

Understanding ALICE Families: Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed

Part of a series exploring issues from The Community Foundation's *Aspire Arkansas* report.

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May 2021

ENGAGE

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Keep ALICE Families in Mind for Giving Decisions



When we think of our fellow Arkansans who need help, we often think of the very poor, those without jobs or homes. Or while making giving decisions, we consider giving to the arts, healthcare or other organizations that expand the standard of living for us all.

But when we take a look at the data about “Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed” families (whom we call ALICE), it is clear that these families should figure into our giving decisions. ALICE families are the working poor with income above the Federal Poverty Level, but not high enough to afford basic household necessities or save for the future. These families are sliding through the cracks of our society, and they deserve our thoughtful consideration and support.

In this issue of *ENGAGE*, we hope to raise the awareness of ALICE families, who take many forms — families with two incomes who cannot make enough to save for budget-busting events, single parents working multiple jobs who go to school to improve their income capacity and older Arkansans making choices between medicine and rent.

These people are working hard, sometimes at two to three jobs. They are doing everything within their control to “do it right.” We can help make a difference as they work to move a step up on the sustainability ladder by supporting community colleges that advance their education and earning power, policy change organizations like Arkansas Advocates for Children and Families that advocate on their behalf or efforts like the Community Supporters for Early Childhood Care and Education Fund at Arkansas Community Foundation that helps ensure quality daycare for children in Northwest Arkansas.

I hope this issue of *ENGAGE* provides new insight into the lives of our neighbors and how we might help.

Best regards,

Heather Larkin
President and CEO

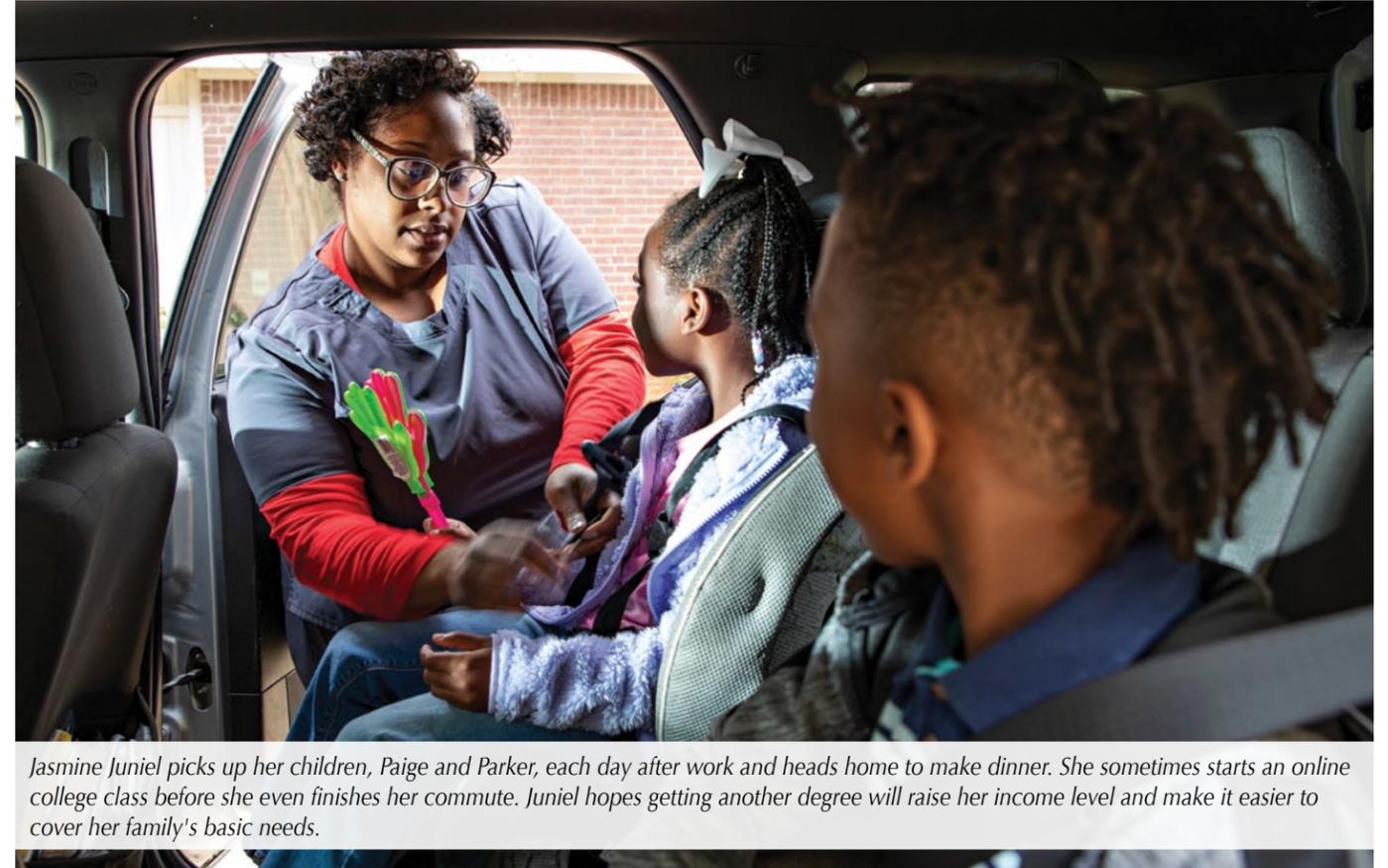


Find data on ALICE families at [Aspirearkansas.org/families](https://aspirearkansas.org/families).

On the cover: Jasmine Juniel attends class virtually at the end of a very long day.

