community.

**Q: With 33 percent of Houston households unable to afford basic necessities, are your goals achievable?**

A: While we know the need in the community is greater than ever, our 13 years of prior work through our Thrive financial stability program have shown us that we can make a difference for those who are ready to make the journey. Our new strategic direction is based on these prior learnings and has several unique components that play an important role in achieving our goals. We have developed an integrated client journey that allows families and individuals, when they are ready, to create their own customized plan for programs and services based on their unique goals and needs. A trained navigator works one-on-one with families as a coach, supporting them as they determine their goals and build an individualized plan to achieve them. Throughout the journey, our United Way partner organizations are working more closely together to address individual

needs, dramatically increasing access to services and programs and making it much easier for families and individuals to engage various services as needed.

Additionally, United Way recognized that Black, Indigenous and people of color, or BIPOC, communities have been disproportionately impacted by economic, educational and assistance disparities caused by systemic racism and other barriers. We created 13 priority regions, based on United Way data showing a density of households likely to benefit from these services and density of BIPOC households. All of our investments in services and agencies are evaluated on how they incorporate diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging into policies, practices and service delivery. We feel this is an important part of our work to make headway against racism and underrepresentation.

**Q: Local service organizations are good at responding to immediate disasters and needs, but your long-term vision is different. Explain.**

A: Immediate disasters, such as a pandemic, hurricane or even the winter freeze, can have a huge impact on a person's financial stability. When disaster strikes, United Way will continue its leadership role in helping the community recover. We work in partnership with the Greater Houston Community Foundation to convene the donors and partners that can direct resources where they are most needed. United Way's long-term vision is to reach a point where more families don't need the support of service organizations when disaster strikes because they already have the tools and resources to overcome this barrier.

**Q: Explain your new technology platform to connect service providers with those who need help.**

A: When you're working multiple jobs, caring for a family and living paycheck to paycheck, navigating the network of social service resources can be extremely daunting. The integrated client journey technology tool addresses that disparity by improving access to these resources and making it easier to connect clients with services as they are needed on a journey to financial stability. Trained navigators will use this technology tool as they guide clients on their individualized plans to achieving their goals. No one should have to tell their story 10 times to access different programs, so we are working to reduce that barrier significantly.

The technology tool will also integrate data from United Way's partners and the 211 Texas/United Way helpline to not only identify available services and

resources throughout the region but also identify where adjustments in services are needed to better address unmet, emerging or changing needs in the community.

**Q: How do you see United Way evolving and meeting its goals as you look toward another century of service?**

A: United Way's new strategic direction is data- and outcomes-driven. Our review of data will be ongoing to ensure our investments in services are meeting needs and making a difference in the community, as well as to identify any opportunities for adjustments that will better address the needs of those we serve.

United Way is also building relationships and collaborating with new and different partners in its efforts to holistically address the challenges many families face. One example is a new partnership with the Kinder Institute to study the challenges faced by financially struggling households and the impact of strategies aimed at helping them improve their financial stability and resilience. We continue to look for new ways to engage more of our community in lifting up our neighbors, which lifts up all of us.

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