United Way of Northwest Illinois
Community Investments Grant Application Guidelines
2026 - 2027

UNITED FOR IMPACT

About the United Way of Northwest Illinois

The United Way of Northwest Illinois is committed to improving lives by advancing opportunities for education, health, and financial stability for all. Through our annual Community Catalyst and Basic Needs Grants, we award funds to nonprofit organizations serving across our three-county region - Stephenson, Jo Daviess and Carroll Counties.
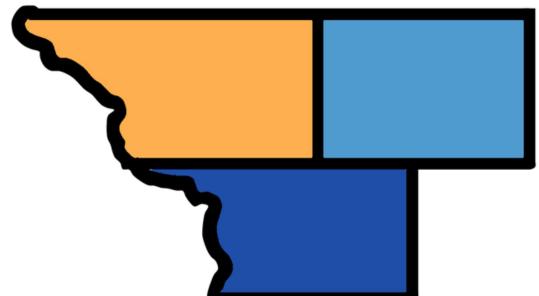
Our 2026-2027 grantmaking will focus on supporting programs that serve ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, and Employed) families and improve their long-term stability and ability to thrive.

By investing in evidence-based programs and collaborative approaches, we work alongside our nonprofit partners to create lasting change across Northwest Illinois.

Our Focus on ALICE Families

In 2026, United Way is sharpening our focus on ALICE households; families who are Asset Limited, Income Constrained, and Employed. These working families earn above the federal poverty level but still struggle to afford basic necessities like housing, childcare, food, healthcare, transportation, and utilities.

This focus allows us to more directly address the barriers facing the largest segment of financially vulnerable households in our region. ALICE families are working hard but living paycheck to paycheck, and our investments will prioritize programs that help these families achieve long-term stability and the ability to thrive.

Areas of Impact

United Way grants support programs that serve ALICE households across one or more of our Impact areas:

- Youth Opportunity
- Healthy Community
- Financial Security

We prioritize evidence-based programs, collaborative approaches, and programs that address gaps in services in our region.

Grant Programs Overview

United Way of Northwest Illinois offers two grant pathways to support nonprofits serving ALICE families across our three-county region. Organizations may apply for funding that best fits their program scope and budget.

Community Catalyst Grants

Funding Level: 80% of funds available will go towards Community Catalyst grants. These grants require a comprehensive application including organizational background, detailed program narrative, evidence of success or alignment with best practices, and a robust evaluation plan with measurements.

Best suited for: Programs proving long term solutions, proven track records in measuring outcomes not just outputs, and comprehensive data collection systems.

Basic Needs Grants

Funding Level: 20% of funds available will be awarded towards Basic Needs grants. The Basic Needs Grants provide funding for programs addressing critical needs in our community. The streamlined application focuses on program description, ALICE alignment, budget, and basic goals and outcomes.

Best suited for: Programs focused on meeting immediate needs.

Key Information for Both Programs

- Grant Period: One year
- Multiple Applications: Organizations may submit more than one application however, funding awards will be limited to one per organization.
- Review Process: All applications undergo the same rigorous review by volunteer reviewers and the Community Investment Committee
- The average funding award for all grants is between $5,000-$40,000.

Application Process & Timeline

Key Dates
- Application Opens: February 10, 2026
- Application Deadline: March 27, 2026 at 11:59 PM CST
- Review Period: March – May 2026
- Funding Decisions Announced: July 2026
- Grant Period: July 1, 2026 – June 30, 2027

How to Apply

Step1: Review the Complete RFP's for eligibility

RFP's can be found here:
    uwni.org
    Create a login to start your application

Step 2: Prepare Your Materials

All applicants must submit:
- Completed online application (Community Catalyst Grant OR Basic Needs Grant)
- Program Budget
- Patriot Act Form
- MOU's where appropriate

And the following documents:
- 501(c)(3) verification
- Most recent Annual Audit or Financial Review
- Most recent 990 Form
- Current Board of Directors list

Review & Selection Process

Application Review
Each application is reviewed by volunteer reviewers, including members of the Community Investment Committee and trained volunteer grant reviewers. All reviewers use a standardized scoring rubric (see Appendix D) to evaluate applications based on:

- Case for Funding: Compelling need, ALICE alignment, addressing service gaps Overall
- Strength of Program Design: Activities, evidence of success, collaboration
- Effective Use & Impact of Funding: Budget alignment, sustainability, geographic reach
- Project Impact & Evaluation: Goals, outcomes, and measurement plan

Funding Priorities
United Way prioritizes programs that:
- Demonstrate strong collaborative partnerships
- Address clear gaps in services across our region
- Serve ALICE households with evidence-based approaches that build long-term stability and ability to thrive

Notification & Award
All applicants will be notified of funding decisions via email in mid-June 2026, regardless of outcome. Funded organizations will receive:
- Award letter with funding amount
- Fully executed Partnership Agreement
- Reporting requirements and schedule

Payment Schedule
Grant funds are distributed via monthly ACH payments throughout the grant period (July 2026 – June 2027).

Reporting & Evaluation

United Way is committed to supporting our funded partners while maintaining accountability for the community investments we make together. Reporting requirements help us track progress, celebrate successes, and identify opportunities for support.

