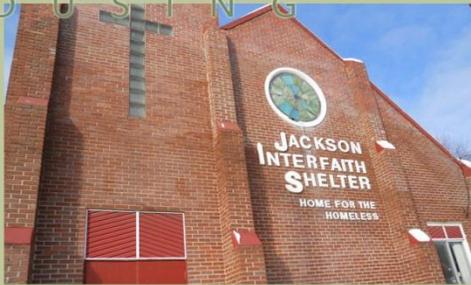




Jackson's Poor Living On The Edge

H O U S I N G



T R A N S P O R T A T I O N



J A C K S O N ' S P O O R

LIVING ON THE EDGE

E D U C A T I O N



E M P L O Y M E N T



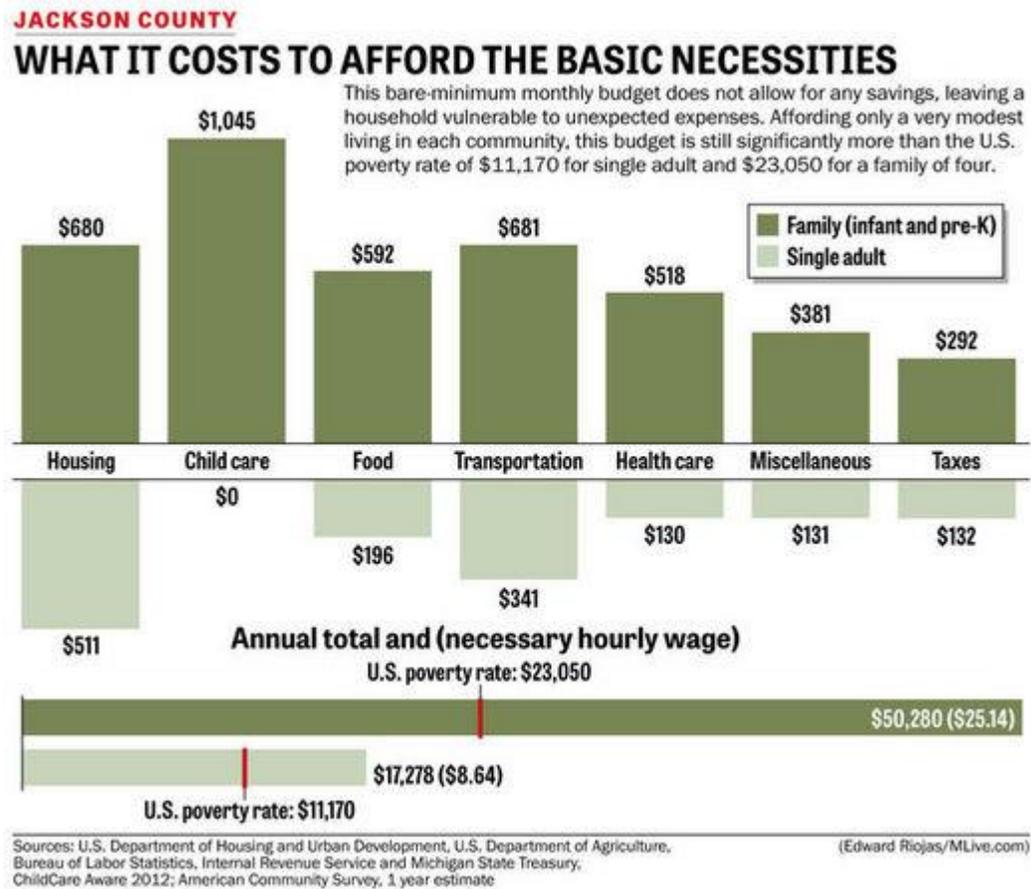
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Initiative to end poverty in the works

The United Way of Jackson County, Communication Action Agency and the Jackson District Library are leading an effort to identify the root causes of — and what do about — the high percentage of Jackson families who struggle to make ends meet.

“If we can permanently improve people’s economic situations, especially struggling households, the entire community benefits,” said Ken Toll, president and CEO of United Way of Jackson County.

In its early stages, the initiative hasn’t been named, but Megan Albertson, a facilitator for the project, said this is the time for long-term, substantial change. Data-driven conversations are beginning to outline the needs and wants of the community, building off existing networks to create responsive and effective structures, Albertson said.

