One of the strategies in United Way of Pierce County’s goal to break the cycle of poverty is to create strong families. In 2013, we held Community Conversations throughout Pierce County to find out what barriers were holding our families back.

In 2015, we participated in a three-state research project to take a closer look at financial hardship in our community. What we found was that while 12 percent of our families live in poverty, another 22 percent are working but still struggle to provide their families with basic needs like food and shelter. They are what we call ALICE - Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. Our research showed that there was not single issue affecting these families and therefore, no single solution.

We went to work to launch our Center for Strong Families which focus on helping families Earn It, Keep It and Grow It. By providing job training, education, tax assistance and financial coaching we can help more families break the cycle of poverty.

In February of 2017, more than 100 business leaders from around the county joined United Way of Pierce County to discuss their most valued asset, their employees.
Financial Stability for Employees
Developing strategies to increase the income of working families

“Every job is important but we want to get them to a family wage job,” explained Dammeier. “Take someone who is unemployed or has barriers to employment and get them that first job but you don’t stop there. The goal is to get them to a family wage where they can buy a house, raise a family and have the quality of life we all want for our neighbors.”

Tacoma City Mayor Marilyn Strickland and Pierce County Executive Bruce Dammeier both spoke at the event and shared their own visions for workforce development in our community.

Additionally, moderator Jeff Rounce from the Business Examiner led table discussions around how businesses can help their employees progress in their careers and how partners like United Way can help. Some key messages that came out of the discussion were as simple as asking employees about their career goals to making sure mentors and advisors are available to help with training.

Pierce County has one of the fastest growing job markets in the country. What it lacks are the skilled employees to fill those positions. United Way convened local CEOs, union members, human resources professionals and municipal partners to help develop a strategy that will close that gap.

www.uwpc.org
Discussion Topic # 1

How do we currently invest in our employees’ ability to progress in their careers and increase their economic opportunities?

- **Staff Engagement/Motivation**
  - Create an environment where employees want to jump in to serve in other capacities and give people a chance to move up
  - Provide mentoring and advisors as the most important piece of training
  - Provide a human-centered approach to professional development

- **Professional Development/Education**
  - Identify talent and invest in emerging leadership
  - Provide tuition assistance and support continued education
  - Help develop holistic skills for employees to move outside of their role
  - Partner with other agencies to allow personal/professional development
  - Provide staff with on-the-job training
  - Learning why employees might not be choosing to take advantage of opportunities (see staff challenges below)

- **Staff Challenges**
  - Staff over-worked doing multiple jobs
  - Staff are struggling themselves (family and financial issues)
  - Employee classification system needs to be re-engineered
  - Less motivated staff members make it hard to encourage growth
Resources for Managers

Education & Professional Development

**Lynda**
Learn a new skill online, on your time. Over 5,000 courses in Business, Technology and Creative Skills taught by industry experts. [www.lynda.com](http://www.lynda.com)

**Dial 2-1-1**
Dial 2-1-1 to speak to a navigator or visit the online database of local short-term training programs in healthcare, construction, information technology, and advanced manufacturing. South Sound 2-1-1 staff can also help people find employment readiness programs, job training classes, and soft-skills classes. [www.win211.org](http://www.win211.org)

**Career Bridge**
Explore different career paths, see how much each career pays, and whether a career field is growing. Then view a comprehensive database of Washington education programs. [www.careerbridge.com](http://www.careerbridge.com)

**IRS**
Exempt up to $5,250 of benefits each year for qualified educational assistance you provide to employees under an educational assistance program. The exclusion also applies to graduate level courses. See the full details online. [www.irs.gov](http://www.irs.gov) (Search “Fringe Benefits”)

**WGU Washington**
An online, competency-based university designed to expand access to higher education for Washington residents. Career-focused bachelor’s and master’s degrees. WGU Washington’s rigorous degree programs are in the fields of business, information technology, K–12 education, and health professions. [www.washington.wgu.edu](http://www.washington.wgu.edu)

**ALF**
The American Leadership Forum (ALF) is a non-profit organization, national in scope, dedicated to joining and strengthening established leaders in order to serve the public good. It enhances leadership by building on the strengths of diversity and by promoting collaborative problem-solving within and among communities. [www.alftacomapierc county.org](http://www.alftacomapierc county.org)
What can we do to help our employees’ ability to progress in their careers and increase their economic opportunities?

