

WHEN ALICE CALLS

What Greater Cleveland's 211 Data Reveals About Working Families

United Way of Greater Cleveland | 2026

ALICE stands for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed: households that earn above the poverty line but not enough to afford the basics.

What is 211?

United Way 211 is Greater Cleveland's free, confidential helpline. Anytime, from anywhere, residents can call or chat to reach a trained navigator who connects them to local help with housing, food, utilities, employment, and more.

Every contact is also a signal. Together, they show us in real time what working families are facing. This unique data gives United Way of Greater Cleveland (UWGC) the insight to design smarter, more efficient solutions and direct resources where they are needed most.

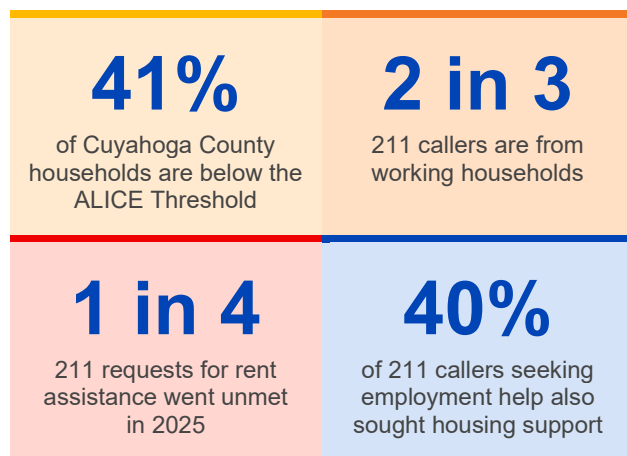
A JOB IS NO LONGER ENOUGH

In 2025, 211 recorded 98,755 requests for help from 78,277 contacts, in every ZIP code in Cuyahoga County. Behind that volume is a clear pattern.

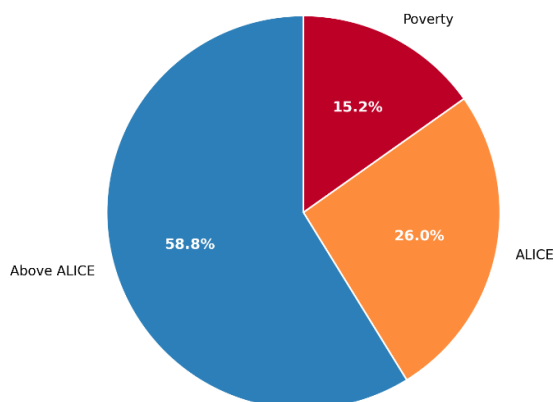
In 2024, 41% of Cuyahoga County households lived below the ALICE Threshold, the minimum income needed to afford housing, food, child care, transportation, health care, and technology. That 41% breaks down as 15.2% of households in poverty and 26.0% classified as ALICE. The remaining 58.8% live above the threshold.

Our 211 data adds a sharp point to that finding. In 2025, an estimated 2 out of 3 callers came from working households. The people reaching out for help are not, for the most part, out of work. They are employed and still cannot keep up.

Employment remains one of the strongest paths toward stability, but for a growing number of families it no longer delivers it. A job is no longer enough.



Household Financial Status, Cuyahoga County, 2024



THIS STORY IS NOT UNUSUAL

Behind those numbers are people like Maria.

Maria works full time at a distribution center on Cleveland's east side, earning \$38,000 a year, and supports herself and her teenage son. She is doing everything right and still cannot keep up with expenses.

Last August, her rent increased by \$150 a month to \$1,000. Her son needed school supplies. Then her car needed a repair she couldn't afford, and without a car she couldn't get to work. She called 2-1-1. A United Way navigator helped her identify a utility assistance program, connected her to food assistance resources to stretch her grocery budget, and found short-term transportation help to keep her working while she saved for the repair.

The rent increase went unaddressed. There was no rental assistance program she qualified for. She earns too much. Maria is not an edge case. She is the face of 211 in Greater Cleveland.

Names are fictional; the situation reflects patterns seen across thousands of 2025 contacts.