If I Worked Around the Clock, I'd Still Be ALICE

By Kimberly Dishongh



Jasmine Juniel picks up her children, Paige and Parker, each day after work and heads home to make dinner. She sometimes starts an online college class before she even finishes her commute. Juniel hopes getting another degree will raise her income level and make it easier to cover her family's basic needs.

At the end of a long day at work, Jasmine Juniel picks up her kids and heads home, often logging in for an online college class as she makes the commute.

It would be easy to pull into a drive-through and pick up something to feed her hungry children so she could focus on her lessons once she gets home. But instead she props up her cell phone on the kitchen counter, pops in an earpiece and listens while she cooks dinner.

“I don’t eat out a lot because, honestly, I don’t have money to eat out a lot,” said Juniel, who lives in Benton.

She pinches pennies, shopping for groceries to make low-cost healthy meals for her kids, ages 6 and 7, but feels like she can never quite get ahead. “I feel like I’m finally afloat, and then I’m drowning again,” Juniel said.

Juniel falls into the ALICE category. ALICE is the acronym representing Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed

individuals and families who are working and who have incomes above the federal poverty level — and who are thus ineligible for many forms of public assistance — but who are still unable to afford basic necessities. They are, in effect, the working poor.

A report funded by Entergy Arkansas and the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, which sponsor ALICE research in Arkansas and work toward removing the barriers that limit financial stability among the ALICE population, estimated that 41% of Arkansas households were ALICE households in 2017. That category can include teachers, childcare providers, health aides, dental hygienists, mechanics store clerks and more.

When Juniel started her job as a respiratory patient care tech almost four years ago, she made \$10 an hour. She was getting regular small raises, but with the start of the pandemic those small increases were put on hold.

The classes Juniel takes are moving her toward completion of a degree that might bring higher income, but they, too, come at a price.

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ENGAGE Magazine

A Publication of Arkansas Community Foundation

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"I'm going to school, making more loans and creating more debt," she said. Her children are school-aged now so year-round daycare is no longer an expense. "There were some times where I really had to figure out a strategy to pay for that," she said.

Still, childcare for the time after they get out of school and before she gets off work costs \$150 per child each month.

"I'm not in super bad debt or anything but when COVID hit, things got even harder. When you're already struggling and then that happens you fall further and further behind," she said. "I start laying this out, and I budget, and once I pay this and once I pay that, there have been times where I have been going negative in my bank account because after I pay all my bills, I still have to have gas money to get to work, we still have to have food in the house."

Justin Booth of Little Rock has faced a similar situation. Booth started writing — and selling — poetry while he was homeless several years ago, which gave him the means and motivation to get off the streets. "Poetry saved me," said Booth, known widely as The Outlaw Poet. "I'm living the American dream."

Booth has had several books of poetry published and has been commissioned for travel to places like Sacramento, Austin and Manhattan so he could give readings of his work. He sometimes does standup comedy to make a little extra money; his partner, who has a 10-year-old son, is a hairdresser.

"The government wouldn't let her work for a while because of COVID. We have enough money to buy bread and baloney, don't get me wrong. But that doesn't mean that every now and then the 10-year-old doesn't want a bag of Skittles," Booth said. "We're fairly certain that we're going to have rent money this month. Security is one thing, knowing that we have enough money that I won't end up sleeping outside, but it seems like we shouldn't be in the category of picking whether we can go to the doctor or get your 10-year-old's cap fixed."

Omar Brock of El Dorado is a damage prevention specialist in his town's water department. After 20 years on the job he has amassed a good bit of valuable knowledge about maintaining El Dorado's infrastructure. He has friends who work for other public utilities and knows they bring home higher wages. "I was stuck at \$17 an hour for years," said Brock. He knows the department, operated by the city, has a limited budget and might not be able to raise his salary even if he went back to school for more training.

Brock and his wife, a mental health therapist, have three children. His wife was unemployed for a while after the clinic she worked for closed last year, and now she commutes to a new job in Camden. They paid off their van, a Nissan Quest, not long ago — right before the transmission went out, and financially it was more practical to replace it than to have it repaired.

"You know, you pay a car off and it's a blessing. It frees up

money for other things you need," Brock said. "And then you're right back in bondage when you make another car note."

Kaleem Nazeem of Jonesboro knows the pain of starting over. He had no work experience when he was released from prison in 2018 after being incarcerated for 28 years, since he was 17 years old. "I came home with nothing, financially speaking. I had no work history to show as far as when I went in applying for different jobs," he said.

Unable to get a good job on his own, he went through a temp agency to find work in a factory, but that meant part of his wages went to pay their commission and expenses. "If I got a job making \$16 an hour, I was only getting \$11 an hour because \$5 of it was going to the temp service," he said. "I worked hard, I did a lot of overtime and things of that nature, but I still wasn't able to do a lot of the things that I wanted to do — buy me a vehicle and different things of that nature. I wasn't able to provide for myself."

Nazeem has thought a lot about generational poverty. He and his five siblings were raised by a single mother in what he calls the worst housing project in Little Rock. He sees some of his relatives stuck in the same cycle that defined his childhood.

"The only way that we can truly help our family structure is if we place ourselves in a position of success, because you can't help anyone if you caught up in that cycle of poverty," Nazeem said. "I don't think that money is everything. But money can get a lot of things taken care of, and money can change a lot of your conditions of life."



Justin Booth has had several books of poetry published and — pre-pandemic — gets commissioned to speak in well-known venues throughout the country. Despite that success, he often still has trouble making ends meet.



Jasmine Juniel's children, Parker and Paige, are the reason she works so hard as a respiratory patient care tech in a hospital. No matter how hard she works, though, she's pretty sure her hourly wage would keep her firmly in the ALICE category — Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed.