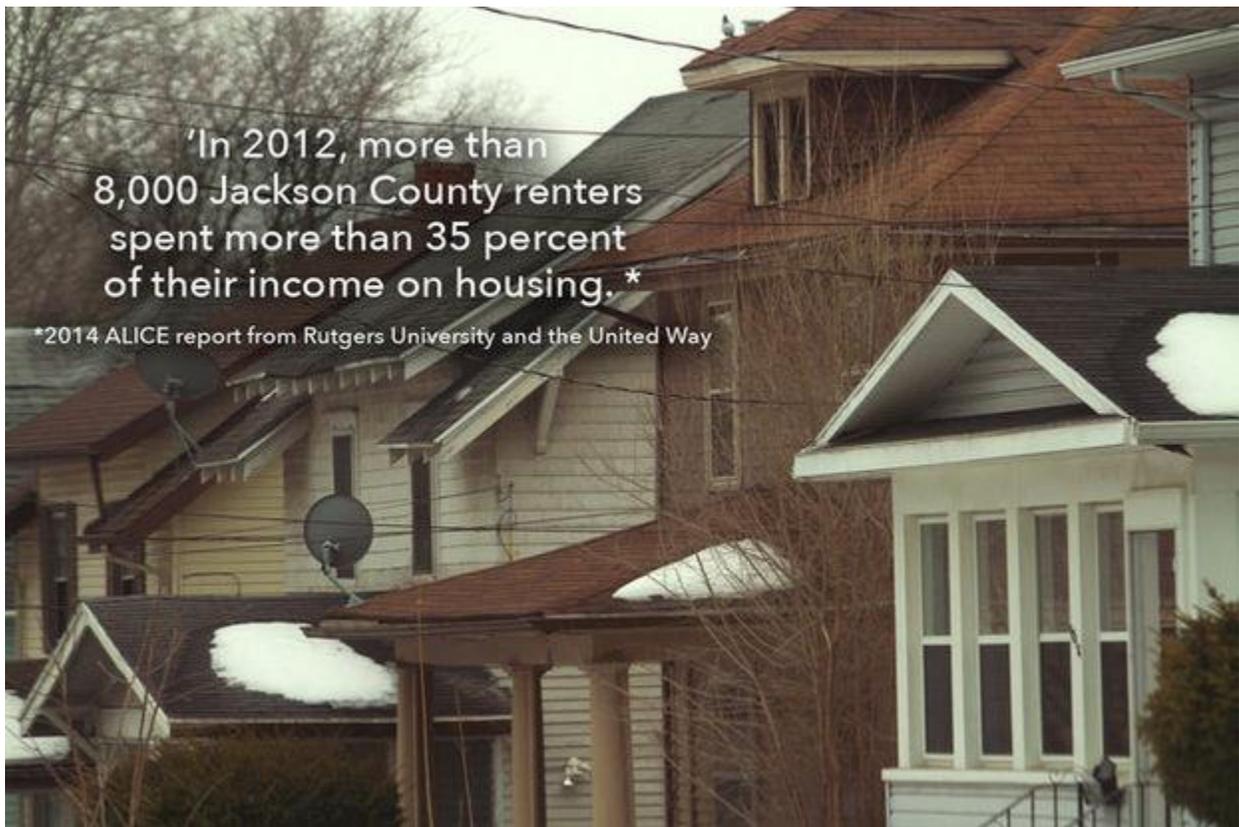


[The ‘ALICE’ community](#)

More than 40 percent of households in Jackson County are struggling to make ends meet with 18 percent below the poverty threshold, the recent "ALICE – Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed" report says.

Initiative coordinators and stakeholders say some of the most common issues impacting financial stability are housing, transportation, education and employment.

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Housing

A shortage of affordable housing in Jackson, and several other factors contribute to homelessness, Laura Reaume, Community Action Agency's program operations manager.

"If someone has a felony on their record, credit problems, or if they just don't make enough money, those are all reasons why people aren't able to stay housed," Toby Berry, CAA Chief Executive Officer said.



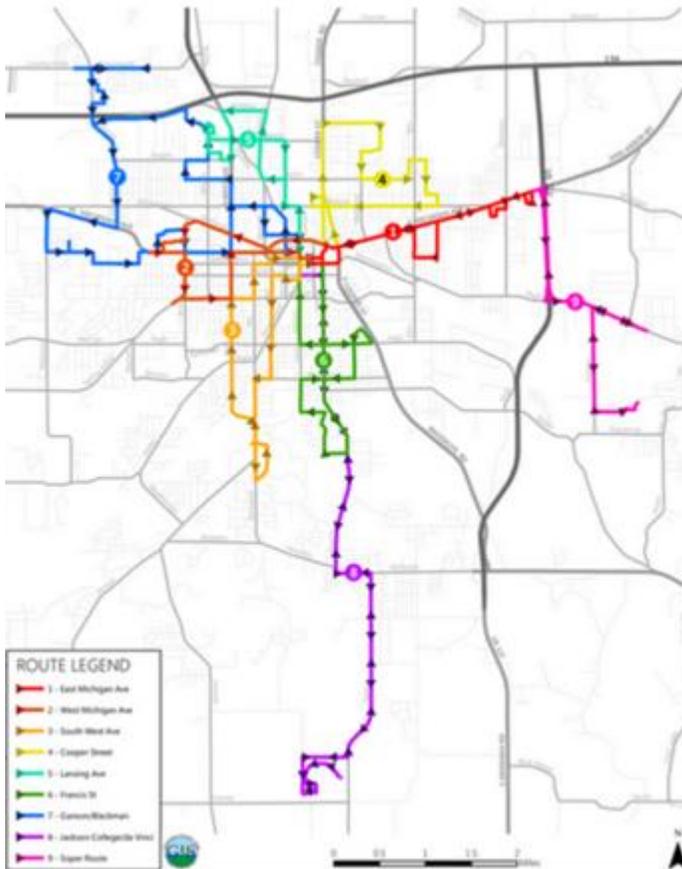
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‘Just happy to have four walls’

Kitrina Sims, manager of the Jackson Interfaith Shelter, said many people struggle to find suitable housing within their budget.