WHAT THE BASICS COST

The ALICE Threshold is not abstract. For a family of two adults and two children in child care in Cuyahoga County, the basics cost \$95,232 a year in 2024. That is nearly \$30,000 above the county's median household income of about \$66,000.

Child care alone runs \$2,208 a month, more than housing or food. A family can do everything right and still fall short of a number this large.

ALICE Household Survival Budget, Cuyahoga County, 2024

Monthly cost for two adults with two children in child care

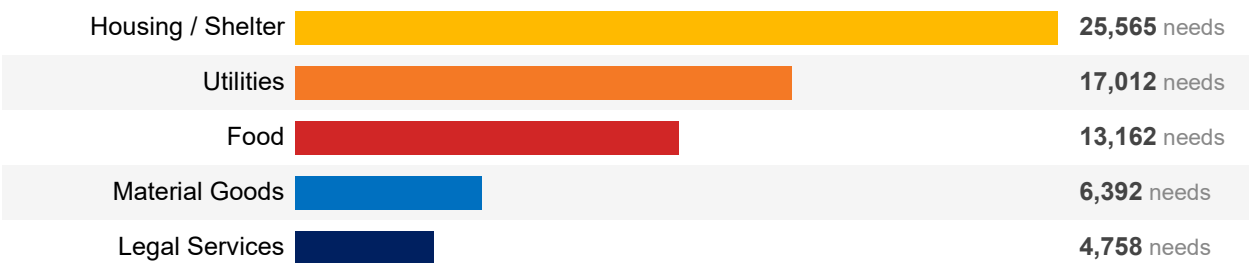
ALICE Budget Category	Monthly Cost
Housing	\$1,298
Child Care	\$2,208
Food	\$1,432
Transportation	\$802
Health Care	\$639
Technology	\$146
Miscellaneous	\$653
Taxes	\$758
Monthly Total	\$7,936
Annual Total	\$95,232
Required Hourly Wage	\$47.62

Source: United For ALICE, 2024 Cuyahoga County Household Survival Budget. Note: Child care is the largest cost in the ALICE budget but rarely appears in 211 data. Those requests are referred to Starting Point, the region's dedicated child care resource and referral agency.

WHAT PEOPLE NEED – AND WHERE RESOURCES FALL SHORT

Across 2025, housing was the largest and fastest-growing need, followed by utilities and food.

Top 5 Need Categories — Total Needs, Cuyahoga County 2025



Source: UWGC 211 2025 data. Material goods refers to clothing, furniture, other household items.

Within housing, a gap is rental affordability. Requests for help paying rent numbered 9,115, and about 1 in 4 went unmet.

What ‘met’ and ‘unmet’ mean in this data:

A need is recorded as met when a 211 navigator finds a resource and the caller accepts the referral. A need is unmet when no resource exists in the 211 database or the caller declines the referral. Unmet need reflects the gap between what people need and what local resources exist.

Top 4 Housing Need by Service Type — Volume and Unmet Rate

Service	Needs (bar = volume)	% Unmet
Rent Payment Assistance	9,115	24.5% unmet
Rental Deposit Assistance	1,856	26.4% unmet
Housing Condition Issues	2,890	23.0% unmet
Emergency Shelter	3,042	4.9% unmet

Unmet needs coding: Orange = high unmet rate. Green = largely being met within a call.

