

AGENDA ITEM REPORT



Date: February 18, 2026
To: Board of County Commissioners
From: Jill deVries Jolicoeur, Assistant County Administrator
Department: Administration
Subject: Douglas County Thrives

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

On May 28, 2025, the County Commission authorized the Deputy County Administrator to sign a subgrant agreement with the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) to participate in the 2025 Economic Mobility Opportunity Cohort. Douglas County was 1 of 15 local governments working as a peer learning cohort to enhance economic mobility in their respective communities. In order to receive a \$24,000 grant as part of this opportunity, Douglas County was required to submit the attached work plan to document how the grant funding would be utilized to advance economic mobility in our community.

In applying for this opportunity, Douglas County was asked to identify a complex challenge and proposed idea to increase access to economic mobility and opportunity to residents to be considered as part of the peer learning opportunity. Looking to the Anti-Poverty Community Health Improvement Plan (AP-CHIP), Douglas County identified the challenge of economic instability in single, female-headed households.

Douglas County Thrives

As outlined in the attached work plan, Douglas County and our community agency partners involved in leading the AP-CHIP partnered with the University of Kansas Center for Public Partnerships and Research (CPPR) to conduct a Community Sensemaking Project focused on the lived experiences of our AP-CHIP priority population (single female heads of household living at or below the United Way ALICE (asset limited, income constrained, employed) standard. CPPR's Our Tomorrow's project model is described as "a complex way of *intentionally listening* and *actively responding* to lived experiences." It is a tool and approach that brings families, communities, and decision-makers into a shared, equitable process for making sense of our daily realities, together.

AP-CHIP partners worked with KU CPPR to develop a survey and data collection process and strategy, to analyze data for emerging patterns and trends from the shared experiences of Douglas County community members. This survey and project ultimately titled, Douglas County Thrives, was launched on October 2, 2025, and remained open through November 21, 2025. With assistance from community partner agencies, including but not limited to DCCCA, Heartland Community Health Center, Just Food, and LiveWell, 94 survey responses were collected. A summary of the responses was shared through visualizations and facilitated sensemaking sessions held in December 2025. Following the December sensemaking sessions, KU CPPR developed the attached report of action-focused strategic initiatives that elevate our community members voices in calling for greater

economic mobility, health and well-being. This report includes a final set of narrative-style summaries of the results of the sensemaking sessions and data collection efforts. The final report is intended to provide the leadership of the AP-CHIP, policy leaders, and community civic and non-profit leaders with information that illustrates how key strategies included in the AP-CHIP, and larger CHIP could positively impact the economic well-being of the community. including but not limited to a guaranteed income pilot program.

LINKS/REFERENCES TO PREVIOUS MEETINGS:

[Subgrant agreement with International City/County Management Association \(ICMA\) for the Economic Mobility Community of Practice \(EMO\)](#)

RELEVANT REGULATIONS, STATUTES, CODES:

N/A

FISCAL IMPACT:

This project was fully funded by a \$24,000 grant from the International City/County Management Association (ICMA).

NEXT STEPS OR FUTURE ACTIONS:

The AP-CHIP will discuss the findings and recommendations included in the Douglas County Thrives report to determine any changes to the plan's goals, strategies and actions that may be in order. Additional steps may include exploration of philanthropic grant support for pilot initiatives related to report recommendations.

RECOMMENDED MOTION:

No action, for informational purposes only.



2025 ICMA ECONOMIC MOBILITY AND OPPORTUNITY COHORT DETAILED WORK PLAN

Responses to these prompts can be brief and should primarily emphasize what you will be focusing on over the next six months through the cohort timeline, but you are welcome to provide additional context for how this work plan supports larger, longer-term priorities. ICMA may use this language in general communication and reporting to our funder about the program. At the end of the cohort timeline, you will be asked to report on progress (and any necessary adaptations) related to the activities, outputs, outcomes, and budget identified.

1. **Brief Project Summary.** Douglas County and our community agency partners involved in leading the Anti-Poverty Community Health Improvement Plan (AP-CHIP) will contract with the University of Kansas Center for Public Partnerships and Research (CPPR) to conduct a Community Sensemaking Project focused on the lived experiences of our AP-CHIP priority population (single female heads of household living at or below the United Way ALICE (asset limited, income constrained, employed) standard. CPPR's Our Tomorrow's project model is described as "a complex way of *intentionally listening* and *actively responding* to lived experiences." It is a tool and approach that brings families, communities, and decision-makers into a shared, equitable process for making sense of our daily realities, together. The project will include qualitative and quantitative data collection with members of our priority population, including story collection, analysis, facilitated community and stakeholder sensemaking, and the development of action-focused strategic initiatives that elevate our community members voices in calling for greater economic mobility, health and well-being.
2. **Anticipated output(s) and outcome(s) of the project.** Through the development of a survey and data collection process and strategy, the project team (CPPR, Douglas County and AP-CHIP partners) will analyze data for emerging patterns and trends which will be shared through visualizations and facilitated sensemaking sessions tentatively planned for mid-October/November 2025. Two community sensemaking sessions (in-person and/or virtual) will take place during this time in order to inform a final set of narrative-style reports summarizing the results of the sensemaking sessions and data collection efforts. This final report will provide the leadership of the AP-CHIP (convened by Douglas County and the United Way of Kaw Valley) with what is hoped to illustrate and make the case for key strategies included in the AP-CHIP, including but not limited to a guaranteed income pilot program. The primary audience for this final report (which will be provided to ICMA as part of the EMO Cohort) is local, state and federal policy leaders, private philanthropy, and the larger community.
3. **Anticipated timeline.** Briefly note expected monthly activities/milestones (program completion December 2025).
 - **August 1** – Project kickoff
 - i. Survey/framework design (August)



- ii. Data collection planning (August-October)
 - iii. Survey development and management (September-December)
 - iv. Data collection implementation (September-October)
 - v. Data management (September-October)
 - vi. Data analysis, visualizations, and materials development (October-December)
 - vii. Community sensemaking sessions (October-November)
 - viii. Reporting (November-December)
 - **December 31** - project completion
4. Please fill in the attached detailed budget template according to your anticipated expenditures.



Center for Public Partnerships and Research

Douglas County Thrives

An Our Tomorrows
Community Sensemaking Initiative

Final report for the Douglas County Kansas
Community Health Improvement Plan
Economic Mobility Project Team

2026



Acknowledgements

This report summarizes the key findings from the Douglas County Thrives Community Sensemaking Initiative, a partnership with the University of Kansas Center for Public Partnerships and Research (KU-CPPR) and the Douglas County Kansas Community Health Improvement economic mobility team with funding from Douglas County. Funding for this effort was made possible by the International City/County Management Association (ICMA)'s 2025 Economic Mobility and Opportunity Peer Learning Cohort and Mini Grant Program with help from the Gates Foundation, awarded to Douglas County in May 2025. The KU-CPPR team would like to acknowledge contributions from the following community partners: Douglas County, United Way of Kaw Valley, LiveWell Douglas County, Kansas State Research and Extension of Douglas County, DCCCA, Community Children's Center, Lawrence-Douglas County Public Health Department, Heartland Community Health Center Community Health Workers, and all those who submitted a story and contributed their perspectives in community sensemaking sessions.

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Executive Summary

The Douglas County Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP) economic mobility project team has a goal to increase the percentage of single female headed households that can afford to meet basic living expenses so that all families can thrive. They partnered with the University of Kansas Center for Public Partnerships and Research (KU-CPPR) to develop Douglas County Thrives, an Our Tomorrows sensemaking project, to elevate community voices, center lived experiences and narratives, and place community member stories at the heart of meaningful dialogue and action planning. KU-CPPR collected community stories and convened two community sensemaking sessions around these stories aimed at understanding family experiences and developing actionable insights for policymaking.

Participants stressed that families are navigating overlapping, compounding challenges including financial strain, housing instability, difficulty meeting basic needs, transportation barriers, and chronic stress. These challenges are not isolated or temporary. They are structural and ongoing, leaving families with little margin for error. Even small disruptions, such as an unexpected bill, reduced work hours, or a missed service connection, can quickly escalate into crisis.

A dominant theme was that systems are difficult to navigate and often misaligned with real family life. Eligibility thresholds, income calculations, credit requirements, and fragmented services create barriers that leave families feeling “stuck” in a cycle and unable to stabilize by being penalized too soon for earning more or working overtime. Community members describe systems that require significant effort to navigate and are rarely designed around the needs of whole families.

Community Recommendations

- ❖ **Increase income stability and reduce cost burdens.** Pilot direct assistance programs for single parents; identify opportunities to reduce household cost burdens such as food, child care, utilities, and other basic needs taxes; and align benefits with the real cost of living using the ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) Household Survival Budget for Douglas County as a guide.
- ❖ **Simplify access and reduce system barriers.** Reduce eligibility thresholds, wait times, and requirements and simplify applications, promote “no wrong door” policies and programming across the system of provider agencies, and advocate for policy solutions that reduce sudden benefit cliffs and help families on the path to economic stability.
- ❖ **Prioritize housing stability and affordability for single parent households.** Provide affordable housing options with fewer barriers, short-term stabilization supports, financial education and credit counseling, and housing and program policies that recognize financial realities such as fluctuating incomes or wages.
- ❖ **Strengthen service coordination and whole-family design.** Establish cross-agency coordination, shared accountability, and whole-family service models that align program services around family stability goals rather than individual eligibility.
- ❖ **Leverage lived expertise.** Leverage lived experience when designing services and new interventions, to help increase effectiveness.

