*Resultant*

# Measuring What Matters:
# United Way of Central Indiana's Multi-Year Journey

The name United Way has long been synonymous with good work, philanthropy, fundraising, and advocacy. The nonprofit is known for providing critical funding to community organizations in its mission to support people and families living in or near poverty.

In 2017, on the cusp of its 100th anniversary, United Way of Central Indiana found itself at a pivotal crossroads. Over time, the landscape of philanthropy had shifted and donor expectations evolved. Stakeholders and donors alike placed a greater value on transparency and measurable impact than in years past, and a difficult question emerged: *Could United Way prove its investments were changing lives?*

The challenge was as complex as it was urgent. While many community organizations tracked basic service outputs, few had the capacity, tools, or frameworks to measure long-term impact. Data sharing was either fragmented or nonexistent. Privacy concerns loomed large. Meanwhile, donors and funders were eager to understand the return on their contributions—not just in numbers served, but in outcomes achieved.

United Way's leadership recognized that understanding impact required more than reporting. It required a new approach entirely: one that prioritized comprehensive analysis of how community organizations utilized funding, where services were helping whom, which people weren't reached because service gaps existed, and how participants' lives improved as a direct result of their participation. This approach demanded long-term, cross-sector data collaboration while honoring the trust and relationships at the heart of their work.

They chose Resultant as a data and technology partner for this multi-year transformation that would position United Way as a national model in nonprofit data strategy. Together, we set out to build an adaptable, people-centered solution and implement the training community organizations needed to use it effectively.

## ABOUT UNITED WAY OF CENTRAL INDIANA

United Way of Central Indiana is uniquely positioned to bring the resources of philanthropy, businesses, local government, nonprofits and neighborhoods together to tackle generational poverty. With a focus on basic needs, early care and learning, economic mobility, and safe and affordable housing, United Way helps people live the lives they are capable of living. United Way of Central Indiana serves Boone, Hamilton, Hancock, Hendricks, Marion, Morgan and Putnam counties. Visit uwci.org.

# A MISSION WORTH MEASURING

United Way works to tackle generational poverty, focusing on basic needs, early care and learning, economic mobility, and safe and affordable housing. The organization partners with and invests in nonprofits that help people living in or near poverty meet their basic needs, increase earnings, and enhance their well-being. This mission is the driving force behind their evolving data efforts.

## Measuring Impact Within Our Community

| 21,614 | 3,994 | 5,844 | 63% |
|--------|-------|-------|-----|
| Individuals Served Across All Economic Mobility Strategies | Individuals Served Through the Centers for Working Families Program | Individuals Receiving Employment, Financial, or Income Supports Counseling | Adults Completing Education Milestones |

| $15,142 | $8,408 | 44% | 45% |
|---------|--------|-----|-----|
| Economic Moblity Strategies have supported nearly 3,200 individuals in achieving an **increase in income** over the past five years. | Average Income Increase through the Center for Working Families Program. | Nearly half of the adults receiving support through employment, financial, or income counseling services were **single-female parent/ caregivers.** | Approximately half of the adults who achieved educational milestones were **unemployed or actively seeking employment.** |

Click here to learn more about Center for Working Families.

To understand whether program participants made sustained progress, United Way needed to track outcomes like income growth, educational attainment, and employment stability not just at a moment in time, but over multiple years. They also needed to support community organizations in collecting, sharing, and understanding this data in ways that honored participant privacy and nonprofit capacity.

Importantly, the very definition of "impact" evolved over the course of this initiative. Early on, United Way and its partners focused on basic descriptive statistics: who was served, and how often. But as the project matured, the focus shifted to outcomes and trajectories:

- What changed for an individual or family over time as a result of receiving services?
- Did participation correlate with tangible outcomes like increased income, better school attendance, or educational progress?
- Did individuals find long-term stability through improved access to work, education, or support systems?

These more nuanced questions required not just new data, but new thinking.

Furthermore, the external pressure of donors and funders seeking to know whether their contributions were producing real, lasting improvements in people's lives pushed United Way to define more meaningful metrics, forge new partnerships to access previously unavailable data, and develop the infrastructure necessary to track it all. Not simply for reporting and accountability, but for United Way's own mission alignment.

United Way needed to show how they were moving the needle: donation by donation, community organization by community organization, person by person.

As United Way of Central Indiana's Chief Strategic Intelligence and Information Officer Denise Luster explained, "We're using the data to bring a voice to those clients that are being served through our partners."

## LAYING THE GROUNDWORK: METRICS, SYSTEMS, AND PARTNERSHIPS

The first phase of our project defined the metrics that could meaningfully track progress across all their impact areas: Family Opportunity, Basic Needs, and Social Innovation.