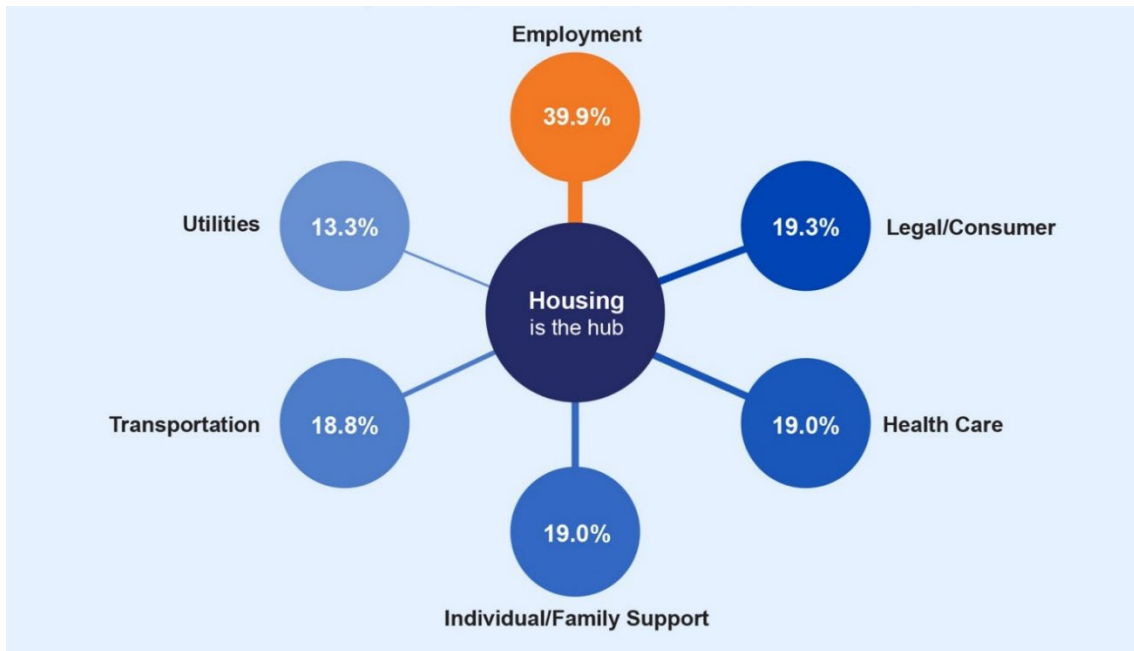
Most rent assistance is designed to reach specific groups, such as veterans, people with documented disabilities, or those experiencing chronic homelessness, and those targeted programs do important work. Very few rental assistance programs serve general working households, so when someone calls 211 for help with rent, our navigators may have little to no resources to offer. Even the programs that reach broader populations, including UWGC’s Family Stability Initiative and the county’s Prevention, Retention, and Contingency (PRC) program, are limited to families with children or operate at a fraction of the scale needed. There is no resource, or combination of resources, in Cuyahoga County large enough to respond to 9,115 rent requests.

NEEDS ARE INTERCONNECTED

The challenges working families face rarely come one at a time. Housing is the hub that nearly every other need connects to. A rent increase, a utility shutoff, or a car repair can set off a chain reaction across a family’s budget, which is why working families usually need coordinated help across several needs at once, not a single fix.

The strongest tie is between employment and housing: for many working families, the two are not separate problems but the same struggle. Transportation is a multiplier of its own. When a family loses reliable transportation, it can lose access to work, child care, groceries, and services all at once, which is why transportation trouble so often arrives bundled with other needs.