His situation is improving. He has joined the staff of an advocacy group for incarcerated people that he volunteered with after his release from prison. He is also finishing up an associate's degree in HVAC repair. His overnight shift at the factory ends at 5 a.m. after an overnight shift and goes to class from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m.

"Then I go home and see my family for a couple of hours and repeat the process all over again," he said. "I see myself, five years from now, owning my own company. Instead of working for someone, I see myself owning my own company, and it's like, if I can work half as hard for myself as I did for these other companies, then I know, I'll be a success."

Arnetta Pugh of Dumas is also hoping for a more lucrative future. "When I was a kid I always dreamed of being a lunch lady," said Pugh, who enjoyed watching the women who worked in the cafeteria at her school roll out dough, snap beans and dump lunch trays. "Now I am one, but it comes with another title — ALICE. The working poor. There are probably kids at McDonald's bringing home more money than I am. I live on a prayer. I'm broke but you can't look at me and tell I'm broke."

Pugh starts her work day at 6:30 a.m. and, four days a week, stays after school to help with snacks for the tutoring

program. She also waits tables at a steak house on nights and weekends, and she also worked as a census taker.

When she doesn't have income from one of those three extra jobs, according to Pugh, "You can tell a difference." Money aside, she loves her job, nurturing the children in her town.

"As a kid, I thought it was the bomb. I feel like my life would be boring if I did not get to go see my babies. There's always a story. Think about mealtime. That's when you sit down and talk — it's that times 200 plus. My desk is in the middle of the cafeteria and whoever is sitting around me is talking to me. I'm the lunch lady."

Pugh recently started online college classes, and she's working toward a degree in hospitality management. She plans to switch to a nutrition program soon, though.

"I might go back to the hospital and work or I might teach, maybe home ec — I like that," she said.

Pugh worries that, at her current pay rate, even if she worked longer hours, she would still have trouble making ends meet. "If I worked around the clock, I would still be ALICE," she said. "I would just be tired ALICE."



Research Reveals Struggles for ALICE Households

ALICE is an acronym for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed households that earn more than the Federal Poverty Level, but less than the basic cost of living for the state. ALICE households contribute to the Arkansas economy as wage earners by spending and paying taxes, sometimes working two or more jobs. Yet they don't earn enough to afford basic necessities or save for the future.

ALICE households live in every county of Arkansas. Men, women, seniors, young people, all races and all ethnicities are part of ALICE families. Challenges for these Arkansans include low wages, depleted or non-existent savings and increasing costs of basic goods and services. Between 2007 and 2017 the number of ALICE households and those below the Federal Poverty Level who cannot afford basic needs increased by 20%, according to the ALICE Report for Arkansas.

"The Federal Poverty Level is an outdated calculation and inaccurate information about the number of people struggling distorts the identification of problems related to poverty, misguides policy solutions and raises questions of equity, transparency and fairness in the allocation of resources," according to the ALICE Report for Arkansas.

As part of a national ALICE movement, the ALICE Report for Arkansas was released in 2020 to provide high-quality, research-based information about who is struggling in our communities and equip communities with information to create innovative solutions. Portions of the report data are available on Arkansas Community Foundation's AspireArkansas.org and the full report is at aliceinar.org.

Sponsored by the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation and Entergy Arkansas, the report was supported by an Equity Research Advisory Council, Arkansas Association of United Ways and the National ALICE Advisory Council. To produce the ALICE Report for Arkansas, a team of researchers collaborated with a Research Advisory Committee, composed of 17 representatives from across Arkansas, who advised and contributed to the report. The unbiased data from the report is replicable, easily updated on a regular basis and sensitive to local context.

"We all know people who are in ALICE families," said Rev. Shantell Hill, Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation equity officer. "For example, many daycare workers, healthcare workers, retail workers and front-line workers are ALICE."

Despite low national inflation during the recovery (22% from 2007 to 2017), the bare-minimum Household Survival Budget in Arkansas increased by 32% for a family and 24% for a single adult, according to the ALICE Report for Arkansas. Affording only a very modest living, this budget is still significantly more than the Federal Poverty Level of \$24,600 for a family of four and \$12,060 for a single adult.

"One incredibly useful thing about the ALICE data is that it is local. You can take a closer look at what people need to earn to get to a basic survival level in your community," Rev. Hill said.

Data from the report indicates an ongoing struggle for ALICE families and points out these obstacles to achieving financial stability:

- **The extent of hardship.** Of Arkansas' 1,158,693 households, the percentage of households earning below the ALICE Threshold — which includes 17% statewide who are below the Federal Poverty Level and 24% statewide who are ALICE families — ranged from 26% in Benton County to 64% in Lee County.
- **The basic cost of living.** The cost of basic household expenses in Arkansas increased to \$46,812 for a family of two adults with one infant and one preschooler and \$18,249 for a single adult, with the Household Survival Budget increasing far more than the increase in overall inflation and wages between 2007 and 2017.
- **Jobs.** Low-wage jobs dominated our state, with 51% of all jobs paying less than \$15 per hour. Another 19% pay between \$15 and \$20 per hour, and 26% of jobs pay between \$20 and \$40 per hour. Less than 4% of jobs pay more than \$40 per hour.
- **The role of public assistance.** Public and private assistance provided support to many households living in poverty or earning slightly above the Federal Poverty Level, but it provides significantly less support to ALICE household whose income is above eligibility levels. Spending on healthcare and health insurance was higher than other budget areas. Large gaps remained in assistance, especially in housing, transportation and childcare.