Background

Douglas County Thrives is an economic mobility project in service of anti-poverty goals outlined in the 2024-2029 Douglas County Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP).¹ The 2024-2029 CHIP found that single-parent families, especially single mothers and families, are more likely to experience poverty, rent cost burden, and challenges finding employment that pays a living wage. This led to the following work team goal: increase the percentage of single female headed households in Douglas County living at or above the ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) standard.² The CHIP team began exploring possible solutions through data walks, screenings of the documentary “It’s Basic” and community discussions, and most recently, partnering with KU-CPPR to develop Douglas County Thrives, a new sensemaking project. Douglas County Thrives aimed to engage directly with the priority population to elevate community voices, center lived experiences and narratives, and place community member stories at the heart of meaningful dialogue and action planning.

KU-CPPR partnered with the Douglas County economic mobility project team between August and December 2025 to develop a survey, collect community stories, and convene two community sensemaking sessions around the survey results. This report outlines the methods, survey results, takeaways from each community sensemaking session, actionable insights for future policymaking, and recommended next steps.

Methods

KU-CPPR employed a sensemaking approach called Our Tomorrows³, designed to center community stories at the heart of productive discovery and action planning. Sensemaking with Our Tomorrows begins with a unique approach to surveying that invites participants to respond to an open-ended question with a story about their everyday life and then assign meaning to their own experiences through a series of multiple-choice questions. Participants assign significance to their own stories through innovative question structures, yielding a deeper understanding without researcher interpretation or bias. Facilitators then co-interpret the patterns in the data with community members and make meaning together through individual and group reflection activities. Our Tomorrows Sensemaking brings families, communities, and decision-makers together to unearth unmet and unknown needs, celebrate community strengths, and develop actionable insights grounded in community narratives.

Survey Design

KU-CPPR began the project by interviewing the Douglas County CHIP economic mobility team and reviewing existing research. KU-CPPR presented an initial draft of the Douglas County Thrives survey to the project leadership team in August (see Appendix A). Each member of the team contributed edits and subject matter expertise from various sectors such as housing, child care, behavioral health, food security, and public health. The survey included a consent statement and the following open-ended prompt, followed by a series of multiple-choice questions.

- ✦ Think about a moment in the last year when you felt like your family was really thriving or just surviving. What was happening at the time? Tell us about that experience in the space below.

Community members had the option to complete surveys independently online, on paper, or with the help of a project representative on an iPad. The survey was available in both English and Spanish.

Data Collection

Surveys

KU-CPPR launched the online survey in September 2025 and collected stories from October through November 2025. The survey was advertised via flyers, word of mouth, and social media (see an example in Appendix C). Community partners from several local agencies set shared story collection goals and assisted with outreach. Key outreach partners included Just Food, Lawrence Parents as Teachers, the Douglas County Housing Authority, the Ballard Community Center, the Heartland Health Community Health Worker Program, the Children's Community Center, Child Care Aware of Kansas, school districts, DCCCA, Tenants to Homeowners, and Lawrence-Douglas County Public Health.

The team collected 94 stories from across county zip codes. Some participants received gift cards to incentivize participation and compensate them for their time. KU-CPPR monitored and reported participation to the project team weekly.

Community Sensemaking Sessions

KU-CPPR facilitated two community sensemaking sessions in December — one with a small group of members of the community with lived experiences followed by a broader event open to the public.

The purpose of the first session was to validate the overall approach and areas selected for analysis as well as to begin community-based interpretation of the survey results. The Community Children's Center hosted the session on the evening of December 8, 2025. The project team recruited participants from social service agencies from across Douglas County. The host provided child care and Douglas County provided gift cards to help cover transportation costs and participants' time. KU-CPPR walked participants through a Story Pack with sample data, patterns of responses, stories, and activities designed to inspire reflection and discussion (see Appendix D). Throughout the session, several participants also shared their own stories and experiences overcoming challenges, navigating services, and ideas for action.

Session two took place at the Lied Center of Kansas on December 15, 2025, and was designed to move from data to ideas for action. Douglas County submitted a press release inviting the public, posted the event on social media, and sent invitations to civic leaders and local community organizations. Two facilitators and a notetaker from KU-CPPR led the session beginning with an overview of the project and walking small groups through a Story Pack (see Appendix E), individual reflection, small group discussions, and opportunities to share with the broader group. Data was captured via sticky notes and notetaking. The event was advertised in the *Lawrence Journal World*, followed by a feature.

KU-CPPR facilitators invited participants in both sessions to share their individual and group interpretations of the survey data and patterns across four key areas:

- ❖ What surprises you/stands out about the patterns?
- ❖ What challenges emerge?
- ❖ What's working in the stories?

- ✦ What do the patterns and stories tell us about what families need to thrive?

The results of both sessions revealed significant overlap in themes and actions, synthesized below.

Data Analysis

In community sensemaking, primary analysis takes place with community members through guided inquiry and discussion. Preliminary data analysis began with the initial survey results. KU-CPPR reviewed the survey data for emerging patterns and prepared data visuals and descriptives for partner and community consideration. KU-CPPR presented preliminary responses and patterns to the Douglas County economic mobility project team in November to help interpret patterns of interest for further inquiry. The team reviewed patterns and data and advised KU-CPPR on patterns of significant interest to focus on for community sensemaking. KU-CPPR developed story packs and discussion and reflection questions for participants to help make further meaning and develop community actions and recommendations. Researchers compiled notes from individual and small group reflections, conducted thematic analysis, and summarized key takeaways in this report.

Findings

Findings from the Douglas County Thrives sensemaking survey and community sensemaking sessions are summarized below with a synthesis of community actions and recommendations.

Survey Results

Participants

A total of 94 participants from across seven zip codes completed the survey between October 2 and November 22, 2025. Participants were primarily single parents or caregivers, living below the ALICE threshold, female, and between the ages of 35 and 44. See below for a breakdown of key demographics and Appendix B for more details.

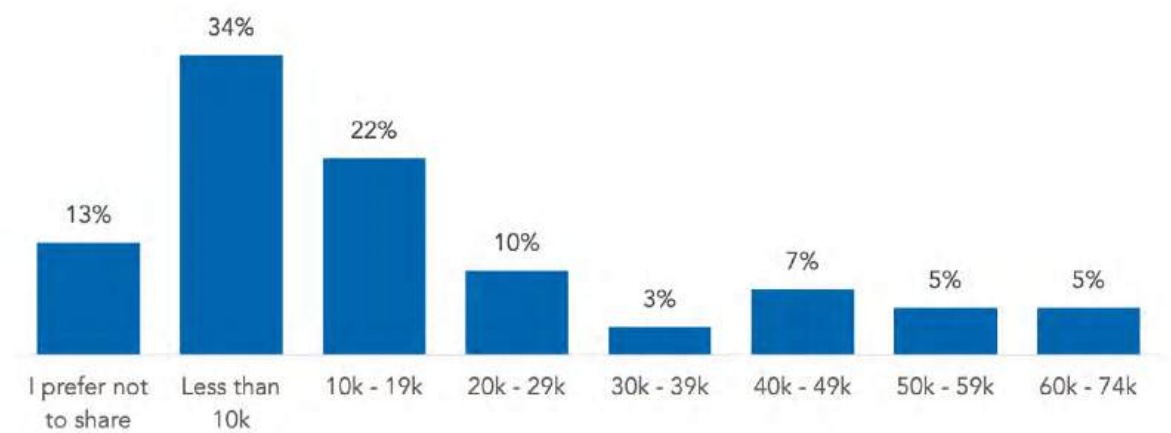
Households

Most respondents identified as female (72%), followed by male (19%), non-binary or gender non-conforming (4%), and other identities (1%). Most participants shared that at least one child was living in their household at the time of the survey. Specifically, 20% reported having one or two infants (ages 0 to 2), 17% had one or two preschool-aged children (ages 3 to 4), and 30% had one or two school-aged children (ages 5 to 17) living in the household. More than half of participants (53%) reported having one adult living in their household, and 24% reported having two adults in the household.

Income

Nearly two-thirds of respondents (62%) identified as low-income. When asked for specifics on annual household income, over two-thirds (66%) reported earning less than \$30,000 per year. Within that threshold, 34% earned less than \$10,000, 22% earned between \$10,000 and \$19,000, and 10% earned between \$20,000 and \$29,000. All participants reported incomes below \$75,000.⁴ The majority of survey participants were experiencing financial hardship and struggling to meet their basic needs; 66% of participants fell far below the ALICE threshold for single households, with an average annual income of \$30,684.⁵

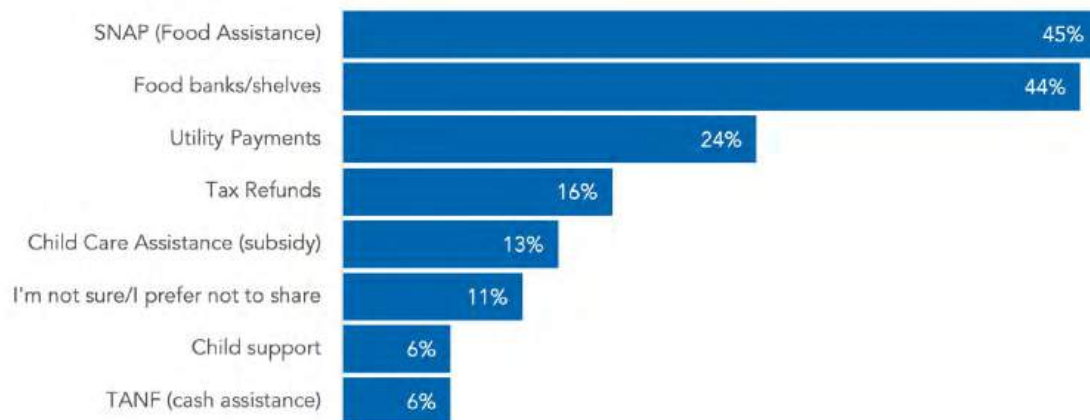
Figure 1. Household Income, Survey Responses



Participants were also asked to identify experiences or identities that were important to their story. Over a third (39%) identified as single parents, and 21% said co-parenting was a part of their story. Additionally, 15% identified as parents of children with disabilities or varying abilities, and 13% reported being pregnant at the time their story took place (see Appendix B) for additional identities and experiences).

