



UNITED WAY
East Central
Iowa

THE WHY BEHIND UWECI

A comprehensive story guide that showcases
United Way of East Central Iowa's positive change
in our community.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

As a trusted nonprofit leader, United Way of East Central Iowa (UWECI) identifies top needs in our community, brings partners together, and implements effective solutions that change people's lives. Throughout our work in the community, UWECI has created an impact within four key focus areas and beyond, which includes youth opportunity, financial security, healthy community, and community resiliency.

This story guide highlights excerpts from United Way's impact right here in East Central Iowa. These stories are just a few of the ways that our organization has risen above challenges, come together, and changed the stories for our friends and neighbors. Just as we have encouraged volunteers, investors, and advocates to find their "why" for supporting our organization, we've done the same by compiling these impact stories.

Welcome to The Why Behind UWECI – a comprehensive story guide that showcases UWECI's positive change in our community.

STORY #1 - WHY UNITED WAY OF EAST CENTRAL IOWA

At United Way of East Central Iowa, we believe strong communities don't happen by accident. They are built when people come together and help one another to transform East Central Iowa and change the story for our friends and neighbors.

One of those people who has given back through UWECI is the 2026-2027 Board Chair, Nick Nielsen. Nick's start in supporting United Way was kickstarted through what was known as Young Leaders Society at the time, now Emerging Leaders United. For him, it was believing in the impact United Way makes when our community is facing challenges.

“UWECI works hard to understand the immediate and long-term needs of our community, and they’ve provided leadership, support, and guidance when needed. In times of need, you can count on UWECI to step up to the challenge and serve our people,” Nick said about his why for supporting United Way.

Nick and his wife, Wendy, are active UWECI supporters, giving at the Sinclair Society leadership giving level and serving as the 2025-2026 Campaign Co-Chairs.



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STORY #2 - WHY YOUTH OPPORTUNITY

At United Way of East Central Iowa, we believe every child should have the opportunity to create a successful future and become tomorrow's leaders. This means kids have access to educational resources, like early childhood learning, out-of-school opportunities, and a path to college and career.

Right now in our community, we know that less than half of students in Linn County are ready to enter kindergarten. This means kids in our community are beginning their educational journey without the foundation, especially in reading, to be successful.

When you support United way, you are providing a path for local students to be successful starting with their little fingers wrapped around a pencil, all the way through their educational journey that ends with a cap and gown and college or career plans.



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STORY #3 - PACK THE BUS

With 1 in 3 households in East Central Iowa unable to afford basic essentials, it can be a challenge in getting students ready for school with new school supplies. From glue sticks to pencils and backpacks, ensuring local kids have what they need to be successful in the classroom was a need identified by UWEI and a community partner, which prompted a unique collaborative opportunity with local nonprofits and businesses.

In partnership with the Zach Johnson Foundation's Kids On Course Program and the Youth Advisory Board, a total of over 500 backpacks filled with school supplies were distributed to The Arc of East Central Iowa, Foundation 2 Crisis Services, Big Brothers Big Sisters, YPN, and Boys & Girls Club. Backpacks of school supplies were generously donated by Cummins, Transamerica, GreatAmerica, and Skogman Companies. Some companies hosted a backpack build in their workplace, while others donated supplies and the Youth Advisory Board members put backpacks together.

"For the Youth Advisory Board, this was the first small step toward something so much bigger than us. Giving something to your community is what our team is about," said a Youth Advisory Board member.



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STORY #4 - WHY FINANCIAL SECURITY

At United Way of East Central Iowa (UWECI), we believe every person should have the opportunity to move beyond survival and build a stable, secure future. This means friends and neighbors have a safe home and a quality job, creating a strong foundation for success.

In our East Central Iowa service area, 1 in 3 households struggle to make ends meet. This forces these families to often make tough choices, like paying the electric bill, putting food on the table, or getting new tires for their car.

UWECI focuses on programs that help individuals and families move their budgets from survival to stable. This can be seen in our various programs and collaborations, like our Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) Program, the Opportunity Center, and more.



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STORY #5 - VITA PROGRAM

One of United Way of East Central Iowa (UWECI)'s top financial security programs is their Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) Program, which provides free tax preparation services for income-eligible individuals and families. VITA is primarily run by volunteers, who donate their time by serving as greeters, site coordinators, and tax preparers. This last year, over 4,000 volunteer hours were logged through the program.

In 2026, the VITA Program brought over \$3 million back into the community through Federal and State tax returns. Because individuals and families were able to get money back through tax returns, they were able to put those dollars toward groceries, paying off debt, investing in education, or simply getting caught back up.

“Her eyes were getting wider and when I told her the amount of her two combined refunds, she put her head into both hands and started crying. After a pause, she looked up and said, ‘You just changed my life, and I can’t thank you enough. This will allow me to pay off all my debts and finally get back even,’” said a VITA Volunteer about the impact of this program.