Working through statewide United Ways, United for ALICE develops tools to measure the challenges faced by ALICE households. These tools allow communities to move beyond stereotypes and judgements of "the poor" to encourage the use of data that informs solutions for ALICE households.

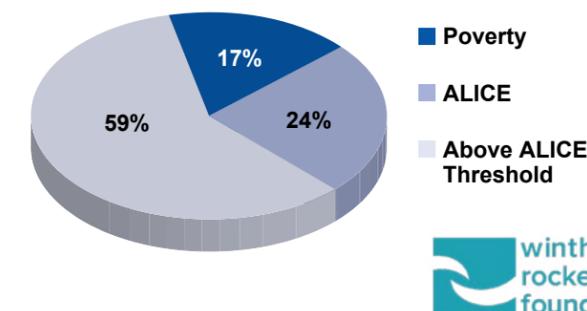
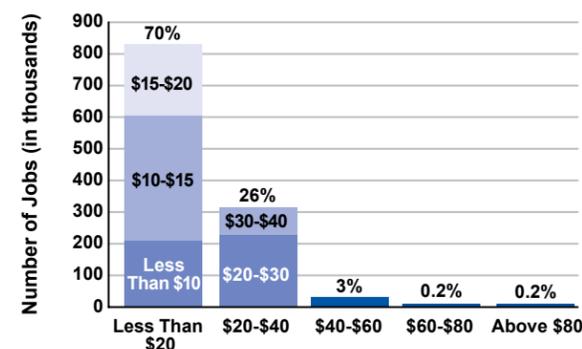
To learn about these tools, learn more about ALICE families and see updated data, Arkansans can sign up for the ALICE in Arkansas newsletter at aliceinar.org. New data that includes the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic upon ALICE families is being developed and will be available soon.

"One question I keep coming back to is why is the income gap gets larger when we can take actions to help propel those who are struggling forward," said Rev. Hill. "Why don't we have a better process to help support ALICE workers, help them find childcare? How can we be more responsive to those who are working hard to take care of us and maintaining our economy in retail, restaurant and front-line jobs? It is reasonable for all of us to ask how we can be better stewards of ALICE households."

Household Survival Budget, Arkansas Average, 2017

	SINGLE ADULT	2 ADULTS, 1 INFANT, 1 PRESCHOOLER
Monthly Costs		
Housing	\$480	\$651
Child Care	\$-	\$761
Food	\$179	\$543
Transportation	\$322	\$644
Health Care	\$124	\$568
Technology	\$55	\$75
Miscellaneous	\$138	\$355
Taxes	\$222	\$304
Monthly Total	\$1,520	\$3,901
ANNUAL TOTAL	\$18,240	\$46,812
Hourly Wage*	\$9.12	\$23.41

*Full-time wage required to support this budget



See more data on page 7

Why was the ALICE Report for Arkansas Commissioned?



Rev. Shantell Hill

Rev. Shantell Hill, equity officer for the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, shed light on the reason WRF decided to become a part of the ALICE movement by commissioning research on ALICE families in Arkansas.

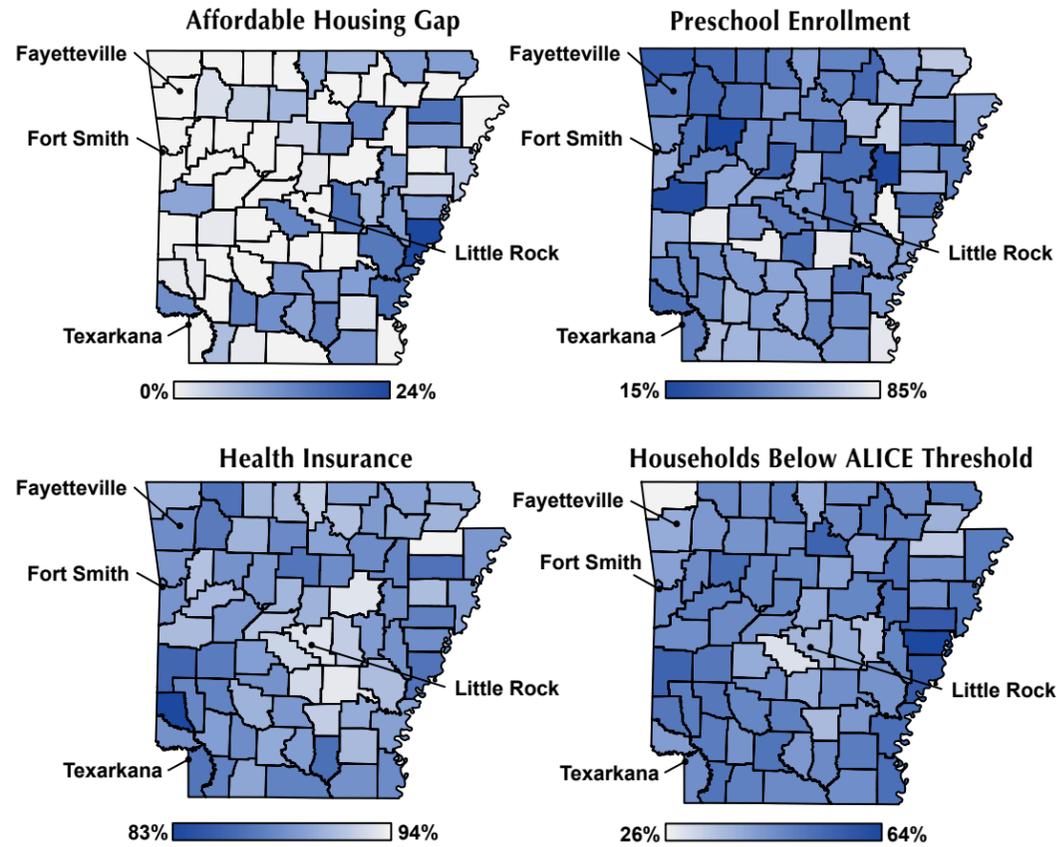
"We were looking for a way to change the conversation, a way to move the needle on anti-poverty," Rev. Hill said. "People experience inequity economically, in available education resources and socially as historically disadvantaged populations. We wanted to find a way to tell the story of inequity and how it touches all Arkansans, whether rural, suburban or urban."

