

# POLICY AGENDA 2021

## UNITED WAY OF PIERCE COUNTY



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Advocacy is a vital component in lifting 15,000 households out of poverty and into financial stability by 2028. This public policy agenda represents current positions of United Way of Pierce County as well as supportive positions for the multiple partners leading work to reduce barriers for struggling families or individuals. To tackle deeply entrenched and complex social problems we must identify and disrupt the systems and policies that disproportionately impact Black, Brown and Indigenous people of color. No single policy, government department, organization or program can solve the increasingly complex problem of poverty. We must work together to achieve significant and lasting social change.

### TIER 1 PRIORITIES – Actively engage with state legislators

#### BASIC NEEDS & SUPPORTIVE SERVICES

**Affordable Housing [HB 1035 & HB 1101] – Increase Access to Affordable Housing and Invest in Solutions to the Homeless Public Health Crisis** – Provide local governments with options to grant rent relief and preserve affordable housing in their communities [HB 1035] and create a grant program for converting unused public buildings to housing for homeless persons [HB 1101] – Housing is the most expensive and important monthly household expense. Yet affordable housing was already in short supply before the virus hit. People and communities continue to suffer the ravages of homelessness.

- Secure and increase funding for programs that prevent and end the crisis of homelessness.
- Provide policy and resource incentives to boost the creation of more affordable housing by public, private and nonprofit sectors.
- Ensure adequate permanent supported housing including resources such as behavioral health services for people impacted by chronic homelessness.
- Invest \$250 million [Capital Budget] in the Housing Trust Fund to build and preserve permanent affordable housing across the state.

**Food Security and Nutrition (SNAP) and Updating the State Standard of Need (Cash Assistance) [HB 1151]**

- Strengthen food stamps by creating a transitional food benefit; extending funding for SNAP fruit/vegetable incentives; and, bringing parity to our state's food assistance program for legally residing immigrants.
- Modernize the outdated 1991 standard of need for cash assistance to better reflect actual costs of living in Washington.

**Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) [SB5214]– TANF Policy Restoration** – Expand the exemptions to the TANF time limits that disproportionately hurt Black, Brown, Indigenous and families of color and ease punitive measures put in place during the Great Recession.

Washington State protects families with children from the harmful effects of deep poverty with TANF/WorkFirst. TANF provides cash assistance and child care to families while parents participate in WorkFirst, which helps with job searching, training, and addressing barriers to employment. The support from TANF has only grown more important as the COVID-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on our state's economy and pushed more people into poverty. While the COVID-19 economic crisis has allowed more people to access TANF, this support remains tenuous as long as harsh cuts and policy changes made during the Great Recession remain in place. While the state has made progress in easing some harsh policies, we support a full reversal of recession-era changes that keep families from accessing TANF assistance. These

include enacting commonsense time limit extensions and easing harsh sanction policies, including full-family sanctions that entirely eliminates a family's grant when they are in sanction status.

**Washington 2-1-1 [Operating Budget]** – The WA211 network is requesting \$3M in funding for the statewide 2-1-1 system to support the 50 percent service level increase helping residents impacted by COVID-19 and the economic crisis. WA 211 demonstrated its importance as part of Washington's emergency response and in ensuring efficient use of our social service infrastructure. Early on during the pandemic crisis, WA 211 rapidly doubled service capacity and increased operating hours, handling over 50,000 COVID-specific calls in less than two months.

## **STRONG FAMILIES**

**The Fair Start for Kids Act 2.0 [SB 5237]** - High quality child care and early learning is critical to a child's success in school and life. COVID-19 has devastated the existing child care industry, making it unduly burdensome for families to find care. The cascading impacts of inaccessible child care and early learning programs create systemic barriers that disproportionately impact children and their families resulting in higher special education needs, greater likelihood of needing to repeat grades, increased child welfare and juvenile justice involvement, reduced high school graduation rates, limited postsecondary education attainment, and greater barriers to employment in adulthood.

- Without immediate action to support child care providers, and without expanded access to affordable child care, especially infant and school-age care, parents will not be able to return to work while children lose valuable learning opportunities.
- Without access to comprehensive, high-quality perinatal to five services, children often enter kindergarten without the social-emotional, physical, cognitive, and language skills they need to be successful and fall behind their peers, facing compounding developmental challenges throughout their K-12 education.

In order to bolster a full economic recovery, the legislature finds that every child deserves a fair start.

**Increase Access, Affordability, and Quality of Child Care and Early Learning for Working Families [SB 5023]** – Affordable and accessible child care helps families by allowing parents to build a career and contribute to our economy, as well as help businesses reduce turnover.

- Children with access to early education programs read earlier, graduate high school at higher rates and have more professional opportunities.
- Before the COVID crisis, most middle- and lower-income families struggled to find and pay for quality child care and pre-K education. Working parents and their employers depend on this care, and their kids require it to be successful in school and life.

The COVID crisis has seriously impacted the feasibility of childcare businesses at a time when childcare is a critical strategy for reopening the economy.

**Help Me Grow Pierce County (HMGPC)** - Continue HMGPC pilot by continuing the state's investment at \$1.74 million. HMGPC is a community-driven, resource and referral linkage system that connects young children and their families to appropriate services and community support, now in year 2 of implementation, and serves about 1,000 children ages 0 to 5 and expectant families per month.

- The pilot seeks to ensure that all families in Pierce County have the resources they need to thrive, with a goal outcome of preventing child welfare involvement.

HMGPC is part of Help Me Grow Washington and one of the 10 Washington Communities for Children Regions.

### **TIER 2 PRIORITIES – Support other organizational expertise**

**Working Families' Tax Credit [HB 1297]** - The Working Families Tax Credit is Washington state's version of the federal Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which provides an income boost to working people in the form of a tax refund.

- For those who qualify, the Working Families Tax Credit would be a meaningful amount of money back into their pockets to help them make ends meet.
- Washington can build on the success of the federal EITC by modernizing the definition of work and including people who work hard but are excluded from the EITC – like immigrants, caregivers, and young workers without kids.
- 2021 legislation would update and simplify the Working Families Tax Credit policy to create flat cash payments to those eligible for the federal Earned Income Tax Credit, including those who file using an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN). These flat cash payments would put an average of \$370 annually back into the pockets of working people with low and moderate wages, putting cash in the hands of people who need it most.
- Lowering working families' tax burden increases savings, helping cushion financial shocks like unexpected car repairs, medical bills, and other expenses that can cause homelessness. It is also used to pay for education and other endeavors that increase families' financial prospects and stability.

### **FEDERAL PRIORITIES**

**COVID Relief (CARES Act)** - In late December, a new COVID relief passed Congress and was signed by then-President Trump. It is a \$908B package meant act as a "bridge" until a more comprehensive relief package in 2021. Included in the package are some of United Way's priority requests including:

- \$288 billion in relief for small businesses including a new round of Paycheck Protection Program loans
- \$300 a week in unemployment insurance for 18 weeks
- \$10 billion in child care assistance
- \$25 billion in rental housing assistance
- \$10 billion for broadband
- \$26 billion in nutrition and agriculture aid

**Universal Charitable Giving Act [HR 5253]** - Strengthen Charitable Giving Incentives: (1) Increase the above-the-line or universal charitable deduction in the CARES Act; and (2) Extend this and the giving incentives enacted in the CARES Act through 2021.