

# RAPPAHANNOCK UNITED WAY PUBLIC POLICY AGENDA

Rappahannock United Way's public policy agenda reflects our cross-sectoral approach and our commitment to improving opportunities for all community members.

Rappahannock United Way will work to promote this agenda with local and state policy makers, in collaboration with our nonprofit partners, to advocate for the education, financial stability and health of every person in our community. Creating lasting change requires Rappahannock United Way and our partners to raise our voices – in big and small ways – to make sure decision makers understand our community's challenges and act accordingly.

While this agenda is organized around Education, Income, Health and Strengthening the Nonprofit Sector, we know these issues are inextricably intertwined. That's why it's important for everyone – every person in every community – to speak out.

## EDUCATION

### SCHOOL READINESS

**VISION:** Children enter school ready to learn and achieve.

**ADVOCACY:** RUW supports policies and funding for initiatives that ensure students begin school on track; hence children are developmentally ready in the areas of literacy, social skills, emotional ability, physical development and health.

**RATIONALE:** Positive early childhood development affects all of us. Over 85% of brain development occurs between birth and age 5. **On average 14% of children in our region are not ready to enter school.** It is reported that 33% of children in our region fail in 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade SOL Math. Early childhood development programs prepare children to become adults who are literate, employable and productive citizens. Because brain development occurs most rapidly during the first five years of life, children who enter school healthy and ready to learn are more likely to successfully graduate high school and less likely to live a life of poverty.

### HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

**VISION:** Individuals obtain a high school diploma or equivalent.

**ADVOCACY:** RUW supports policies and funding on the local, state and national level that ensure the highest quality K-12 education that results in increased graduation rates and subsequent entry of individuals into post-secondary education or work training to become gainfully employed.

**RATIONALE:** Individuals who do not finish high school are more likely to lack the basic skills required to function in an increasingly complex job market than people who have earned a high school diploma. Currently **10% of students in our region do not graduate high school on time**; this rate increases to 16% if the student is economically disadvantaged. Adults with limited education levels are more likely to be unemployed, on government assistance, or involved in crime.

## WORKFORCE INVESTMENT

**VISION:** Individuals are prepared and ready for the changing workforce.

**ADVOCACY:** RUW supports policies and funding on the local, state and national level that ensure individuals are afforded opportunities for training and education that prepare them to participate fully in their communities, and support themselves and their family, now and through retirement.

Rappahannock United Way supports policies and funding that will help job seekers and workers access employment, education, training, and support services to succeed in the labor market and match employers with the skilled workers they need to compete in the global economy.

**RATIONALE:** It is reported that **30% of individuals in our region** who live at or below the Federal Poverty Level **did not graduate from high school**. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, in November 2016 the national unemployment rate for adults without a high school diploma was three percentage points higher than for those who had graduated from high school.

## INCOME

### FINANCIAL STABILITY

**VISION:** More households align spending and saving with income.

**ADVOCACY:** RUW supports legislation, policies and community practices that foster the development of a coordinated support system which will work to increase income, build savings and gain assets.

**RATIONALE:** More than **40% of wage earners in our region** are still living at or below the Federal Poverty Level. Currently **48% of households in our region** living below the Federal Poverty Level have children. More than **100,000 Virginians** take out payday loans every year. RUW believes that individuals and families who have access to higher wages are more likely avoid risky financial behaviors and to own homes, build savings, weather personal financial crises and raise healthy families.

### EARNED INCOME TAX CREDIT (EITC)

**VISION:** More households align spending and saving with income.

**ADVOCACY:** RUW supports legislation and funding which reduces the tax burden for low to moderate income individuals and families. RUW supports tax credits for hard-working households like the Child Tax Credit, Education Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit.

**RATIONALE:** Individuals and families who earn low to moderate income oftentimes do not make enough money to meet basic living expenses including the cost of food, housing, transportation, childcare and other necessities. By returning earned money to the individual or the family through a refundable income tax credit, the taxpayer is more likely to continue employment and work towards financial stability. More than 600,000 households in Virginia claimed **\$1.4 billion in Earned Income Tax Credits (EITC)** last year, yet still an estimated 20% of eligible workers do not claim EITC each year.

# HEALTH

## ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE AND PREVENTION RESOURCES

**VISION:** More individuals and families have access to physical, behavioral and mental health care and prevention resources.

**ADVOCACY:** RUW supports legislation, policies and funding that increase access to public health care insurance for vulnerable populations including children, the elderly, individuals with disabilities and low-income working families. RUW supports Medicaid reforms and funding for other health services to meet the needs of this vulnerable population.

RUW supports legislation, policies and funding that expand resources and enable access to mental health and opiodo dependency treatment and intervention services.

**RATIONALE:** RUW believes that healthy mental and physical development ensures individuals are positioned for success, and access to mental health and chemical dependency treatment for both youth and adults promotes healthier and safer communities. Almost a quarter million adults in Virginia live with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders. Suicide rates have increased in Virginia and the nation. Within Virginia suicide is ranked 11<sup>th</sup> for cause of death. More than 12% of Virginians, under the age of 65, are completely without medical insurance – equaling **874,000 uninsured Virginians**.

# STRENGTHENING THE NONPROFIT SECTOR

## CHARITABLE GIVING & VOLUNTEER ENGAGEMENT

**VISION:** Local nonprofits exhibit the highest standards of accountability, effectiveness, and community impact which will result in a better quality of life for our community.

**ADVOCACY:** RUW supports policies and funding to promote initiatives on a local, state and federal level that encourage philanthropy and volunteer engagement; ultimately strengthening the capacity of local nonprofit organizations to work together collaboratively, promoting best practices and evidence based models in an efficient and effective manner to make lasting change and advance the common good.

**RATIONALE:** RUW raises more than \$3.6 million annually and is accountable to more than 10,000 donors and 1,000 volunteers; thus we have a responsibility to advocate for tax policies and government initiatives that reflect our region's values and philanthropic traditions.

### 2-1-1 VIRGINIA

**VISION:** Universal access to 2-1-1 Virginia so that everyone can connect to this vital information and referral service anytime and anywhere.

**ADVOCACY:** RUW's priority is to support continued national and state funding for the 2-1-1 system and the services it provides to Virginians in need. Specifically RUW supports promoting 2-1-1 as the hub for information for resource databases, directories, disaster information and special campaigns.

**RATIONALE:** 2-1-1 is the national abbreviated dialing code for 24/7 access to free and confidential community resource information and referral. Last year 2-1-1 call centers throughout Virginia received more than 100,000 contacts, of those more than 3,000 came from residents of our region.