WRF learned about the ALICE movement through its efforts in 20 U.S. states, especially in New Jersey and Louisiana. Those two states shared information about how they worked with local United Way organizations and other nonprofits to research the needs of ALICE families.

"Many programs here in Arkansas still use the Federal Poverty Level adopted more than 60 years ago to determine who to serve," she said. "We believe that measure is antiquated. Through ALICE research, we can show that there are many Arkansans who live above the poverty level but are not able to support their families without assistance."

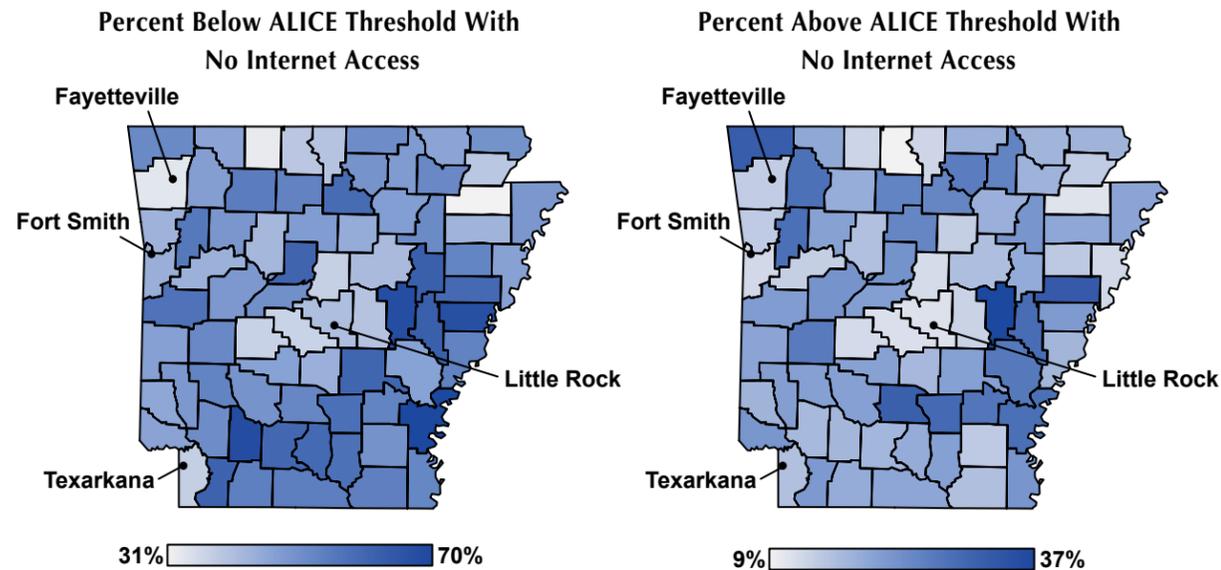
"ALICE research confirms that seven of 10 jobs in Arkansas do not pay a livable wage," Rev. Hill said. "The majority of our workforce must choose to work several jobs to provide for their families. The economic system in which we live, and not the work ethic of our people, is causing inequity in our state."

Local Indicators Compared With Households Below ALICE Threshold, Arkansas, 2017



Sources: ALICE Threshold, 2017; American Community Survey, 2017

Internet Access by Household Income, Arkansas, 2017



Source: American Community Survey, 2017

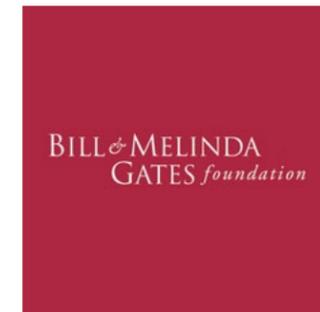
Changing the National Conversation about ALICE Families

A Grass Top Initiative in Arkansas



Last year, 28 organizations from 18 states and the District of Columbia received grants to elevate diverse voices and broaden the national conversation about poverty and economic mobility at a critical moment in our nation's history. The initiative, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is the Voices for Economic Opportunity Grand Challenge. The purpose of the Grand Challenge is to offer alternatives to confusing, conflicting and just plain inaccurate accounts about what poverty is, why it happens, to whom it happens and how to address it.

This goal, meant to be nationwide, aims to start changing the narrative about how people view, represent and understand ALICE families. ALICE is an acronym for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. "The effort to change the narrative around poverty and opportunity is now more important than ever. With tens of millions of people newly unemployed, many of them people of color, and many facing racism each day, there is an even greater need to break down the dominant perceptions about poverty and to replace them with more accurate ones," according to a release published by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.



"Equitable access to opportunity will not be possible until we address misconceptions, racial bias, racism and stereotypes and move to action guided by shared values, history,

systemic solutions, racial equity and human dignity," said Ryan Rippel, director of the Economic Mobility and Opportunity program at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. "We don't think that this work is by itself going to solve either racism or poverty in America. Far from it. But we will not change complex systems if decision makers are not following the voice and insight of those facing marginalization and victimization as a result of our economy and our institutions. One way to accomplish this is by ensuring that the actual stories of those who experience poverty are front and center with the goal of compelling new levels of action."

