

LENAWEE UNITED WAY

Meet ALICE: hard-working but held back

By Amy Palmer



Have you met ALICE? Maybe you've seen our signs around town or heard us talking about ALICE. You may not know it, but you already know ALICE. In fact, you know a lot of ALICES.

ALICE residents are people we all depend on every day. They are cashiers, child care workers, food service personnel, librarians, health care aides, repair technicians, landscapers and auto mechanics; people you cross paths with on a daily basis.

ALICE is an acronym that stands for: Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. Those may be impersonal words, but they represent real people, real families and real neighbors. For behind the acronym are thousands of "real" ALICES: hard-working Lenawee County residents who live each day just one step away from a potential and debilitating crisis.

Lenawee United Way recently participated in a statewide study to take a deeper look at this unique population. What we found was startling — and has radically shifted the way we think about our community. The research shows that nearly one-quarter of Lenawee County falls into the ALICE population. The bottom line is that ALICE residents are upstanding citizens trying to make a living in Lenawee County. They are employed, but have low-paying jobs with little opportunity for advancement. They may have enough to eat and a roof over their heads, but nothing in their savings.

ALICE residents have many strengths and the potential to become financially stable; however, for ALICE residents, a "minor" setback such as a car repair, a leaky roof or the responsibility of caring for a loved one can catapult them into a spiral of poverty, homelessness and suffering.

Trisha, a single Lenawee County mom, fits the ALICE definition. Here is her story.

"When I look back three years ago, it seemed like I was taking one step forward and three steps back. I was working two or three jobs to support my family and struggling to pay the rent, the daycare, and the bills all by myself. I had no

child support or help from their dad. I was always worrying and stressed out about who, what, when, where, why and how. Even with food stamps and Section 8, life was hard. Any and all thoughts of returning to college were out of the question.

"One day I came home from work and checked the mail and received a letter from MSHDA about joining the FSS (Family Self Sufficiency) Program. I filled it out as fast as I could, thinking to myself that something has got to give. Then, I got a phone call from Julie from Community Action Agency, telling me that I had been accepted and what I needed to do to stay on the program and not lose my voucher. In doing this I've completed the Financial Freedom Class, Budgeting Basics Class, became a graduate of the first group of Getting Ahead classes and was given the opportunity to co-facilitate the second round of Getting Ahead classes offered by Community Action Agency and United Way. I'm using the tools I've learned from my classes, and everything is getting better. I'm on top of the world.

"When I think back now, I can see how truly blessed I've been with all the support I needed and opportunities I have been given. I am starting to make some great changes in our lives for the better. It is still hard being a single mom and the only sole provider. I know that I'm not where I want us to be yet; it's going to take one day at a time to get where I want us to be. With all the tools and skills I've learned, hard work, patience and support from those who mean so much to me, I will get there."

Lenawee United Way is helping local residents to rewrite the story.

For more information on how you can help ALICE, contact Lenawee United Way at 263-4696, visit www.lenaweeunitedway.org, and find us on Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn.

Amy Palmer is the executive director for Lenawee United Way.