Many participants identified multiple, intersecting life experiences at the time of their shared experience. Over half identified as low-income (62%), and half said unemployment (50%) or mental health challenges (50%) were part of their experience.. Nearly half also experienced food insecurity (46%). Other commonly reported challenges included transportation barriers (36%), housing instability (34%), substance use disorder or addiction (27%), disabilities or special health care needs (23%), having a criminal record (21%), debt or bankruptcy (19%), and experiencing domestic violence (17%) (see Table 7 for more details about other identities and experiences). When asked what resources or services made a difference for their family in the last year, nearly half said selected food banks/shelves and SNAP (Food Assistance) as seen in Figure 2 below. (Appendix B).

Figure 2. Resources or services that made a difference for my family in the last year (select all that apply) (N=94)



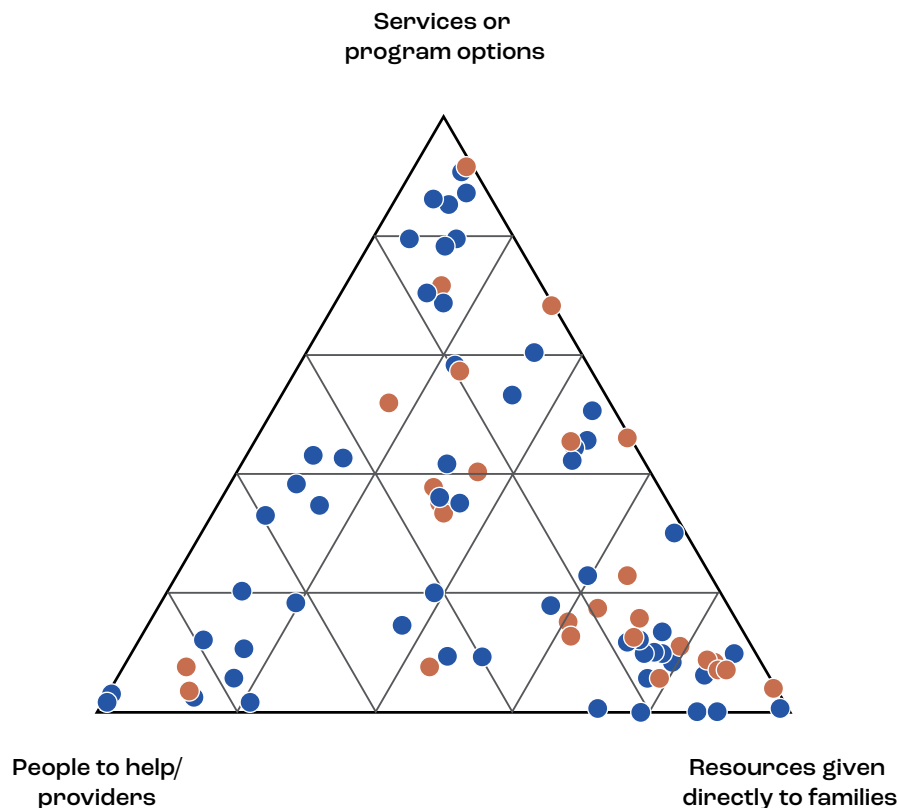
A majority (65%) of participants identified as White, European, or Caucasian. Other racial and ethnic identities included Black or African American (11%), Indigenous, Native American, or Alaska Native (9%), multiracial (5%), Asian, Asian American, or Desi (3%), Hispanic, Latino/a, Latinx, or Spanish origin (3%), and Other (1%).

Sample Responses

Single Parent Households

After participants shared a story, they answered a series of questions to help us better understand their experience and circumstances. Researchers filtered the responses for single parent households, to try to better understand their experiences when compared to the other experiences. In many instances, a significant pattern of responses emerged, prompting opportunities for sensemaking with the community. In Figure 3 below is an example pattern of responses to one such question. For these unique question types, participants are invited to look at three points on each triangle, click and hold onto a ball on the screen, and then move it to the place on or within the triangle that best fits with the experience they shared. The pattern below represents 89 out of the 94 responses (some chose not to respond). The orange dots represent participants who said single parenting was part of their life when the story took place (approximately 40%).

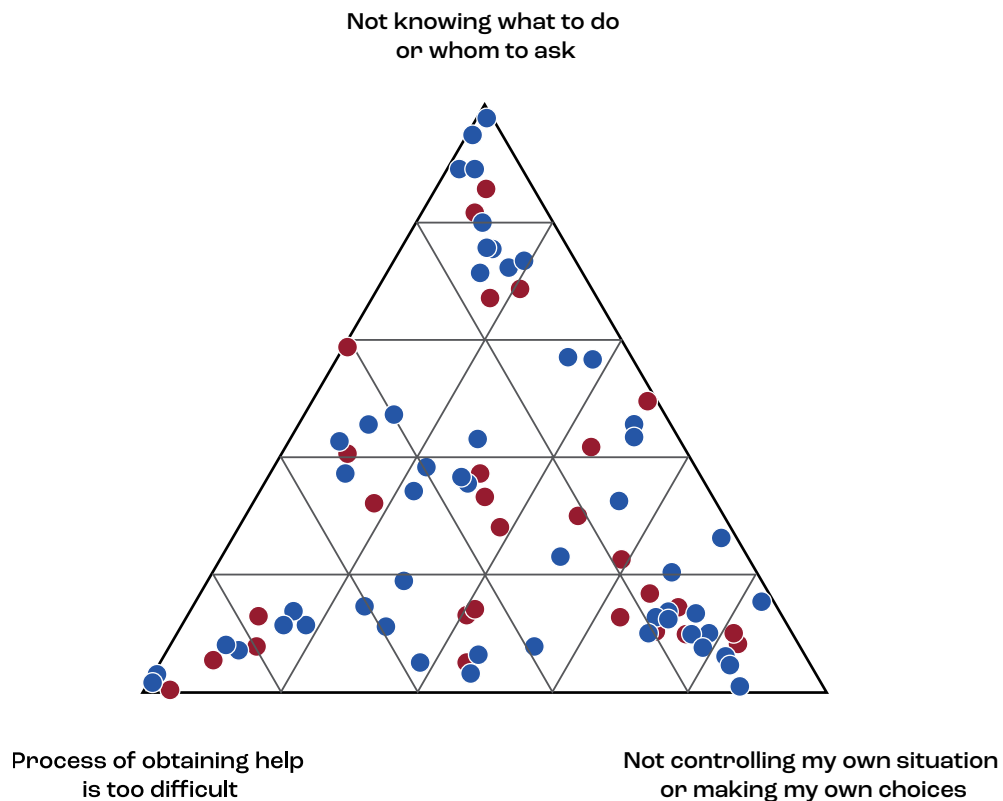
Figure 3. When I think about what's available for families in my community, we need more...



Note: Each dot represents a story (N=89). The orange dots represent single parent experiences (n=37).

In Figure 4 below, single parent experiences (red dots) appear to spread out and align with other populations, suggesting a broad experience of shared challenges related to seeking help.

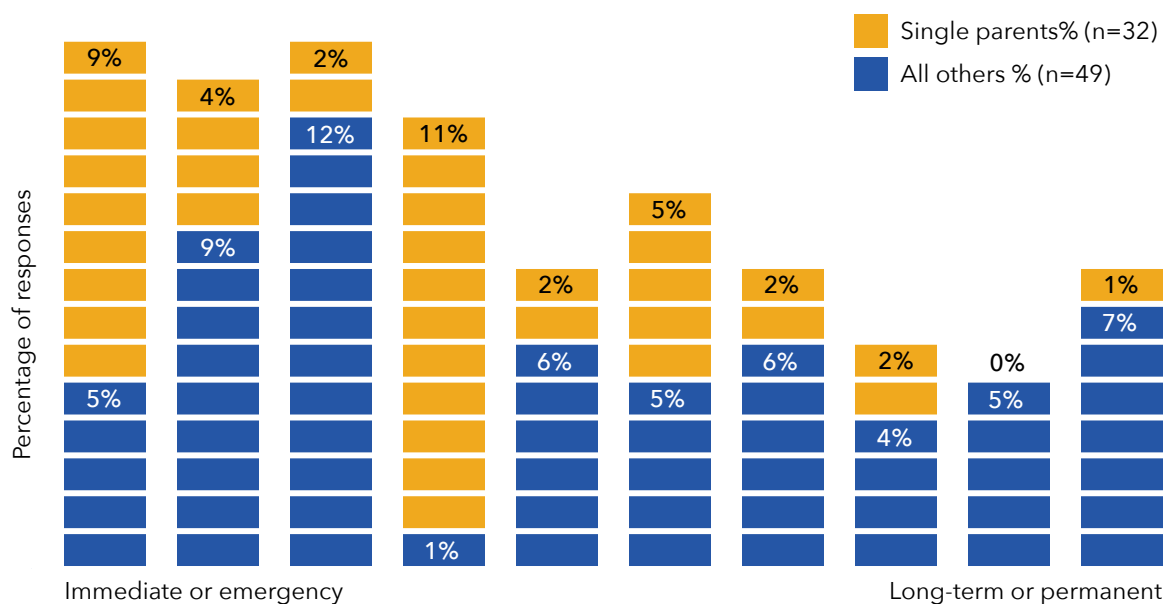
Figure 4. When I think about the times I've needed help, I felt most concerned about or challenged by...