**Staff Engagement/Motivation**
- Ask employees what they want to do and where they want to go
- Let staff stretch themselves
- Create more opportunities for income growth in the same positions
- Have an honest conversation with employees regarding wage rates
- Care about employees’ living situation
- Provide opportunities for employees to grow and explain what they need to progress
- Provide opportunities for employees to balance work and school

**Professional Development/Education**
- Open up internal training opportunities to other businesses/companies
- Provide mentoring opportunities
- Prepare employees to move on to other businesses to get the positions they want and need
- Help with fundamental employment skills: attendance, writing, communications
- Better prepare the next generation (i.e. internships provided with local high schools)
- We encourage training, but could do better in cross-training
- Reimbursement for education; payment for advanced degrees
• **Identify Resources for Employees**
  • Business Leadership can find additional resources for housing, transportation, financial literacy, child care
  • Learn how to offer financial coaching and other services to employees for their success

• **Management/HR**
  • Conduct a salary survey with a gender focus and identify if disparities exist
  • Make employees’ goals a part of their HR goals
  • Be intentional about succession planning
  • Offer a formal flexible work schedule
  • Provide a clearer on-boarding process and growth expectations
  • Make personal development an expectation and provide time to do so
  • Do a better job of performance management
  • Sponsored development opportunities (i.e. toast masters)
  • Increase flexibility and provide career development assignments for professional growth

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**Resources for Employees**

**Financial & Career Coaches**

Center for Strong Families provide access to high-qualify, one-on-one career and financial coaching when you need it. CSF coaches work with clients over an extended period of time to help people increases their income, decreases their expenses, and improve their credit.

• Land a career that pays a family wage
• Improve your credit score
• Access resources you qualify for

Get connected to a coach today. **Dial 2-1-1.**
What do we need from our community partners like United Way of Pierce County, training providers, and community organizations to help our employees?

**Discussion Topic # 3**

- **Professional Development/Education**
  - Set-up cross trainings between companies
  - Provide targeted recruitment opportunities from local colleges to businesses
  - Offer training funds for 1st semester/quarter until company tuition assistance reimburses
  - Help make tuition free or more affordable

- **Identify Resources for Employees**
  - Coordinate with employers for employee resource meetings
  - Educate employees about any available subsidies (i.e. transportation and childcare)
  - Provide financial coaching to employees
  - Prepare employees to address issues ahead of time to ensure the employees stay employed

- **Business Conversations/Meetings**
  - Discuss if employers feel like financial stability of employees are “their business”
  - Provide information to companies that may have ALICE employees
  - Engage employers, employees, and community organizations on a larger scale
  - Find ways to reduce the stigma for those seeking help
  - Continue to have collaborative meetings (i.e. the Business Leaders Breakfast) to help keep resources alive and provide a platform to connect with community partners
Resources for All

Friend or Co-worker going through tough times?

South Sound 2-1-1 is a comprehensive information and referral line that connects people with essential health and human resources.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

By simply dialing 2-1-1, callers can access a live Information and Referral Specialist between the hours of 9am and 5pm Monday through Friday. Specialists can guide the caller to programs that meet their unique needs.

- Rent and Utility Assistance
- Counseling and Mental Health Services
- Food and Clothing
- Shelter and Affordable Housing
- Employment and Education Services
- Military/Veteran Resources
- Transportation
More Ideas

United Way of Northwest Vermont
Working Bridges Model

Employers lose good workers for seemingly inexplicable reasons. Whether it is a long-term, reliable worker who starts missing work or a new hire who seems to be performing well and then suddenly stops showing up to work altogether. Employers often do not understand the underlying causes for this change in behavior. Equally challenging to employers are workers distracted on the job due to non-work-related issues, in some cases compounded by the complex issues facing someone from generational poverty, with a disability, or recently immigrated to the United States. For employers that have invested in hiring and training workers, these issues affect the business of running a business.

Feedback from the Business Leaders event reminded us of the Working Bridge model. Three employers founded Working Bridges in 2006: Engelberth Construction, University of Vermont Medical Center, and Rhino Foods. All three companies are champions of Working Bridges today.

Highlights

- **Education/training for employers** about economic class in the workplace. They use the Bridges Out of Poverty curriculum and concepts.
- An **employer workgroup** is at the core of Working Bridges. At meetings, employers tackle issues affecting employee stability, including transportation, income supports and affordable housing. Together, they design, test and share innovative practices and refine policies to improve the lives of employees.
- **Resource coordinators**, who are shared by employers, provide on-site resource assistance to employees so that they get the help they need without disrupting work.
- **Employee loan/savings program** (income advance loan) is a partnership between employers and financial institutions to help employees meet emergency needs, and begin saving and building credit.
- A mobile volunteer **tax preparation** program that provides employees with tax assistance and **financial coaching** at the workplace.
- **On-site classes** for employees including GED, English Language Learning (ELL) and financial coaching.

As part of the Earn-ability Taskforce strategy, UWPC will be coordinating a presentation from business representatives on the Working Bridge model.

What resonated with you in this report?

*We have five quick questions to ask you and will show you others’ results.*

Click Here: [http://tinyurl.com/UWPCBusiness](http://tinyurl.com/UWPCBusiness)