Overlapping Needs in 211 Calls

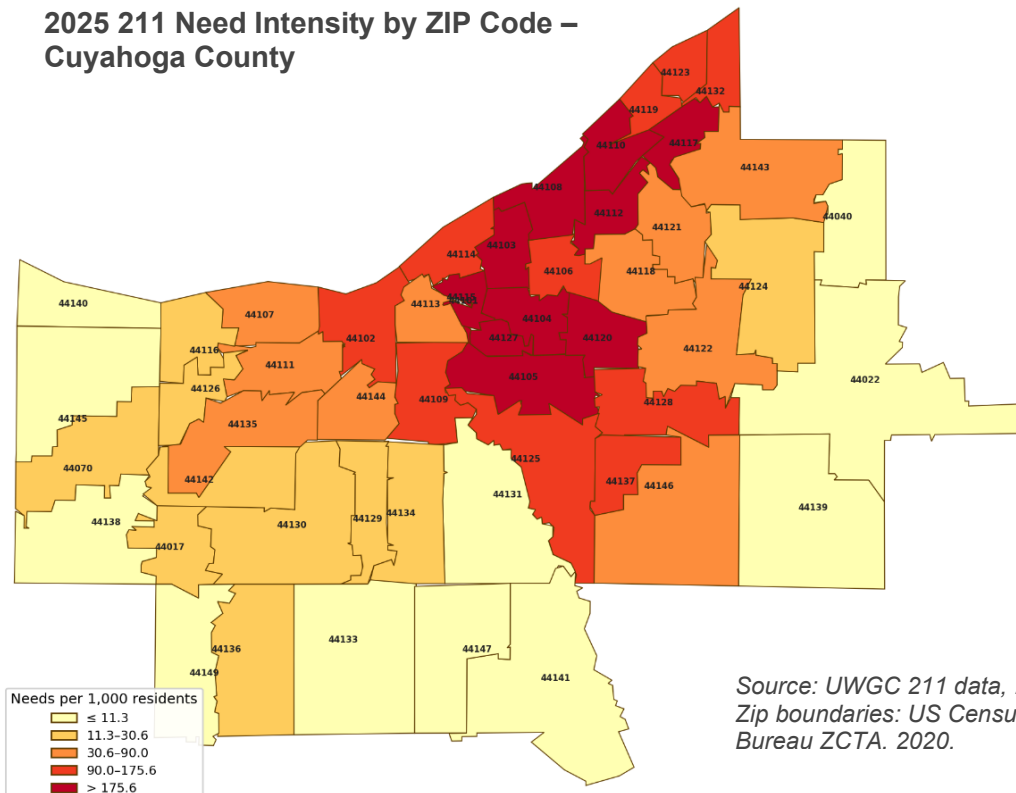


Source: UWGC 211 2025 data.

WHERE PEOPLE CALL AND WHERE HELP IS HARDEST TO REACH

Need is concentrated in Cleveland's highest-poverty neighborhoods, where 211 hears from residents at far higher rates than in the suburbs. Most callers are connected to help, but the gaps in met need are not evenly distributed. In the suburbs fewer people call, yet a larger share of those who do cannot be connected to help. Unmet rates for housing and transportation run higher in the suburbs than in the city.

2025 211 Need Intensity by ZIP Code – Cuyahoga County



Source: UWGC 211 data, 2025.
Zip boundaries: US Census Bureau ZCTA. 2020.

211 Needs per 1,000 Residents — and Where Needs Go Unmet

Geography	Needs / 1,000 Residents	Overall Unmet	Housing Unmet	Transport. Unmet
Cleveland	126	8.9%	13.1%	~18%
First Ring Suburbs	45	11.3%	19.5%	~22%
Outer Ring Suburbs	11	12.2%	~18%+	28.3%

Source: UWGC 211 2025 data; 2024 ACS 5-Year Estimates via Bridgepoint. ‘Unmet’ reflects needs for which no qualifying, accessible resource was identified.

That gap raises an important question: Does lower suburban call volume reflect lower need, or lower awareness of 211 as a resource? The answer can help guide where future investment goes.

WHEN NEED SURGES

Monthly 211 data reveals recurring seasonal patterns, and moments when a single disruption sends need surging across categories at once.