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STORY #6 - LANDLORD-TENANT SUCCESS INITIATIVE

Having a safe living environment might often be something we all take for granted. For some individuals in our community, that is a challenge they are trying to overcome. That's why United Way of East Central Iowa (UWECI) partnered with several local organizations and government agencies to implement a program that partners housing-challenged individuals with for-profit landlords.

The Landlord and Tenant Success Initiative was started as a pilot program to increase housing opportunities and positive tenant outcomes for landlords and those exiting homelessness. Since the initiative started in November 2024, 88 adults and 62 children have been housed.

“We’ve seen firsthand how powerful a coordinated homeless response system can be. By aligning data, programs, and best practices, our community is not just responding to homelessness, we are building lasting solutions. Systems-level work allows us to see the bigger picture, identify gaps, and create collaborative strategies that truly change lives. Together with partners, like United Way, we are proving homelessness is not inevitable, it is solvable.” -J’Nae Peterman, Homeless Systems Manager

We’re seeing results right here of the power of collaboration in addressing homelessness in our community. In our community, we’ve seen a 12% decrease in homelessness over the past year, while the entire State of Iowa has seen a 35% increase.



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**ENSURING NEIGHBORS
HAVE A SAFE HOME**



STORY #7 - WHY HEALTHY COMMUNITY

At United Way of East Central Iowa (UWECI), we believe every person should have the opportunity to achieve their best health and well-being. This means local individuals and families have access to nutritious food and healthcare.

Two of the barriers often faced when accessing healthcare within our community are cost and transportation. More than 12,000 people living in East Central Iowa do not have health insurance. This is where UWECI comes in by providing programs or access to resources that support accessing healthcare services right here at home. A few examples of this are free rides for senior citizens to their medical appointments, help with navigating Medicare insurance, and assistance for women accessing health services.



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STORY #8 - MEDICAL TRANSPORTATION PROGRAM

For older individuals, one of the biggest challenges in achieving their best health is simply getting a ride to their medical appointment, especially in rural communities like Benton and Jones counties. That's why United Way of East Central Iowa (UWECI) is proud to offer a free, volunteer-supported program that gets senior citizens to their medical appointments, providing them with the opportunity to remain independent and access high-quality health services.

In FY26, UWECI's medical transportation program had volunteers drive more than 46,000 miles in helping senior citizens in Benton and Jones counties get to 634 medical appointments.

"I don't know what I would do without these drivers. I do not own a car, and I can't afford to. I enjoy the conversations with my drivers during rides and feel very safe with every one of them." -Medical Transportation Client



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STORY #9 - SENIOR HEALTH INSURANCE INFORMATION PROGRAM (SHIIP)

When it comes time in someone's life to enroll in Medicare, it can be overwhelming to navigate all of the changes that come with that program. That's why United Way of East Central Iowa (UWECI) is proud to offer the Senior Health Insurance Information Program (SHIIP). This program pairs knowledgeable volunteers with individuals who are looking to apply for Medicare health insurance. Volunteers walk through all of the Medicare options and help individuals better understand the benefits associated with each kind of coverage, empowering individuals to make the best choice for themselves and their situation.

In 2025-2026, SHIIP volunteers made over 260 client contacts, which resulted in over 210 hours of educating and assisting individuals with understanding Medicare coverage options.

"I couldn't begin to count the number of folks I've met either in town or through SHIIP. You need someone you can talk to and who you can trust, because the topic is kind of personal. And when someone walks out of the office at the Volunteer Center and they are in tears because they are relieved to know what's going on with their Medicare coverage, that's the kind of thing that gives you goosebumps." -Tom Osborne, SHIIP Volunteer and Iowa Governor's Volunteer Award Winner



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STORY #10 - WOMEN UNITED

Since its inception in 2006, Women United, an Impact Network within United Way of East Central Iowa (UWECI), has raised nearly \$4 million and helped make over 59,000 health-related encounters possible for local women.

Women United's mission is centered on uniting funds and resources to help women achieve their best health, especially those women in our community who are un- or under-insured. Funds raised by Women United help local partners provide needed health services, such as annual exams, maternal health services, vision care, prescriptions, and much more.