Note: Each dot represents a story (N=84). The red dots represent single parent experiences (n=37) (39%).

One survey question asked participants to reflect on the type of help or support they experienced. Participants were invited to look at the two endpoints on either side of the line, click and hold onto a ball on the screen, and then move it to the point on the line that best fits with the experience they shared. In the pattern of responses below (see Figure 5), most experiences appear to involve help or support that was “immediate or emergency” versus “long-term or permanent”. The yellow bar portions represent single parent experiences among the broader set of responses (n=32).

Figure 5. My story involves help or support that was... (N=81)



These data and response patterns are a few examples of the survey results KU-CPPR presented to the economic mobility project team and community members in community sensemaking sessions. See the appendix for more survey data and sample stories pulled from patterns like these for sensemaking sessions. See below for more details on sensemaking session outcomes. Note: Data in the story packs may differ slightly from final figures because story packs were created with 95% of the final dataset.

Community Sensemaking Sessions

Challenges

Participants began by reflecting on visual patterns of the survey data followed by a sampling of stories. A facilitator invited participants to share their reflections on what the patterns and stories could tell us about what situations or challenges families are facing in Douglas County. A pattern emerged among session observations:

Families are managing multiple, overlapping pressures with little margin for error.

While individual circumstances vary, the underlying challenges are consistent. Families are working hard, making constant tradeoffs, and navigating systems that are not able to meet the realities of family life. In summary, one sensemaking session participant observed,

“Folks don't feel like they have choices.”

Financial Strain/Economic pressure

Financial strain is at the foundation of most challenges. Participants noted that income is often unstable and does not keep pace with the cost of living, forcing families to make difficult choices about housing, food, transportation, childcare, and healthcare. Even families who are employed full-time describe living without financial margin. Income thresholds and benefit calculations often fail to reflect families' real financial situations, leaving some families ineligible for support while still struggling to meet basic needs. Session participants talked about feeling caught in a bind – earning more can result in losing supports before stability is achieved, while earning less keeps them in constant scarcity. This financial strain forces families to make difficult tradeoffs between work, time with family, and basic needs.

“It feels sometimes like damned if you do, damned if you don't. The tension between making too much to get help, like if I want to work overtime, I might be just over the edge income eligibility-wise, but not right away. That might impact me later, and I can't predict how I'll be doing when that shows up on my income. and then if I work overtime, I miss time with my family.

Structural barriers: eligibility rules, service navigation, and transportation

Families consistently describe difficulty accessing help. Systems are experienced as fragmented, hard to navigate, and full of requirements that are difficult to meet. Family structures are also unique, causing additional complications with eligibility. Many families struggle simply to find services, determine whether they qualify, or complete required steps. Eligibility rules, especially those tied to income thresholds, often feel arbitrary and punishing, leaving families “stuck” between needing help and earning just enough to be disqualified. The abundance of non-standard “gig” work or overtime mean that earnings also fluctuate in the short-term, resulting in mismatched gaps in document earnings and eligibility versus need. Families experience systems as fragmented, requiring significant time, effort, and persistence to navigate, often without clear guidance or coordination across programs.

“Places that give direct support like food pantries are really helpful, but it takes time to figure out how it all works...You might qualify, might be lucky off the start. But it can take time to find the right fit.

Housing barriers: affordability + credit/requirements

Housing instability is both a symptom and a driver of this financial pressure. Families face rising rents, limited affordable options, and barriers related to credit history, deposits, and eligibility requirements. Even when families are housed, many live with constant fear of losing their housing.

Poor housing quality further undermines stability, forcing families to choose between affordability and safe, livable conditions. Housing challenges ripple outward, affecting employment, mental health, and children's well-being.

“Once you learn about how credit works, it's too late... even if working.

“One crisis is all it takes to throw a family into chaos.

Basic Needs & Food Security

Families reflected on the persistent difficulty meeting basic needs, particularly access to healthful affordable food. Even when food pantries are available, healthful food options are often limited and do not always meet families' needs, especially for children or those with specific dietary requirements. Participants also described food insecurity as an ongoing concern that requires constant problem-solving and trade-offs. Families in session one noted that it often requires families to patch together multiple sources, adding to stress and time burden. The inability to reliably meet basic needs, and the stigma attached to asking for help, contributes directly to stress and instability.

“There are a lot of places that help here but it can be hard to get; it takes work. It's hard to ask for help too.

“You should be able to just have food.

Emotional toll: stress and mental health strain

The cumulative effect of these pressures is chronic stress and exhaustion. Participants described how families are carrying a constant mental load as they juggle work, caregiving, finances, and system navigation with little time to rest or recover. Single parents and primary caregivers experience this strain most acutely, often managing responsibilities alone without reliable backup. Families emphasize that stress is not simply emotional; it is the result of living without time, money, or flexibility. Rather than framing mental health as a standalone issue, families in session one connected well-being to whether basic needs are met and stressors are reduced. Ongoing uncertainty and lack of stability take a toll on both mental and physical health.

“When families had strong mental health and emotional health, they could handle anything...Basic needs go a long way to helping mental health.

Across both sessions, participants also spoke about issues of dignity and trust. Many noted that families can feel judged, scrutinized, or punished by systems that require proof of need and impose rigid rules that sometimes feel inconsistent. This erosion of dignity discourages families from seeking help and reinforces feelings of shame and frustration. Families want systems that assume good intentions and help reduce stigma.

“Giving families directly what they need is bottom line and then making sure families have what they need to move forward.

What do families need the most?

A facilitator asked participants to reflect on the stories and insights into what families say they need the most. Participants highlighted the importance of direct concrete supports for creating the stable conditions needed for mental health and strength needed to navigate financial stressors. Examples from session one included formal and informal help with food, housing, and assistance with mental health medications through organizations like Bert Nash, Heartland Health, and Tenants to Homeowners. Participants also noted formal and informal mutual support as one way communities try to fill the gaps in the formal system. Examples of needs from both sessions included direct financial support and access to healthy, quality food options that meet dietary needs, and when possible, the freedom to make decisions about what they need.

Duration also mattered. Families expressed a need for help with basic needs, while also emphasizing the importance of time to breathe and plan for what's next, beyond crisis. Needs such as, “livable wages”, “direct cash/grant assistance”, and “increase income threshold to qualify for benefits” emerged across sessions.

“There are very few services with no barriers – there is always a stipulation.”

“I imagine a lot of these experiences near emergency happen more than once, whereas on the long-term help, maybe not so often. Families, when in an emergency, often have to repeat the use of short-term services. We need long-term solutions too.”

Participants noted that families with less barriers and easier access to services, could minimize the number of situations resulting in a crisis. Families experience systems as fragmented (“silos,” “red tape”) and want a simpler front door and fewer penalties for improving their situation.

“I noticed there are a lot of stories near emergencies. It reminds me that we are all just one emergency away from a crisis.”

Stable housing and economic stability emerged as a recurring theme, alongside the observation that while many families appear to need “emergency or short-term” help available, more long-term, coordinated responses may help reduce the frequency of needs for emergency and crisis services.

“A lot of Douglas County services are for emergencies but there are not a lot of long-term options or solutions, or ways to prevent the emergency from happening again.”

“Families, when in an emergency, often have to repeat the use of short-term services. We need long-term solutions too.”

The need for networks and coordinated support emerged as key solutions. Participants recognized the many resources and strengths in Douglas County when community members and agencies worked together to help a family. They shared ideas such as, “one stop for services/resources”, “one application will get you to many service providers”, and repeatedly pointed to trusted, ongoing and consistent human support such as peer mentors and community health workers – not just referrals.

“Agencies come together to work together to be that network that families need to move forward...We should take care of each other. We all need help and support at some point.”

Overall, participants said that Douglas County has many services and families are working hard to make ends meet, but single parent- and low-wage-earning households need more direct assistance, fewer hoops to jump through, and more long-term, stabilizing help to close the gap on opportunities for economic mobility.

Sensemaking Session Ideas for Action

The final activity centered on inviting participants to share actions and ideas on how to help meet the needs that emerged in the data. Session one participants, families with experience, reflected on the data and on the final prompt.



Session One Prompt: If you had a magic wand and could remove any barriers to change, what is one thing that needs to happen to help all families thrive in our community?

Overall, these ideas coalesced as the following actions:

<p>Prioritize economic stabilization (e.g., direct income assistance, financial education and credit counseling, reduced cost burdens)</p>	<p>Reduce assistance barriers and improve system coordination to wrap around families and provide more long-term, preventative solutions while families get back on track.</p>	<p>Find ways to fill the gap when eligibility restrictions fall short of meeting real families' needs.</p>
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Session two participants responded to the prompt below then wrote their actions on paper light bulbs and then hung them on a string in the room for all to view.



Session Two Prompt: Given what you've learned and discussed today, what is one action or change you would like to see happen in our community over the next 6-12 months? Who can help make that action or change happen?"

The 44 actions are summarized below, merged with session one ideas for action and "what needs to happen next".