We began with a comprehensive data assessment to evaluate existing metrics and infrastructure. From there, we worked closely with United Way's impact team leaders and its funded partners, school systems, and other human service organizations through interviews and collaborative discovery to build a shared understanding of what to measure and why. The complexity of this model—requiring data across generations, services, and systems—underscored the need for robust infrastructure.

Denise said, "Through the partnership with Resultant, we started to ask what it would look like if we had our own data warehouse, which was unheard of for a United Way."

Enter partnerships with Indiana Department of Education (IDOE), Indiana Department of Workforce Development (DWD), the Indiana Commission for Higher Education (CHE), and Indiana Management Performance Hub (MPH), a state agency that facilitates secure, anonymized data sharing.

Denise further commented, "We're able to do our own analysis, control that data, and produce our own reports, securely."

One key technical element critical to success was the implementation of one-way hashing, which allows records to be matched across disparate systems without revealing personally identifiable information. This record matching discerns, yet anonymizes, distinct individuals in various systems, enabling United Way to assess outputs and outcomes of impact-funded strategies while ensuring privacy. This provides a better picture of how community organizations and state agencies work together and where gaps need to be addressed.

As one partner described it, the data could describe how "a 23-year-old male in Marion County" interacts with community organizations and other services without ever disclosing who that person is.

**THROUGH THIS COLLABORATION, UNITED WAY BECAME THE FIRST NON-STATE AGENCY TO PARTNER WITH MPH. THIS ALLOWED UNITED WAY TO USE THEIR OWN SECURE DATA WAREHOUSE TO LEVERAGE EXTENSIVE, LONGITUDINAL STATE-HELD DATA AND START CONNECTING INDIVIDUAL-LEVEL RECORDS IN A PRIVACY-PROTECTED WAY.**

## BUILDING TRUST, ONE PARTNER AT A TIME

While the technical lift was significant, the relational work proved just as essential. For many community organizations, data collection felt burdensome, confusing, or even risky. Because many are grassroots endeavors, some viewed data collection as a distraction from their mission of helping as many people as possible. Nonprofit leaders also worried about how data would be used, what it meant for funding, and how to explain it to their clients.

United Way and Resultant took a thoughtful, iterative approach. They piloted the data collection program with a small group of willing community organizations, provided hands-on training and support, and continuously refined their messaging. Over two years, they worked to ensure partners understood not only how data would be protected, but how it could benefit them.

United Way of Central Indiana Chief Impact Officer Sara VanSlambrook emphasized this listening-first approach: "We have to be able to listen. We're listening to those organizations to understand the stress that they may be under to collect certain data."

United Way helped community organizations increase their data literacy and understanding of their impact on the community. Because of the listening, education, and iteration, community organizations now have willingly adopted the data collection practices, recognizing the value in them. Data collection is embedded in the partnership agreements between United Way and community organizations.

## Another Example of Measuring Impact Within Our Community

| 2,927 | 81% | 1,901 | 285 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Individuals Served Across All Early Care & Learning Strategies | Youth aged 0-5 enrolled in our 2Gen initiatives received childcare services | Individuals Received Childcare Assistance | Students Enrolled in the ReadUP Program |

| 71% | 56% | 83% | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Over the past five years, the majority of children ages 0-5 met key developmental benchmarks prior to entering kindergarten. | Youth aged 0-5 receiving services and enrolled in child care were placed in programs rated **Level 3 or Level 4 on the Paths to Quality scale.** | The majority of the childcare assistance support went to **single female parent/ caregivers.** | Through our ReadUP Program, more than **1,100 third graders in** Central Indiana **received over 14,000 hours** of additional literacy support over the past five years. |

United Way also identifies emerging trends and uses that data to shape new outreach strategies and partnerships. As they discover what stumbling blocks community organizations experience, what they struggle with in terms of recruitment and retention, and what the data shows, they can connect partners with other organizations that have relevant approaches and solutions.

For example, an insight uncovered in the data was a high rate of chronic absenteeism among the children in families being served through Family Opportunity Fund investments. The organization EmpowerED Families Indy has a priority of reducing chronic absenteeism. Through United Way, they attended a recent peer learning event and shared strategies and resources for community organizations to use in their own work.

# FROM DESCRIPTIVE TO STRATEGIC: HOW DATA INFORMS DECISIONS

Today, United Way can track longitudinal outcomes like income changes, program retention, and educational attainment across thousands of individuals and families. Their internal data warehouse allows for sophisticated analysis, while their public-facing dashboard, Impact United, increases transparency and accountability.