“Women all around us are facing more and more challenges and pressures. This group is working to put real solutions into place to support women. Unfortunately, their health is usually the first thing pushed off their plate. Diagnoses, additional challenges, and access just add to the stress. By doing this work, we are supporting women when they need it the most.” -Erica Bergfeld-Reed, Women United Vice Chair



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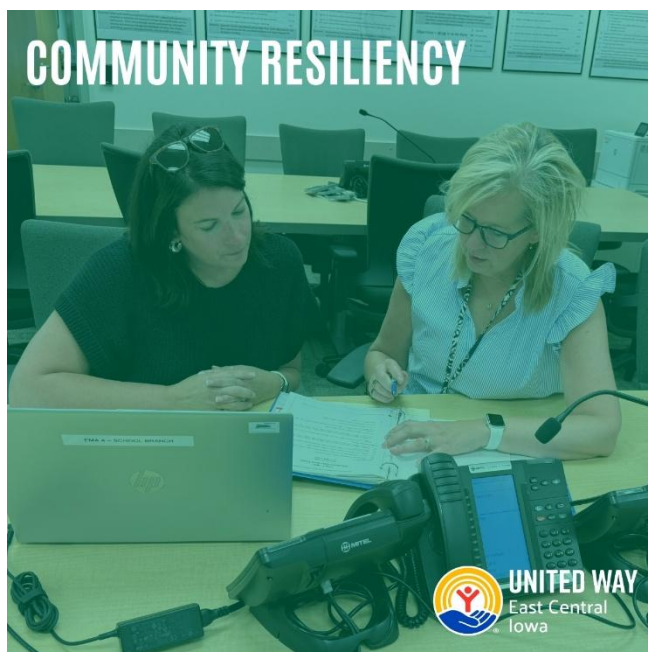
STORY #11 - WHY COMMUNITY RESILIENCY

At United Way of East Central Iowa (UWECI), we believe every person should have the opportunity to live in a community that thrives through any challenge. This means our community can prepare, respond, and recover from any emergency, becoming stronger than we were before.

In East Central Iowa, we have had our fair share of disasters, like the 2020 derecho or 2008 flood. It's pivotal in times like those that we have a coordinated response to meeting the needs of our community. That's why UWECI is proud to partner with several local organizations through Linn Area Partners Active in Disaster (LAP-AID) in responding to our community's needs during a crisis.

By partnering with LAP-AID, UWECI has been able to offer its expertise in volunteer coordination by standing up the Volunteer Reception Center (VRC) during times of crisis. This means UWECI leads LAP-AID's volunteer coordination and deployment, making help from local individuals and groups possible at times when it is needed most.

“United Way of East Central Iowa has an established network that can be surged during a response, doing things from communications to resource and volunteer coordination. Our community is stronger because of their partnership.” -Julie Stephens, LAP-AID Vice Chair and Emergency Preparedness & Disaster Recovery Specialist at Linn County Public Health



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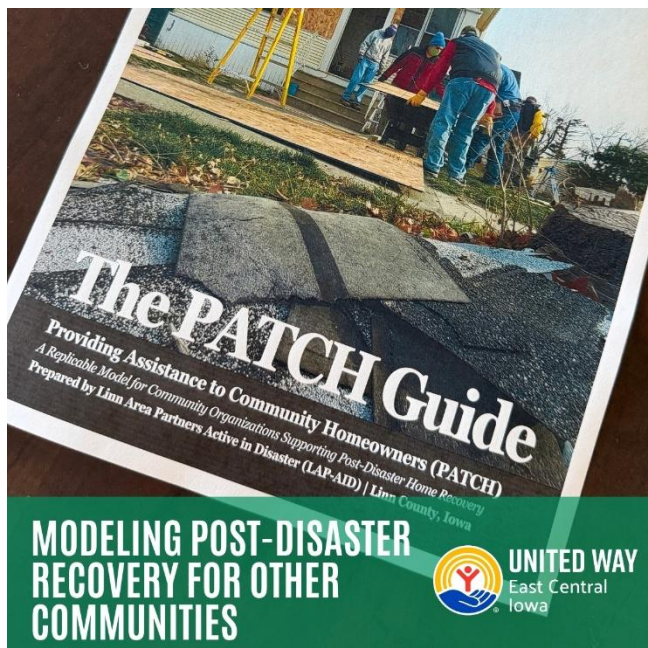
STORY #12 - PATCH GUIDE

After the derecho struck in August 2020, it was immediately known that homeowners in our community were going to need assistance rebuilding after the storm. That's why United Way of East Central Iowa (UWECI) joined many local organizations and government agencies in implementing the Providing Assistance to Community Homeowners (PATCH) program.

The PATCH program helped 292 households use financial assistance for completing home repairs after the storm, providing them with a stable living environment after one of the most destructive storms our community has witnessed.

As a result of the program, LAP-AID and its partners developed a PATCH Guide, a framework that explains how the program was created and how it can be replicated in other communities following a disaster. The guide is available for download on LAP-AID's website at: <https://www.linndisasterinfo.com/thepatchprogram>.

"The PATCH Guide captures practical lessons learned through Linn County's disaster recovery journey and offers a framework communities can adapt to strengthen local recovery efforts. Developed through the collaborative work of LAP-AID and community partners, like United Way, this guide highlights the power of partnership, innovation, and shared learning to help communities recover stronger together," said LAP-AID's Project Manager, Arika Mason, about how this guide will influence other communities rebuilding after disasters.



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