1. Income & Economic Stability (Including Direct Assistance)

Income & Economic Stability was the most frequently cited theme. Participants called for direct economic intervention such as increased financial assistance for families a guaranteed or universal income pilot program focused on single moms, and overall, improved "living wages". Example solutions suggested creating "flexible vouchers" for single parent families and a "supplemental local funding source to fund resources not restricted by federal poverty-level rules"; as well as to "include ALICE populations", and "asking for help shouldn't result in a 'no.'"

2. Integrated Access & Systems Change (Navigation / "No Wrong Door")

Integrated Access & Systems Change was also frequent across responses. Participants observed a need for concrete system changes that reduce fragmentation and make it more feasible to access services more quickly and efficiently. Common actions referred to "a one-stop or coordinated entry system," to "streamline access to services across providers", improved cross-agency collaboration, and reduced duplication and paperwork when it comes to services and assistance. Concrete examples include, "bring funders together around priorities" to provide more "coordinated responses", and investment in a "closed-loop referral system".

3. Housing Affordability & Stability

Housing Affordability & Stability was also frequently cited. Participants emphasized short-term wins (rent

relief, stabilization) alongside longer-term housing strategies. Common actions suggested, “affordable rent”, “increase access to stable housing with supports”, and “short-term housing stabilization.” Some examples include, “develop more supportive housing programming for women and children” and “enhanced housing protections and tenant rights.”

4. Community, Peer, and Relationship-Based Support

Community, Peer, and Relationship-Based Support focuses on how change happens: through people and relationships. Common actions suggested peer support and mentoring programs, increased investment in community health workers, consistent school-based support, and relationship-based service models. Concrete examples included suggesting that Douglas County, “promote cross-agency pilots utilizing peers/CHWs [community health workers]”, and “peer supports and lived experience workers” to foster trusted connections and combat isolation.

5. Childcare, Youth, and Family Supports

Participants emphasized practical family supports that enable stability through Childcare, Youth, and Family Supports. Common actions suggested Douglas County find ways to “increase childcare supports” and availability, reduce costs, and expand youth and “school-based resources” and supports.

6. Provider Capacity, Funding & Sustainability

Participants also noted a need for solutions that address provider capacity, funding, and sustainability. This theme reflects concern about burnout and feasibility. Responses referred to a need for “more funding for providers so programs can last,” and the need to “support agencies that are already overwhelmed”, and overall actions that help reduce burnout and support long-term capacity to help families achieve stability.

7. Voice, Values, and Culture Change

A smaller but meaningful set of responses focused on how decisions are made, not just what is implemented. Many responses explicitly name autonomy, reduced stigma, and the need to provide support before a crisis. Common actions also suggest continuing to “center lived experience”; promoting service design grounded in dignity and voice to help reduce stigma. This could look like designing services that increase family choice, provide help earlier to help prevent crisis, and embed more mechanisms for families’ stories to drive change. As one participant noted, “families need to be seen for their progress and not just the crisis that needs to be solved.”

Conclusion

Across sessions, a consistent and coherent picture emerges of what families, especially single-parent households and ALICE families in Douglas County, are experiencing and need to help them thrive. Families are navigating overlapping challenges that compound one another: financial strain, housing instability, difficulty meeting basic needs, transportation barriers, and chronic stress. These challenges are not isolated or temporary; they are structural and ongoing, leaving families with little margin for error. Even small disruptions such as an unexpected bill, short or long term illness, reduced work hours, or a missed service connection, can quickly escalate into crisis.

A dominant theme across all data is that despite a strong local system of support, services are difficult to navigate and often misaligned with real family life, diverse family structures, and the timing of needs. Eligibility thresholds, income calculations, credit requirements, and fragmented services create barriers that leave families feeling “stuck” in a cycle and unable to stabilize by being penalized for earning more or working overtime. Participants describe systems that require significant effort to navigate and are rarely designed around the needs of whole families.

Despite these barriers, families demonstrate strength, motivation, and care for their children, often relying on informal networks and community connections to get by. However, participants agreed that resilience alone is not enough. Thriving families need ongoing stability, beyond crisis response, along with dignity through trust and coordination across complex systems.

Families consistently identify what would help them thrive: reliable access to basic needs (especially quality food and housing), stable income that reflects the true cost of living, fewer barriers to accessing support, and systems that work together. Importantly, families frame mental health not primarily as a standalone service need, but as an outcome of reduced stress and increased stability.

When asked what actions Douglas County should take, participants call for income support, financial education and credit counseling, reduced cost burdens, simplified access to services, better coordination across agencies, and support that closes the gap for families who may be making too much to qualify for stabilization support but still need help meeting basic needs. Areas where needs are expressed but actions are less clearly articulated, such as childcare and transportation, represent opportunities for continued county leadership, investment, and cross-sector design.

Taken together, the data presents a unified message: helping all families thrive in Douglas County will require shifting from fragmented, conditional support toward integrated, family-centered approaches that prioritize stability, dignity, and trust.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are supported across the survey and session data, informed by community insights and ideas for action.

1. Increase Income Stability and Reduce Cost Burdens

Families and community members at large explicitly call for income support, including but not limited to actions such as guaranteed basic income programs; financial education and credit counseling, expanded housing vouchers for families and single parent households; resources to address household cost burdens (food, utilities, taxes) and aligning benefits with real cost of living with ALICE survival and stability budgets.

2. Simplify Access and Reduce System Barriers

Navigation and eligibility barriers emerged among the most consistent challenges. Participants said that families need fewer barriers, less conditionality, and more trust. Actions called for a system with less barriers to help, that works together to wrap around families, and provides more long-term, preventative solutions as families gain stability. This could include fewer eligibility thresholds and requirements, simplified applications or “no wrong door” access (one application to many service providers) and more long-term support systems and policies that do not penalize families for working more and avoid sudden benefits cliffs and the need for more emergency supports.

3. Improve Housing Stability and Affordability

Participants said that despite many services and growing investments, housing instability continues to underpin many other challenges for low-income families. Credit requirements and affordability are persistent barriers, and income levels fluctuate for many families while housing costs only increase. Recommended actions included, increasing affordable housing options with fewer barriers, short-term stabilization supports, and housing program policies that recognize financial realities such as fluctuating incomes or wages.

4. Strengthen Service Coordination and Whole-Family Design

Fragmentation emerged across the data. Participants consistently asked for agencies to work together more closely to ease the mental, physical, and emotional strain of asking for help. This could include increased cross-agency coordination and shared accountability, investment in whole-family service models and lived expertise, and aligning programs around family stability rather than individual eligibility.

Participants agreed, Douglas County has many strengths, from families helping families, to programs and services working together to develop creative solutions; and more can be done to close the gap for single parent and low-income families struggling to meet basic needs, so that all families in Douglas County can thrive.

References

Douglas County. (2024). 2024-2029 Douglas County Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP). Retrieved at <https://ldchealth.org/221/Community-Health-Improvement-Plan> August 2025.

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United For ALICE. “ALICE in Douglas County.” (2025). Retrieved at <https://www.unitedforalice.org/county-reports/kansas#11/38.9042/-95.2789> August 2025.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2026). Median Household Income in the Past 12 Months (in 2024 Inflation-Adjusted Dollars). American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B19013. Retrieved February 3, 2026, from <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDT5Y2024.B19013?q=B19013&g=040XXooUS2o>.

Endnotes

- 1 The 2024-2029 Community Health Improvement Plan was presented to the public on October 17, 2024. ldchealth.org/221/Community-Health-Improvement-Plan
- 2 According to the 2025 *United for ALICE: The State of ALICE in Kansas* report, “an estimated 38% of households in Kansas were below the ALICE Threshold in 2023”.
- 3 University of Kansas, Center for Public Partnerships and Research, Our Tomorrows Initiative cpr.ku.edu/ourtomorrows.
- 4 For context, the 2024 median household income in Douglas County is \$69,746 and the state median income is \$74,275). Source: U.S. Census Bureau. (2026). American Community Survey, ACS 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables, Table B19013.”
- 5 According to 2025 *United for ALICE: The State of ALICE in Kansas* report and data on Douglas County, 60% of Single-Female-Headed (with children) and 52% of Single-Male-Headed (with children) in Douglas County fall below the ALICE Threshold. Furthermore, the “survival budget” for one adult with one child in child care in Douglas County is \$48,876, and over half of single parents are under the ALICE threshold.

Appendices

Appendix A. Survey

Douglas County Guaranteed Income Pilot Project

Douglas County Family Story Project: Single Parenting Experiences

Single Parenting in Douglas County: Tell Your Story

Introduction, Consent Info

In our community, single parents play an essential role in raising the next generation, often while facing significant challenges. We know that in Douglas County, single-parent families, especially single mothers, are more likely to experience poverty, rent cost burden, and challenges finding employment that pays a living wage. But those numbers don't tell the whole story.

Behind every statistic is a person, a family, and a journey. That journey includes moments of hardship, but also of deep joy, resilience, love, creativity, and strength. Whether your story is about a time your family was thriving—or just surviving—we want to hear it.

Your voice matters. Sharing your experiences helps shape a more complete and honest picture of what life is like for single parents in our county. It also helps leaders, policymakers, and community members better understand how to support families like yours—on your terms.

The tree visual below is from the Douglas County Community Health Improvement Plan. Please consider the topics listed here when thinking about the story you would like to share.



I am ready to share my experience!

Share your story

We know our community is strongest when we listen—and respond to—the strengths, struggles, and lived experiences of all families. Thank you for taking a moment to tell us a bit about your community and share your family story with us. Together we can build and sustain healthy and safe communities where all families thrive.