This transformation has changed how United Way allocates grants. Rather than relying on proposals alone, they now consider demonstrated impact. And while increased income is a key indicator that an individual or family is moving away from poverty, not every community organization will have the same metrics because they all serve unique needs. Those needs are considered in context of the specific organization's objectives during the grant review process.

## Measuring the Impact Within Our Community

**Individuals Served by ZIP Code**



Individuals Served
10 ▬▬▬ 3,403
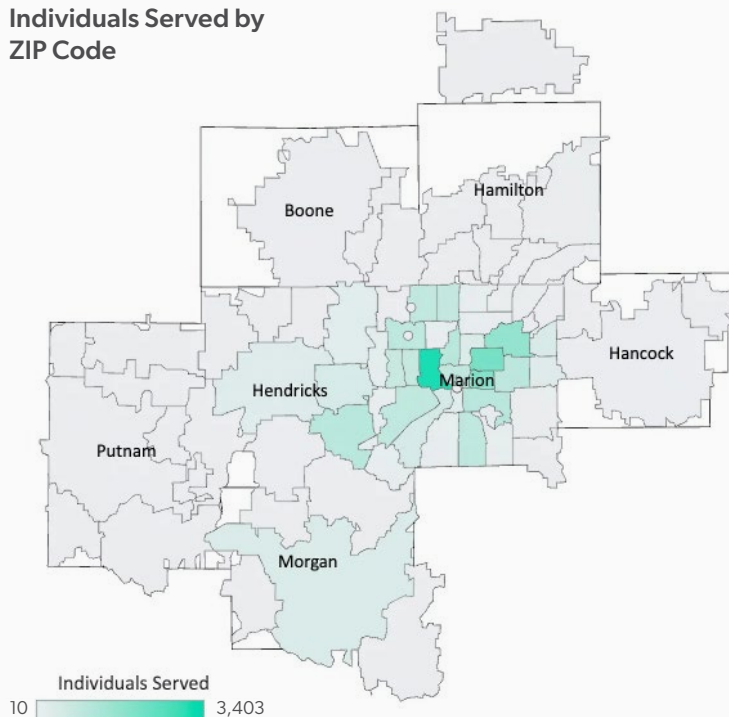
| 38,521 | 50 |
|--------|-----|
| Individuals Served | Partners in Impact |

**89,400**
Supportive Services were provided to help address barriers such as income instability and eviction risk.

**24,119**
Rental assistance services allowed individuals to receive direct support to stabilize their housing.

**369,446**
Nights of Safe Emergency Housing Provided.

**19,368**
Households maintained access to essential services like electricity, water, & heat during times of financial harship.

**5,269**
Individuals were able to obtain permanent housing.

**5,295**
Individuals received legal assistance to obtain and/or retain housing.

United Way of Central Indiana Vice President of Strategic Intelligence and Information Stephanie Fritz highlighted the long view of impact. "It takes decades for people to come out of poverty. Sometimes it doesn't show up in the parent or caregiver but starts to show up in the child. They're the ones who are moving because of the efforts that the parents made while they were young to move them out of poverty."

As United Way's data systems and analytics capabilities continue to mature, they'll build on their abilities to confidently map trends and use them to inform actions around fundraising, donor matching, fund distribution, partnering, and education.

Importantly, United Way shares results with its board, funders, state partners, and peer organizations. This storytelling—grounded in both data and lived experience—helps donors see the return on their investment, shows state agencies the impact of data sharing, and builds momentum for continued support to help people and families in need. Most importantly, it provides a voice through the data for those living in or near poverty.

## LESSONS LEARNED AND THE ROAD AHEAD

Since that pivotal crossroads in 2017, United Way's path hasn't been linear. Staff turnover during the pandemic, shifting nonprofit capacity, evolving community needs, and the complexity of the work required constant adaptation. But United Way embraced the idea that the project itself was a learning process. And that progress is measured not just in perfect data, but in stronger partnerships, clearer vision, and ultimately distancing people from poverty.

United Way continues to refine its evaluation models, support its partners, and balance data needs with the realities of nonprofit work. They can now connect donors better to their areas of interest and are more effectively helping individuals and families move out of poverty. United Way has always used data and human impact to deepen understanding of the issues they're tackling; the next focus is to enhance their storytelling capacity to better show donors and stakeholders the human impact behind the numbers.

## WHY IT MATTERS

For other nonprofits, United Way's story offers a powerful message: You don't have to start with perfection. You can start small by formalizing metrics, then grow into a system with data sharing agreements that reveals gaps, strengthens strategy, and elevates community voice.

By investing in data, United Way hasn't just improved reporting. They've built a foundation for more equitable, effective, and accountable impact. They've brought their mission into sharper focus, ensuring that every investment helps move a person or family not just out of crisis, but toward lasting stability.

Find out more at **RESULTANT.COM**