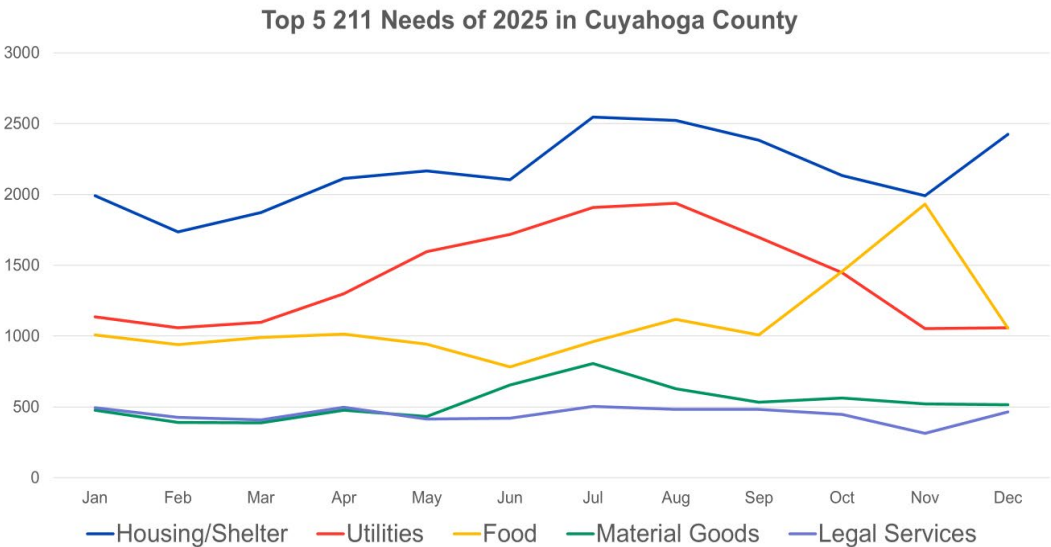


Figure: Top 5 211 Needs by Month, Cuyahoga County 2025. Food peaked at nearly 1,933 needs in November, roughly double baseline. Source: UWGC 211 operational data.

The SNAP Lapse: Fall 2025

Food calls spiked in October as households braced for the disruption before a federal shutdown paused SNAP benefits. Calls came from 88% of Cuyahoga County ZIP codes. By December, housing calls rose in turn, consistent with food-budget pressure cascading into rent stress. When one support is disrupted, others come under pressure quickly. Read more [here](#).

UNITED WAY IS TURNING DATA INTO ACTION

The 211 data shapes our response. UWGC uses this real-time signal to direct investments, design programs, and advocate for the policy changes that working families need.

Bridges@Work

UWGC's employer-embedded economic mobility program. Bridges@Work partners with employers to connect employees to resources, financial coaching, and credit building tools, reaching working households before a crisis hits. Maria's story is exactly who Bridges@Work is designed to serve: employed, above the poverty line, without a clear path to stability. [[» Learn more](#)]

Benefits Cliff Advocacy

A family earns a raise or takes a better job and loses benefits worth more than the raise, leaving them worse off. This is the benefits cliff, and 211 documents its effects every day. UWGC advocates to smooth the path off assistance, through employer engagement and legislative advocacy so people can accept opportunities without falling backward. [[» Learn more](#)]

Family Stability Initiative (FSI)

Short-term, flexible financial assistance for families facing housing instability, including rent assistance and utility support. FSI addresses a real gap in the resource landscape, though at a scale that the data shows is not sufficient relative to need. Expanding FSI's reach and eligibility is one of the most direct responses to 211 needs data. [[» Learn more](#)]

Tenants' Resources

When renters call 211 about poor conditions, unresponsive landlords, or the threat of eviction, 211 is the front door to Cleveland's Tenants' Resources initiative, connecting them to legal info, mediation, and tenant-organizing partners. UWGC serves as the administrator for this City of Cleveland-funded initiative and 211 as central intake. [[» Learn more](#)]

A LOOK AT 2026

The pressure has not eased. In July 2026 alone, 211 heard from 8,272 Cuyahoga County residents, up 15% from July 2025, and recorded 10,816 needs, up nearly 18% year over year. Housing and utilities still accounted for roughly half of all needs, the same pattern this report documents throughout 2025. Even so, the network continues to meet most needs. More than 97% of food needs were met with a referral in July.

***The people reflected in this data are working and still struggling.
What they need are solutions that work as hard as they do.***

GO DEEPER AND GET INVOLVED

- **Connect someone who needs help.** Call 2-1-1 or chat via 211oh.org.
- **Invest in solutions.** Donate to 211 or the Family Stability Initiative; become a Bridges@Work site.
- **Explore the data.** Visit 211oh.org for 211 need and trend data and learn more about [ALICE](#).
- **Share this report.** Every partner who understands it strengthens our response.

About the data

Figures come from United Way 211 contacts in Cuyahoga County for 2025, alongside the 2026 United For ALICE Report (2024 data). Need categories follow the national 211 Human Services Indexing System.

Working-household estimates are drawn from Census data matched to caller age rather than self-reported, and some figures are still being finalized. Some needs, such as child care, are referred to dedicated lines like Starting Point and appear less often in 211 data.