The Grand Challenge is part of a multi-funder, multiyear plan to examine economic mobility and opportunity in this country, to create tools to help everyone better understand the systemic factors that lead to the presence of greater economic mobility in their own neighborhoods, and to craft and test strategies for changing the outlook for people experiencing poverty. Grantees were selected from 1,225 submissions made last fall and represent a broad cross-section of geographies, cultures, media and scope of ideas.

Arkansas Asset Funders Network (AFN) was one of the grantees of the Grand Challenge with the "Can You See Me Now?" initiative. AFN is organizing grass top ambassadors (e.g. business and banking, philanthropic and policy) to advance an agenda focused on ALICE individuals. This initiative is highlighting stories about the value and worthiness of hourly wage employment and the importance of asset creation and protection for Arkansas workers.

"ALICE employees have literally been taking care of our society through the pandemic, at their own physical risk. How long will we think of grocery store workers, truck drivers, healthcare workers and teachers as 'essential' workers?" said Mollie Palmer, Heart of Arkansas United Way vice president of communications and committee member for the ALICE narrative change with AFN. "We all

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Mollie Palmer

want to go 'back to normal' but to truly have learned from this pandemic and carry us all forward in a sustainable way, we have to continue the respect and care for these workers."

There are several barriers that keep ALICE workers vulnerable. Rise in cost of childcare expenses, lack of public transportation and access to affordable health care are a few. Many ALICE workers hold two, sometimes three jobs and are paid minimum wage.

"The current narrative about ALICE families is distorted," said Palmer. "It's the bootstrap myth. That if you just work hard, keep your head down, go that extra mile, things will work out and you'll make it. Unfortunately, that just isn't true. We need to highlight the experience of ALICE workers and understand the systems in place that keep them in debt or in need of assistance to broaden our understanding. We are all in need of a reality check."

Through the "Can You See Me Now?" initiative, the Asset Funders Network is using a grass top approach at changing the narrative about ALICE families in Arkansas. "The legislature, business owners, policy makers, community leaders and the wealthy are who need to know about this work and these stories," said Palmer. "If they understand the realities of ALICE households, it can affect policy."

AFN is also identifying these grass top ambassadors to highlight ALICE households without a work from home option: those individuals who keep our businesses running, prepare and handle our food, care for our children and our sick and keep our public spaces clean.

We have an opportunity to work alongside ALICE workers and be their advocate," said Palmer. "ALICE families juggle to make ends meet and need equitable options and protections for the future. They are working so hard already. This is where the grass top ambassadors can make a real impact for Arkansans, by understanding these stories and using their influence to make change."

We Can Only Be as Strong as the Customers We Serve

By Laura Landreaux, CEO
Entergy Arkansas, LLC



Laura Landreaux

It's been one year since Entergy Arkansas joined with the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation, community leaders and elected officials at the Arkansas State Capitol to announce our participation in the ALICE (asset limited, income constrained, employed) research report. Little did we know, COVID-19 would

drastically impact our world as we knew it.

According to the recently updated ALICE in Arkansas report, 46% of households struggled to make ends meet in 2018 — and that was before the current public health emergency triggered by COVID-19. These ALICE Arkansans have incomes above the federal poverty line, yet they often struggle to afford daily necessities such as housing, childcare, food, transportation and healthcare.

Entergy Arkansas and the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation helped produce the ALICE in Arkansas research, because we see the struggles first-hand and wanted to target long-lasting solutions.

Nearly three quarters of calls handled by our Entergy phone centers each year are from households that face some level of financial hardship. That's why Entergy teams with community partners and organizations to invest in solutions that make a difference, as well as volunteer at programs that provide vital assistance to people like ALICE.

The pandemic hit our communities shortly after the ALICE research was announced last year, and this crisis has caused even further hardships for Arkansans.

As soon as the pandemic hit, Entergy Arkansas issued a moratorium on disconnects for nonpayment and implemented an Enhanced Customer Assistance Plan that provides customers with flexible options to extend time to pay their utility bills.

That moratorium and payment plan continues to this day, but as things slowly return to our "new normal," disconnects for nonpayment will begin again. Meanwhile, we are working to make sure our customers can get assistance they need to recover.

The Power to Care utility assistance payment program has received a great deal of support by our customers this past year to help senior citizens and disabled customers pay their electric bills. Remarkably, with your help, we increased support for the program by \$500,000, which allowed us to help more low-income older adults and people with disabilities. When customers contribute to The Power to Care via their monthly electric bill, Entergy shareholders match all gifts, dollar-for-dollar, up to \$1 million annually. Every penny received provides direct support to those who are struggling.

In addition to The Power to Care, Entergy Arkansas sponsors Super Tax Day events to help ensure customers qualify for the Earned Income Tax Credit and file their income taxes at no cost.

Additional help this past year came from increased funding of the federal Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program, which provides money to help customers with energy bills and other energy-related expenses. And soon, we will help promote a new federal program that will provide assistance directly to landlords and renters.

Entergy Arkansas is committed to helping lead economic recovery by working with our public officials, industry peers and investors to move our state — and our customers — forward.

As Arkansas government and business leaders wrap their arms around the interventions necessary to get our state's economy strong again, we would be wise to look at the vulnerabilities that existed before the crisis hit. This means we need to take a hard look at ALICE and, using the data at ALICEinAR.org, prioritize long-term policy solutions and programs that put Arkansas's working households on more secure ground in the future.

We appreciate all our customers and especially, you, who care so much about the ALICE families and work each day to make Arkansas a better place to live and work.