She said she has seen many people move into homes in poor conditions and others who move into homes without furniture or appliances.

“I can’t tell you how many people move into homes with no beds, no bedding,” Sims said. “I mean these people have children. And they are just happy to have four walls.”



Jackson Area Transportation Authority Bus Route.

Transportation

Sims said a major challenge for people trying to get back on their feet is transportation.

Many utilizing the shelter don’t have a vehicle. If they get a job, they must take the bus, which is insufficient in many cases, or use more costly measures like cabs or Reserve-a-Ride. If clients do opt for the buses, they have few options for routes outside city limits (see accompanying graphic) and won’t have transportation available after 6:15 p.m. or on Sundays.



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'It's about survival'

Stephen Merrill, 53, said he used to work as a drill press operator in a factory. Then he got laid off.

He was unemployed for nearly two years until May 2013 when he got a part-time job as a sign-holder for McThirsty's Pub.

He doesn't own a car and, in order to make it to work on time, he has to take the bus or bike from his home in Vandercook Lake. He says he does odd jobs on the side, working whenever he can, but can't seem to find a steady second job with his transportation situation.



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Employment

Achieving financial stability is impossible without income.

While there is a [shortage of workers in certain segments of the manufacturing industry](#), those jobs require post-secondary training. Without that, college or other training, the only employment options are for low-wage, entry-level positions.

The 2014 ALICE report states 63 percent of jobs in Michigan pay less than \$20 per hour, with the majority paying between \$10 and \$15 per hour. Manufacturing and construction jobs used to make up the majority of regional jobs. That is now dominated by lower-paying service jobs, primarily in education and health service, the report said.



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'Financially, it's a struggle'

Richard Rodriguez, 27, said he has been unemployed for the last three weeks.

He has worked numerous entry-level retail jobs, driven a taxi cab and worked in factories but has rarely been able to maintain employment for more than a year, leaving large gaps in his employment history.

He recently landed a new position with a marketing company but until his new job begins the father of two said he is trying to stretch his last paycheck as far as it will go.



Early Education

In 2012 more than 10,500 Jackson County children lived in poverty, according to the most recent kids count report.

Those children are already at a disadvantage for future financial success, a [national report from the Educational Testing Service](#) and Rutgers University in 2013 says.

"Compared with children whose families had incomes of at least twice the poverty line during their early childhood, poor children completed two fewer years of school, earned less than half as much money, worked 451 fewer hours per year, received \$826 per year more in food stamps, and were nearly three times as likely to have poor health," the report said.



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[Building on Cradle 2 Career](#)

Organizers of the financial stability initiative said existing networks already established for Cradle 2 Career and the Health Improvement Organization are being referenced to build the financial stability network.

[Energizing Education](#), a program within the Cradle 2 Career network, is already working to help not only low-income but all kindergarten through second-graders struggling with literacy. Twice a week, participants from six schools who read below grade level meet with a volunteer mentor to work on their reading skills.

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The end of 'silos'—a collective impact approach

[In 2011 The Stanford Social Innovation Review](#) published an article that outlined five elements of a collective impact approach necessary for success: a common agenda, shared measurement, mutually reinforcing activities, continuous communication and backbone support.

Berry thinks this approach, paired with momentum in the community, could lead to long-term change in Jackson.

“I think if we want to make wide community change, we can’t function in a silo,” Berry said. “It seems to me to be different than how we’ve done things in the past. ... I feel like we are at a tipping point where we really do have enough community support and people who are really focused that it could be a change for the whole community.”



Potential challenges

Outside of its scope and the complexity of an entire community working together towards a common goal, leaders expect a major challenge to the program to be misconceptions about the low-income population.

There is a common belief that people living in poverty are lazy or mentally ill, which is not always the case, Toll said.

“With something like housing, mindset is a huge issue. Neighbors don’t want poor people living in their area – or poor families think there is nothing out there for them. So changing mindsets sometimes can be huge,” Toll said.



What's next?

Toll said he hopes the initiative leads to some change by the end of the year.

Participants are currently working to establish a common agenda, highlighting specific issues impacting poverty and low-income households. Volunteers will then be broken up into smaller groups focused on a single issue and will work collaboratively to improve conditions leading to poverty and financial hardship.

The hope is to create a flexible and adaptable network that can reduce barriers and quickly react to unforeseen needs to prevent deep poverty in the future.



How to get Involved and Links

For volunteer opportunities, click here. <http://volunteer.uwjackson.org/>

To learn more or get involved, contact Megan Albertson at (517) 795-6758.

For more information on the similar initiatives, check out the following links:

[Cradle 2 Carrer website](#)

[Health Improvement Organization](#)