Community Catalyst Grants
- Quarterly Reports: Due in October 2026, January 2027 and April 2027
- Final Reports: Due July 2027
- Reports include progress on program goals, selected shared measurements, budget updates, success stories, and any challenges encountered

Basic Needs Grants
- Mid-Year Report: Due in January 2027
- Final Report: Due in July 2027
- Reports include progress on program goals and outcomes, budget updates, success stories, and any challenges encountered

All reports will be submitted online through a provided link. Specific due dates will be included in your award letter.

Shared Measurements Reporting Organizations receiving Community Catalyst Grants will report on the measurements selected in their application. Quarterly reports should include progress toward your stated targets and goals for each selected measurement.

Agency Updates United Way may request one board presentation per year with each funded organization, beginning in September 2026. These presentations provide an opportunity to learn more about your funded program, discuss progress and challenges, and strengthen our partnership.

Accountability Timely and complete reporting is essential to maintaining our partnership. Late or incomplete reports may affect current and future funding eligibility. If you anticipate challenges meeting a reporting deadline, please contact United Way staff as soon as possible.

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Northwest Illinois

Appendices

Appendix A – Community Catalyst Grants Rating Factors
Appendix B – Basic Needs Grants Rating Factors
Appendix C - Grants Measurements

Community Catalyst Grants Rating Factors

This rubric uses a weighted scoring system.

Case for Funding

1. Statement of need is compelling, uses current data, and clearly defines the priority population.
2. Program directly addresses barriers faced by ALICE households and aligns with selected ALICE need categories.
3. Gap in services is clearly defined and substantiated with data; approach is innovative or clearly distinguished from others.

Overall Strength of Program Design

4. Program activities, timeline, and implementation plan are clearly described and feasible for the grant cycle.
5. Program demonstrates evidence of success (existing programs) or alignment with best practices (new programs).
6. Collaboration strategy strengthens program delivery with clear roles, partnerships, or multi-agency coordination.

Effective Use and Impact of Funding

7. Program has a clear, consistent, and reasonable budget.
8. Use of United Way funds is specific and well-justified with diverse revenue sources supporting implementation.
9. Geographic distribution and target number served are clearly defined and realistic for program scope.

Project Impact and Evaluation

10. Program goals and outcomes are clear, measurable, and achievable.
11. Selected measurements align logically with program outcomes; targets are ambitious yet realistic.
12. Evaluation plan demonstrates appropriate systems for collecting and tracking data throughout the funding cycle.

Overall

13. Overall, the program narrative, budget, and evaluation plan demonstrate strong likelihood of program success if funded.
14. The applicant has the organizational capacity and experience to successfully deliver this program.

Basic Needs Grants Rating Factors

This rubric uses a weighted scoring system.

Case for Funding
1. Statement of need is compelling, uses current data, and clearly defines the priority population.
2. Program directly addresses barriers faced by Federal Poverty Level and below and ALICE households and aligns with selected ALICE need categories.

Overall Strength of Program Design
3. Program activities, timeline, and implementation plan are clearly described and feasible for the grant cycle.

Effective Use and Impact of Funding
4. Program has a clear, consistent, and reasonable budget.
5. Use of United Way funds is specific and well-justified with diverse revenue sources supporting implementation.
7. Geographic distribution and target number served are clearly defined and realistic for program scope.

Project Impact and Evaluation
8. Program goals and expected outcomes are clear, measurable, and achievable.
9. Evaluation plan demonstrates how the program will track and measure success.

Overall
10. Overall, the program narrative, budget, and evaluation plan demonstrate strong likelihood of program success if funded.
11. The applicant has the organizational capacity and experience to successfully deliver this program.

Community Catalyst Grants Measurements

United Way of Northwest Illinois will use a common set of measurements across all Community Catalyst Grant programs. These shared measurements are built on the Results Based Accountability (RBA) framework, which asks three simple but powerful questions: How much did we do? How well did we do it? Is anyone better off?

By using consistent measurements across our funded programs, we can track community impact across our region and better communicate the difference our investments make for ALICE families in Northwest Illinois.

How It Works In your application, you will select 1-2 measurements from each of the three categories below that best align with your program's goals and outcomes. For each measurement you select, you will provide a target or goal for the funding cycle. You will then report progress toward those targets in each quarterly report.

A few important notes:
- Measurements should align logically with the goals and outcomes you describe in your application
- Targets should be ambitious but realistic given your program scope and budget

How much did we do? (Examples - choose 1-2)
- # of individuals served
- # of sessions/classes/activities provided
- # of families/households connected to wraparound services
- # of referrals made to partner organizations

How well did we do it? (Examples Quality - choose 1-2)
- % of participants who meet program engagement goals (as defined by your program)
- % of participants demonstrating improved knowledge/skills (via pre/post assessment)
- % of participants who report feeling supported and connected to resources
- % of participants engaged in identifying personal goals and taking steps toward achieving them

Is anyone better off? (Examples Impact - choose 1-2)
- % of participants who increase income or access to resources % of participants who
- achieve/maintain stability (housing, employment, health, etc.) % of participants who
- demonstrate improvement in assessment scores % of participants who report
- reduced barriers to accessing services % of participants who successfully complete
- their program goals % of individuals who report a positive change in behaviors