1. Think about a moment in the last year when you felt like your family was really thriving or just surviving. What was happening at the time? Tell us about that experience in the space below.
2. Give your story a title or #hashtag:
3. How do you feel about the story you shared?
 - ☐ Positive
 - ☐ Negative
 - ☐ Neutral/no strong feelings
 - ☐ Mixed feelings/I'm not sure
4. How often do you have experiences like the one you shared?
 - ☐ It happened just this one time
 - ☐ It has happened a couple of times
 - ☐ It happens often
 - ☐ I'm not sure how often it happens
5. The good things about my story were... (select all that apply)
 - ☐ My family was there for each other
 - ☐ Laws and policies helped
 - ☐ Community members supported each other
 - ☐ I knew what to do next
 - ☐ I had the resources I needed (e.g. money, transportation, housing, etc.)
 - ☐ Something else (please tell us)
 - ☐ Nothing was good
 - ☐ It was easy to get the services or support needed
6. The hard or challenging things about my story were... (select all that apply)
 - ☐ I felt alone and didn't have anyone to turn to
 - ☐ Laws and policies made things harder or confusing
 - ☐ I didn't have the resources I needed (e.g. money, transportation, housing, etc.)
 - ☐ I had no idea what to do next
 - ☐ My community didn't have the services I needed
 - ☐ Something else (please tell us)
 - ☐ Nothing was hard or challenging
7. Which of the following were a part of your life when your story took place? (select all that apply)
 - ☐ Low income
 - ☐ Food insecurity
 - ☐ Unemployed
 - ☐ Military experience (including veterans)
 - ☐ In debt/bankruptcy/low credit score
 - ☐ Immigrant or refugee
 - ☐ Recipient of government benefits (WIC, SNAP, Section 8, TANF, etc.)
 - ☐ Home language is not English
 - ☐ Experiencing disability/varying abilities
 - ☐ Criminal record
 - ☐ Special healthcare needs
 - ☐ History of incarceration
 - ☐ Struggling with mental health
 - ☐ Substance use and/or addiction
 - ☐ Homebound
 - ☐ Experiencing domestic violence/abuse
 - ☐ Housing issues (unhoused, eviction, 'couch-hopping', etc.)
 - ☐ None of these apply to me
 - ☐ Lack of transportation
 - ☐ Something else is important to me and my perspective (please tell us)


8. As a parent or caregiver, which of the following were a part of your life when your story took place? (select all that apply)
- ☐ Pregnant
 - ☐ Single parent
 - ☐ Co-parenting
 - ☐ Parent of adopted child(ren)
 - ☐ Foster parent
 - ☐ Caring for a relative's child
 - ☐ My children were in foster care
 - ☐ Parenting when I was a teenager
 - ☐ Parent of child(ren) under 18
 - ☐ Parent of adult child(ren)
 - ☐ Parent of LGBTQ+ child(ren)
 - ☐ Parent of child(ren) with disability/varying abilities
 - ☐ Parent of child(ren) with special health needs
 - ☐ Large family (more than 4 children in the household)
 - ☐ I am a parent or caregiver, but none of these apply to me at the time of my story
 - ☐ Something else about my parent or caregiver role is important (please tell us)

Questions about your story

The questions on this page are about the story you shared with us. Think about your story as you answer these questions.

For the next three questions, look at the two endpoints on either side of the line. Click and hold onto the ball, then move it to the point on the line that best fits with the experience you shared.

9. My story involves help or support that was...




Immediate or emergency support

☐ I'm not sure /
I prefer to not share

Long-term or permanent support

10. My story involves help or support that was...




Nonexistent, inappropriate,
or not obtained

☐ I'm not sure /
I prefer to not share

Abundant, helpful, and readily/
easily obtained

11. My story involves help or support that was...



Informal (family, friends,
neighbors)

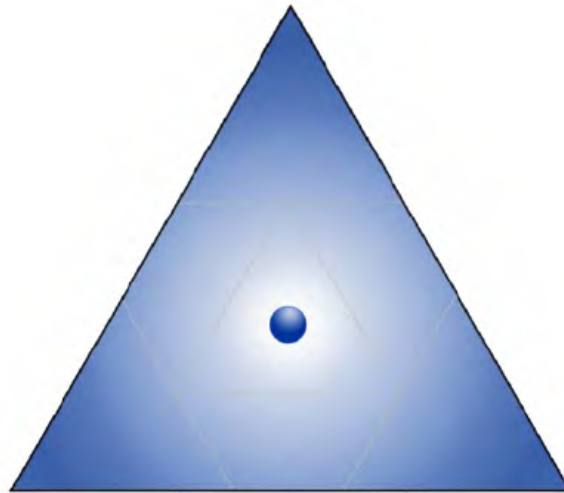
☐ I'm not sure /
I prefer to not share

Formal (organizations, programs,
government)

For the next two questions on this page, look at the three points on each triangle. Click and hold onto the ball, then move it to the place on or within the triangle that best fits with the experience you shared.

12. The story I shared suggests that life is easiest when I have...

Good relationships (family, friends, networks)



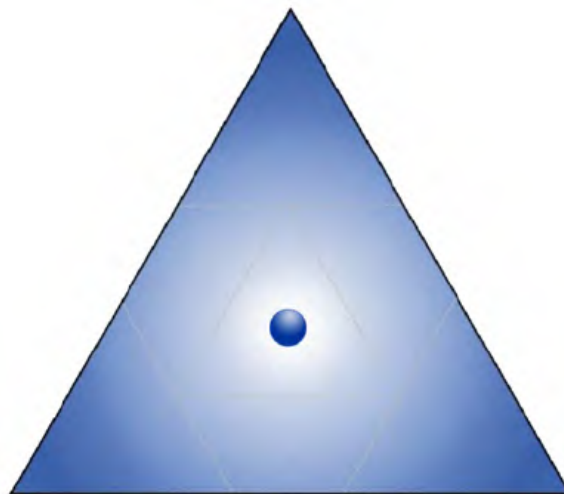
Money/steady income

☐ None of these

Safe environments
(housing, neighborhoods)

13. The story I shared suggests that getting help or support depends on...

Knowing the right people



Trying something different

☐ None of these

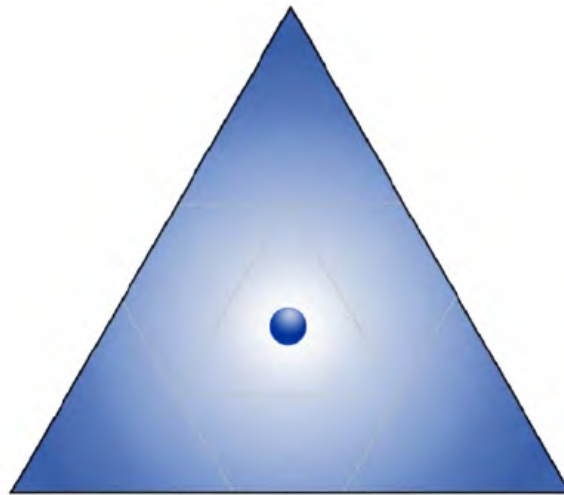
Advocating for myself

Questions about your perspective

The questions on this page ask about your overall thoughts, circumstances, and perspective. Consider the story you shared as well as other experiences you've had as you answer these questions.

14. If I need to know something about my community, I usually trust information that comes from...

Social Media I follow



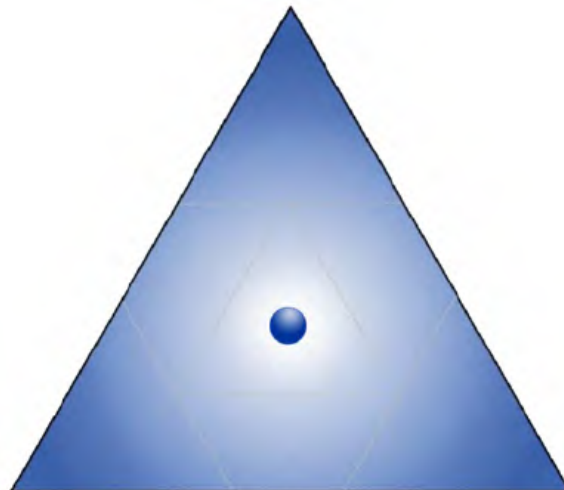
Official outlets (government, organizations, experts)

☐ None of these

People I know/word of mouth

15. When I think about the times I've needed help, I felt most concerned about or challenged by...

Not knowing what to do or who to ask



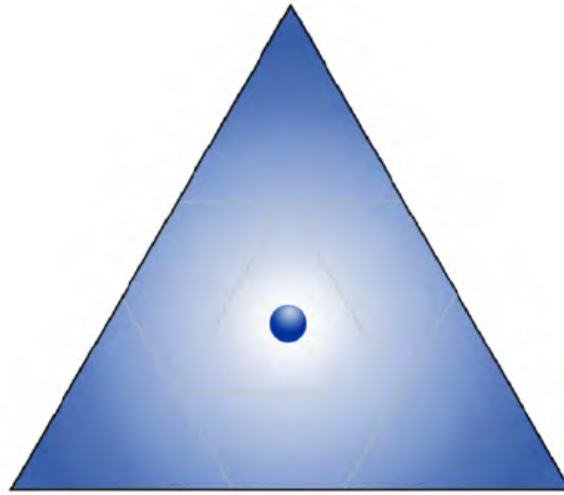
Process of obtaining help too difficult

☐ None of these

Not controlling my own situation or making my own choices

16. When I think about what's available for families in my community, we need more...

Service or program options



People to help/providers

☐ None of these

Resources given directly
to families

17. The largest demands on my monthly budget are... (select all that apply)

- | | |
|--|---|
| <input type="radio"/> Housing/rent or mortgage payments | <input type="radio"/> Transportation costs |
| <input type="radio"/> Utility payments (gas, electric, cell phone, etc.) | <input type="radio"/> Insurance payments |
| <input type="radio"/> Grocery costs | <input type="radio"/> Internet and/or technology costs |
| <input type="radio"/> Healthcare costs | <input type="radio"/> Clothing, shoes, and other needed accessories |
| <input type="radio"/> School/education costs | <input type="radio"/> Extra-curricular activities (sports, music, art, etc.) |
| <input type="radio"/> Child care costs | <input type="radio"/> Other fees, payments, or costs not listed
(please tell us) |
| <input type="radio"/> Child support payments | <input type="radio"/> I'm not sure / I prefer to not share |
| <input type="radio"/> Court costs | |
| <input type="radio"/> Debt payments (credit cards, loans, etc.) | |