At Entergy Arkansas, we believe that we can only be as strong as the communities we serve. We look forward to providing affordable power to all our customers, including ALICE, through this period of uncertainty and working with leaders across the state on policies that put Arkansas workers first.

ALICE IN ARKANSAS



First Place Winner Justin Booth



Runner-ups
Reyna Marquez Arnetta Pugh

Congratulations to Our #SeeALICE Contest Winners







Hear stories of ALICE heroes in Arkansas by visiting www.youtube.com and searching for "SeeALICE"



Essential and Nonessential: Two Perspectives During a Pandemic



Juana Martinez works with ALICE families at Healthy Families of Benton County. While schools and many businesses closed, essential workers still needed childcare — putting a strain on childcare facilities and their staff.

2020 gave Arkansans a new way of looking at those who work in jobs we see every day.

The term essential workers emerged and was defined by the Centers for Disease Control as “frontline workers such as fire fighters, police officers, corrections officers, food and agricultural workers, United States Postal Service workers, manufacturing workers, grocery store workers, public transit workers and those who work in the educational sector such as teachers, support staff and daycare workers.” A nonessential worker was defined as “someone employed in a job that is not crucial during an emergency (like the COVID-19 pandemic). These nonessential employees are not required to maintain business operational functions during the pandemic.”

ALICE workers — those who hold jobs but do not earn enough to cover necessities — fit into both categories. In Arkansas, some nonessential workers were forced to stop working due to state government mandates and executive orders.

On March 23, 2020, Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson announced all barbershops, beauty salons, nail salons,

massage therapists and tattoo parlors had to close operations. This placed all workers in those establishments in the nonessential category. Gov. Hutchinson re-opened these types of businesses on May 6, 2020, with new and relatively strict operating guidelines issued by the Arkansas Department of Health.

These closures and restrictions had a financial impact on proprietors of these businesses. “When I was forced to stop working in March, I was operating at a salon in Little Rock, but I had already seen a decline in revenue. Starting in February my clients who were immunocompromised were taking precautions and not coming in,” said Gimyrah “Cocoa” Newton, esthetician and makeup artists in Little Rock. “It was scary because we weren’t allowed to operate, and the cash flow just stopped when we were closed down. It took several months before I was able to qualify for unemployment. But eventually, I was able to get it and a PPP loan. Until those came through, I had to find work in the essential category so I started driving for Door Dash and Instacart and other food delivery services.”

For those deemed essential, like childcare workers, the challenges were different. Juana Martinez is a family support specialist with a degree in Human Development

and Family Science. Even though she was able to work through most of the pandemic, the pressure and restrictions took a toll. Martinez classifies as an ALICE worker and is considered essential, but she also works with ALICE families in her job at Healthy Families of Benton County.

“My whole family was quarantined at one point because a student at my son’s school had COVID,” said Martinez. “Then, my family and I all contracted the virus. I didn’t get paid while I was sick or while we were quarantined. So that was multiple weeks without income. Then there was an error with my unemployment check, I had a car issues and I’m still paying my student loans... so many things seemed to hit all at once and it took a toll on me and my family financially and mentally.”

Childcare workers were hit particularly hard being classified as essential. “When schools were shut down and everyone went virtual last spring, most essential workers with children still needed childcare,” said Carolene Thornton, director of Childcare Aware NWA, “The barriers are real for those we work with in both categories and our staff too. The demand for childcare remained high and we did our best by using Zoom and being creative with programs, but it was and still is hard on us all.”

Raylin Means, who works with Martinez and Thornton, is also a family support specialist in Benton County. “Juana and I not only had our own set of challenges financially, but we see families really struggling even a year later,” said Means. “I wish people knew how hard most ALICE families worked, and how much the pandemic has adversely affected them, regardless of whether or not they worked through the pandemic.”

“We work with families who may be a mix of essential versus nonessential. One family we work with has eight people living under the same roof. One of them works construction and was nonessential, another did janitorial work and was essential,” said Means. “I wish that people saw them all as doing the best they can, without judgment and with more compassion.”

Navigating processes for unemployment and resources was a challenge, especially for ALICE workers deemed nonessential who were using social support services for the first time.

“I applied for food stamps for the first time in my life and that was so hard,” said Newton. “The wait times for unemployment were long and it felt like every day the rules and who to talk to would change. I was on hold for hours. Once I did start getting unemployment checks, there was no back pay.”

“There was PPP but it took a long time to receive. I worked hard to never miss a bill,” Newton said. “I’m proud of that. But it made me think of my career differently and how to better plan financially. I love what I do, but I updated my resume and started exploring jobs in the ‘essential’ fields because I can never get in this situation again.”



“It was scary because we weren’t allowed to operate, and the cash flow just stopped when we were closed down.

— Gimyrah “Cocoa” Newton



Challenging to meet local needs in the best of times, Childcare Aware in NWA worked nonstop through the pandemic to provide resources to their increasing clientele.



Nonprofit Coalition Supports Advocacy on ALICE Issues



Back in March of 2020, soon after the ALICE Report for Arkansas was released, it was determined that it was important for nonprofits and advocacy organizations in Arkansas to be well versed on the report so that the ALICE data could inform actions they take in advocating for change within our state.

“Our goal was first to immerse nonprofits in the information contained in the ALICE Report for Arkansas,” said David J. Lewis, equity officer at the Winthrop Rockefeller Foundation. “Then we began talking about the advocacy infrastructure in Arkansas and how WRF and other funders could support advocacy activities that meet the needs of ALICE families.”