18. The resources or services that made a difference for my family in the last year are... (select all that apply)

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="radio"/> SNAP or food assistance | <input type="radio"/> Social security benefits |
| <input type="radio"/> Utility payment assistance | <input type="radio"/> Energy assistance |
| <input type="radio"/> Child care assistance or Head Start | <input type="radio"/> Tax refunds |
| <input type="radio"/> Food banks | <input type="radio"/> Child support |
| <input type="radio"/> TANF (cash assistance) | <input type="radio"/> Something else (please tell us) |
| <input type="radio"/> Disability payments | <input type="radio"/> I'm not sure / I prefer to not share |

Demographics

Please answer the following questions with the answers that best represent you, your circumstances, and your identities.

19. Gender Identity

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Non-binary or non-conforming
- ☐ Another gender (please self-describe)
- ☐ I prefer not to share

20. Sexual orientation

- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Heterosexual or straight
- ☐ Lesbian or gay
- ☐ Something else (please self-describe)
- ☐ I prefer not to share

21. Race and ethnicity

- ☐ Asian, Asian American, or Desi
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Central, South, or West African
- ☐ Haitian, Jamaican, or other Caribbean Islander
- ☐ Hispanic, Latin(a/o), Latinx, or Spanish Origin
- ☐ Indigenous, Native American, or Alaska Native
- ☐ Middle Eastern or North African
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Asian Pacific Islander
- ☐ White, European, or Caucasian
- ☐ Multi-racial/Another race or ethnicity (please self-describe)
- ☐ I prefer not to share

22. Age

- ☐ 18 – 24
- ☐ 25 – 34
- ☐ 35 – 44
- ☐ 45 – 54
- ☐ 55 – 64
- ☐ 65 or older
- ☐ I prefer not to share

23. My current annual household income is...

- ☐ Less than \$10,000
- ☐ \$10,000 – \$19,999
- ☐ \$20,000 – \$29,999
- ☐ \$30,000 – \$39,999
- ☐ \$40,000 – \$49,999
- ☐ \$50,000 – \$59,999
- ☐ \$60,000 – \$74,999
- ☐ \$75,000 – \$99,999
- ☐ \$100,000 – \$124,999
- ☐ \$125,000 – \$149,999
- ☐ \$150,000 – \$199,999
- ☐ \$200,000 or higher
- ☐ I prefer not to share

24. Number of adults (ages 18 or older), including myself, currently living in my household:

- ☐ 0
- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3
- ☐ 4
- ☐ 5 or more
- ☐ I prefer not to share

25. Number of infants (ages 0 – 2) currently in my household:

- | | |
|-------------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> 0 | <input type="radio"/> 4 |
| <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 5 or more |
| <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> I prefer not to share |
| <input type="radio"/> 3 | |

26. Number of preschool-aged children (ages 3 – 4) currently in my household:

- | | |
|-------------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> 0 | <input type="radio"/> 4 |
| <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 5 or more |
| <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> I prefer not to share |
| <input type="radio"/> 3 | |

27. Number of school-aged children (ages 5 – 17) currently in my household:

- | | |
|-------------------------|---|
| <input type="radio"/> 0 | <input type="radio"/> 4 |
| <input type="radio"/> 1 | <input type="radio"/> 5 or more |
| <input type="radio"/> 2 | <input type="radio"/> I prefer not to share |
| <input type="radio"/> 3 | |

28. Do you live in Douglas County, KS?

- | | |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> Yes | <input type="radio"/> No |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|

28. If yes, what zip code of Douglas County do you live in?

- | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <input type="radio"/> 66006 | <input type="radio"/> 66047 |
| <input type="radio"/> 66021 | <input type="radio"/> 66049 |
| <input type="radio"/> 66025 | <input type="radio"/> 66050 |
| <input type="radio"/> 66044 | <input type="radio"/> 66092 |
| <input type="radio"/> 66045 | <input type="radio"/> 66049 |
| <input type="radio"/> 66046 | <input type="radio"/> 66652 |

29. How did you hear about this survey?

[Final submission page](#)

Thank you for sharing your experience with us!

Appendix B. Survey Data

Table 1. Number of infants (ages 0 - 2), currently living in my household

Number per Household	Percentage	Total Responses
I prefer not to share	2%	94
0	74%	94
1	17%	94
2	3%	94
3	1%	94
4	0%	94
5+	2%	94

Table 2. Number of preschool-aged children (ages 3-4) currently living in my household

Number per Household	Percentage	Total Responses
I prefer not to share	2%	94
0	80%	94
1	15%	94
2	2%	94
3	1%	94
4	0%	94
5+	0%	94

Table 3. Number of school-aged children (ages 5-17) currently living in my household.

Number per Household	Percentage	Total Responses
I prefer not to share	3%	94
0	57%	94
1	21%	94
2	9%	94
3	6%	94
4	3%	94
5+	0%	94

Table 4. Number of adults (ages 18 or older), including myself, currently living in my household

Number per Household	Percentage	Total Responses
I prefer not to share	2%	94
0	0%	94
1	53%	94
2	24%	94
3	12%	94
4	2%	94
5+	6%	94

Table 5. Household income

Household Income	Responses	Percentage
I prefer not to share	13%	94
Less than 10k	34%	94
10k - 19k	22%	94
20k - 29k	10%	94
30k - 39k	3%	94
40k - 49k	7%	94
50k - 59k	5%	94
60k - 74k	5%	94
75k - 99k	0%	94
100k - 124k	0%	94
125k - 149k	0%	94
150k - 199k	0%	94
More than 200k	0%	94

Table 6. Race/Ethnicity (select all that apply)

Race/Ethnicity	Count	Percentage
White, European, or Caucasian	61	65%
Black or African American	10	11%
Indigenous, Native American, or Alaska Native	8	9%
Multi-Racial	5	5%
Asian, Asian American, or Desi	3	3%
Hispanic, Latin(a/o), Latinx, or Spanish Origin	3	3%
Other	1	1%
I prefer not to share	3	3%

Table 7. Other Identities and Experiences at Time of Story (select all that apply)

Category	Count	Percentage
Low Income	58	62%
Unemployed	47	50%
Struggling with mental health	47	50%
Food insecurity	43	46%
Lack of transportation	34	36%
Housing issues	32	34%
Recipient of government benefits	30	32%
Substance use and/or addiction	25	27%
Experiencing disability/varying ability	22	23%
Special healthcare needs	22	23%
Criminal record	20	21%
In debt/bankruptcy/low credit	18	19%
Experiencing domestic violence	16	17%
History of incarceration	10	11%
Other	5	5%
Homebound	3	3%
Military experience	1	1%
Immigrant or refugee	1	1%
Home language is not English	1	1%
None of these apply to me	3	3%

Table 8. Parenting Circumstances at Time of Story (select all that apply)

Category	Count	Percentage
Single parent	37	39%
Parent of children under 18	23	24%
Co-parenting	20	21%
I'm not a parent/caregiver	16	17%
I'm a parent/caregiver, but none of these apply	15	16%
Parent of children with disability/varying abilities	14	15%
Pregnant	11	12%
Parent of adult children	7	7%
Children in foster care	6	6%
Large family (5+ children in house)	6	6%
Parent of children with special health needs	5	5%
Parenting when I was a teenager	4	4%
Other	4	4%
Foster parent	3	3%
Parent of adopted children	2	2%
Caring for a relative's child	2	2%
Parent of LGBTQ+ children	0	0%
I prefer not to share	5	5%

Table 9. Resources or services that made a difference for my family in the last year (select all that apply)

Category	Count	Percentage
SNAP (Food Assistance)	42	45%
Food banks/shelves	41	44%
Utility Payments	23	24%
Tax Refunds	15	16%
Child Care Assistance (subsidy)	12	13%
TANF (cash assistance)	6	6%
Child support	6	6%
I'm not sure/I prefer not to share	10	11%

Table 10. Survey Engagement by Zip Code

Zip Code	Count	Percentage
66044	40	43%
66046	23	24%
66047	12	13%
66049	14	15%
66006	1	1%
66021	1	1%
66025	1	1%
I don't live in Douglas county	1	1%
66045	0	0%
66050	0	0%
66092	0	0%
66409	0	0%
66542	0	0%
I prefer not to share	1	1%

Share your story!

Real family voices
driving *real* change in
Douglas County.



We Want to Hear from You!

Parents, guardians, and mentors play a key role in our community, but we know support isn't always easy to find—especially for single parents.