ALICE families can seem to be invisible unless you know where to look. Though most of us interact every week with someone who is categorized as ALICE, we don’t always concentrate on the struggles that happen to those who are employed, but don’t earn enough to afford basic necessities or save for the future. The coalition members work to deeply

understand who ALICE is and how to help these families who make up the backbone of Arkansas’ economy.

“In the year since the ALICE data was released, COVID-19 has hit ALICE families hard. We plan to release updated information this year that shows that impact, especially on small business owners and professions hit hard by COVID,” said Marquita Little Numan, leadership officer at WRF.

At the introductory meeting of the ALICE Advocacy Coalition, WRF made presentations to help nonprofits understand the report and its implication for policies and legislation in the state. “Really we want to determine what policy agenda can support ALICE for the long term. We have to identify where there may be policy gaps and encourage policy organizations to advocate for a more supportive, equitable Arkansas for ALICE,” said Numan.

The resulting coalition of nonprofits from around the state has 24 members from 14 organizations. WRF’s role is to create a space to bring together these groups to use the ALICE data in identifying gaps in the current systems for education, healthcare, housing and family economic security — to name a few. Members of the coalition independently determine how they will tackle these issues,

and WRF has encouraged participating organizations to consider the challenges faced by ALICE families in Arkansas as they develop advocacy agendas.

Since last spring’s initial in-person meeting, the coalition has met several times by Zoom to determine how WRF can best assist the members, providing resources and technical assistance. There have been two general sessions and some more focused technical sessions on topics like narrative strategy — how to best use stories to accomplish advocacy goals.

“We’re trying to determine what we as funders can do to leverage our resources — beyond just grantmaking — to help nonprofits and advocacy groups advance issues that impact ALICE. Instead we want to know how we can give them the tools they need to build capacity to accomplish their advocacy goals,” said Lewis. “We want to help them leverage community support for the issues that touch ALICE families, not just understanding the ALICE data, but knowing how to apply ALICE data. It is important for us to know the current narrative about poverty in Arkansas and how the ALICE community’s voice can be amplified in that narrative.”

Zachary Crow, executive director of DecARcerate Arkansas, is a member of the coalition whose organization addresses systemic change needed within the criminal justice system. DecARcerate Arkansas confronts unjust and oppressive systems within policing, the courts and prisons.

“A lot of folks in the criminal justice system are disproportionately poor,” said Crow. “One way the data impacts us at DecARcerate is court debt – fines, fees and bail. What we know is that the cost of this debt is an immense burden on families within the ALICE framework. Families are burdened by often exorbitant debt through this system which leads to cycles of poverty. We are working now on a report about the collateral consequences of court debt.”

Crow said there are far too few organizations doing justice work in Arkansas, and he believes the ALICE Advocacy Coalition is valuable to him and his organization because it helps build connections and alliances between those who are addressing justice issues. He has been a part of the Zoom training sessions and was at the initial in-person meeting.

“They support us, and we support them,” he said of the coalition members. “All justice work is intersectional.”

Part of Crow’s work involves developing an internal curriculum for activism training for those who were formerly incarcerated, and the coalition’s story-telling workshop helped Crow think through that effort. Also that workshop has been helpful in his work with legislators during the recent Arkansas General Assembly session.

“It’s hard to engage legislators with only statistics,” Crow said. “Narrative-based work is helpful and important when making a case with them.”

ALICE data is a part of a larger effort to reframe poverty in Arkansas. WRF believes every Arkansan deserves to thrive and prosper, and the goal of the Alice Advocacy Coalition is to advance that vision and to help organizations use the data to center urgent policy making decisions that can uplift ALICE families.

“ALICE is a framework to facilitate broader conversations about poverty. We plan to continue to with the coalition as long as the partners need us, and to be responsive to nonprofit needs throughout the state,” said Numan.



Zachary Crow

“There are far too few organizations doing justice work in Arkansas, and the ALICE Advocacy Coalition is valuable to me and my organization because it helps build connections and alliances between those of us who are addressing justice issues.”

— Zachary Crow
DecARcerate Arkansas



David J. Lewis



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Meet ALICE Families Where They Are

“It’s possible to change how people perceive ALICE families. We just need to meet people’s basic needs and meet them where they are, not where we think they should be,” said Carol Hart, administrator for the Happy Hollow Endowment held at Arkansas Community Foundation. “Once basic needs are met, then you can start helping them with the next level of support like credit counseling, arts and advanced education.”

An artist and volunteer, Hart has brilliantly picked up the reins (once held by Betty Lighton of Fayetteville) to help Washington County serve ALICE families. “It is my privilege to help continue Betty’s legacy through this work. Her priorities were clear but flexible, and that has allowed us to grant over \$600,000 since the fund began,” she said.

“The pandemic showed us how vulnerable ALICE families in some communities are,” Hart said. “We need to make sure people have food, shelter, access to transportation, things like that. So many Arkansans are just one illness or accident away from desperation. It isn’t because they aren’t working hard; they are. But getting ahead can be a challenge when you are living paycheck to paycheck or have an emergency.”

Through the Happy Hollow Endowment, she helps advise funding for a wide range of causes, from meals, health and dental clinics, to more long-term assistance like single-parent scholarship funding, supporting adults with disabilities, credit counseling, financial training, exposure to arts for at-risk students and urban gardening that provides fresh produce to low-income families.



Carol Hart

“The funds go where help is needed most, and then we build on that. This was especially important when the pandemic hit — we were able to get food to children in need,” Hart said. “But we continue to fund a diverse set of causes. Small efforts can make a huge difference in a person’s life — like a single parent getting a scholarship or a teenager experiencing the arts and theater. It can change the trajectory of their life.”