Share your story to help us understand how we can better support families like yours!



ourtomorrow.ws/DGCOthrives

*DGCO Thrives is an initiative of the
Douglas County Health Improvement Plan.*



Douglas County Thrives

Community Sensemaking Session



Community Children's Center, Lawrence, KS | December 1, 2025

This is a Story Pack

Story Packs are collections to help us explore and make meaning of community stories and data. This story pack is made up of responses to the ***Our Tomorrows: Douglas County Thrives Survey***, part of the Douglas County Economic Mobility Project. You will use this Story Pack throughout the sensemaking session to gain insights into individual and community experiences and to guide group activities and discussions.

The 93 survey responses in this Story Pack were collected between **October 2 and November 21, 2025**. Each participant responded to the following story prompt, and then answered a series of questions about their experience:

Think about a moment in the last year when you felt like your family was really thriving or just surviving. What was happening at the time? Tell us about that experience in the space below.

Our Goal

Our goal today is to explore and make meaning of the stories and data together, center community stories at the heart of productive discovery and action planning and recommend changes that moves all families in Douglas County beyond "just surviving" to "thriving".

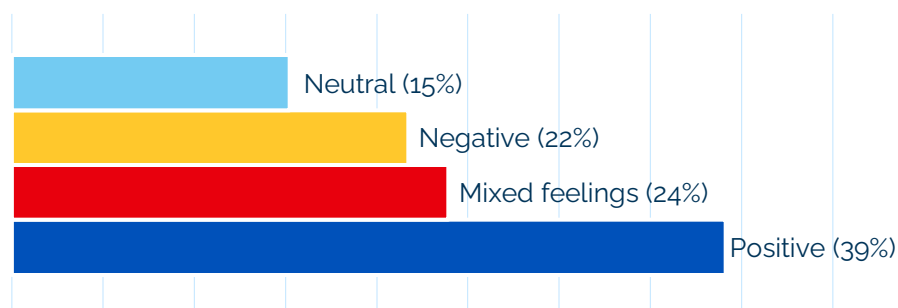
Who shared their voices with us?

We asked participants to tell us a bit about their identities and circumstances through a series of multiple-choice questions to help us understand more about their experiences.

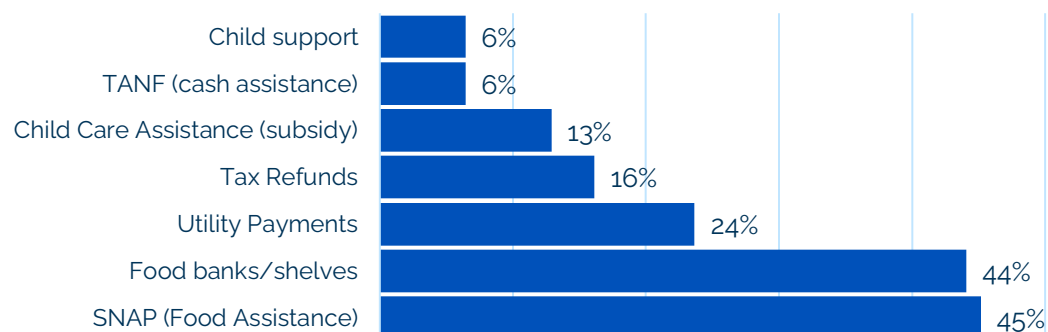
Of the 93 participants who responded from Douglas County:

- 40% identified as single parents
- 25% said they had parents with children under 18
- 20% identified as co-parents
- 15% have children with disability/varying abilities
- 62% identified as low-income
- 51% were underemployed or struggling with mental health
- 47% said they lacked transportation
- 46% said they were experiencing food insecurity
- Most respondents were between 25 and 34 years old (27%) and 35 and 44 years old (37%).

When asked how they felt about their experience...



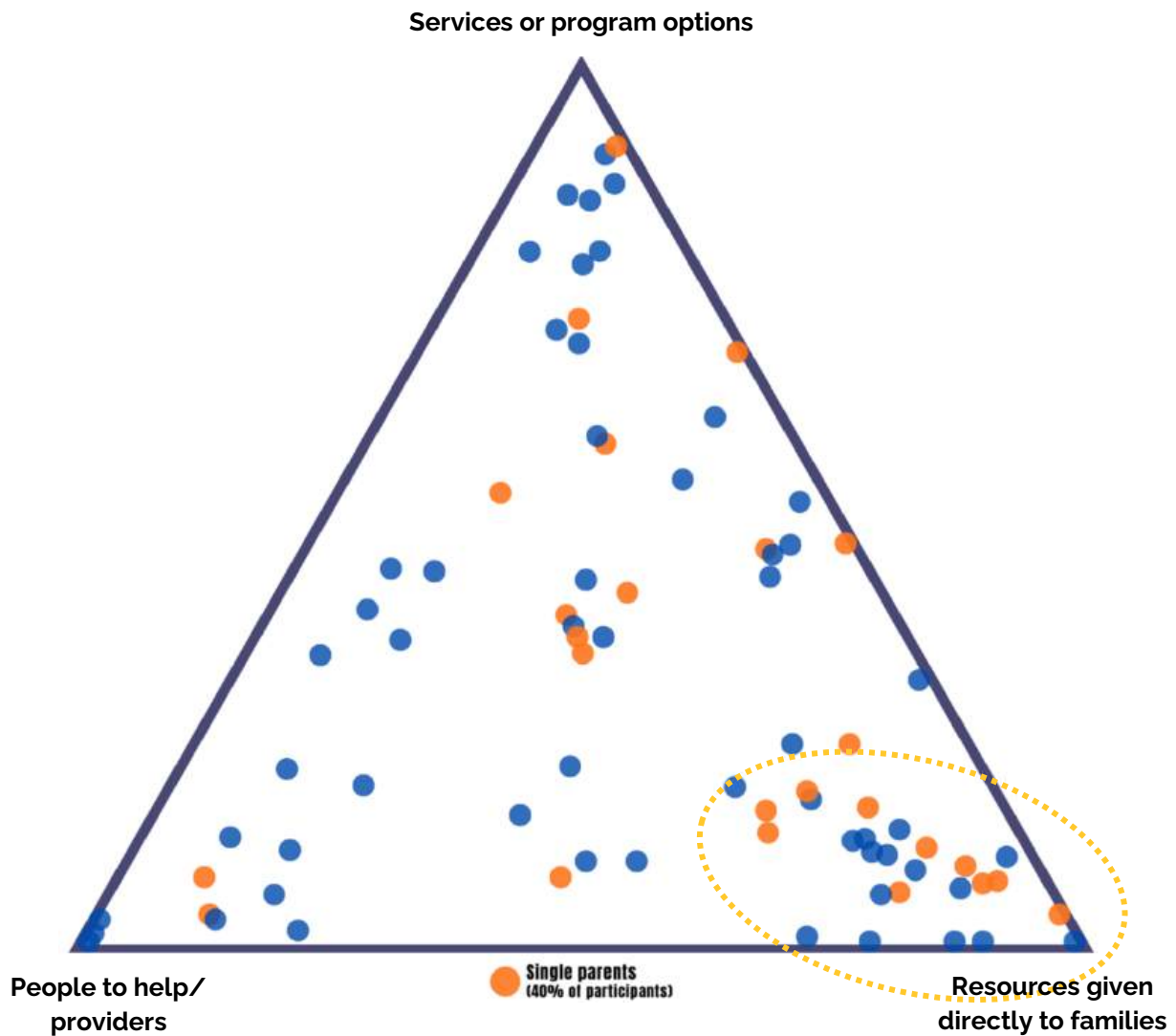
When asked what concrete supports made a difference for their family in the last year...



Activity 1: Family Perspectives

Let's explore how participants responded to the triangle question below. Each dot represents an experience and perspective. Reflect on the pattern and discuss with your group.

When I think about what's available for families in my community, we need more...



Discussion Questions:

1. What do you notice about the pattern of responses to this question? What stands out to you or surprises you? How does it compare to your response to this question?
2. What do you want to know more about? What questions does this pattern raise for you?

Activity 1: Community Stories

Stories near the bottom right corner (*resources given directly to families*)

Moving

I moved back to Douglas county with a transitional housing voucher. It was a great blessing to myself and my son. While I was pregnant I was not sure I was going to have any housing at all for my son. I found a place to rent in Lawrence and thought it was great but quickly found out the opposite was true. The stress of the situation there and even contemplating having to move a third time in one year (once while 7 months pregnant, again with a four month old) was almost debilitating at times. I did not find much support in advocating for being able to stay there (which would have been my preference). Even agencies that are organized to help single parents like myself didn't seem to have the knowledge or motivation to help. It felt like I was being pressured from all sides, especially my landlord to just move. Well I did after much dragging my feet and trying other things. In the end, I did find a much better place. Now my son and I have a great place to call home, but I am just not sure why things continue to happen in this manner, that we don't have more choice, voice and less pressure, to just do what others want or see fit, especially for people that have experienced homelessness (such as my self). It can feel as if we are being displaced over and over again.

Survival mode

Single mom. Personal medical. Children medical. Child food allergies and a GI disease that restricts food. Food cost verse food stamps isn't realistic. Food pantries carry un healthy and cheap so if you require healthy or restricted foods you don't benefit from pantries.

#The Cost of "Affordable"

This past year, my family is and have been in "survival mode." When the rent structure changed and I lost my job, everything tightened overnight. Covering basic expenses became a constant balancing act — choosing which bills to pay first, stretching every dollar, and trying to stay afloat while managing my health. Things haven't improved, because every decision meant to create stability — like finding new employment or refinancing my vehicle to lower payments — ends up creating more strain somewhere else. This is not affordable living. The rent structure is designed in a way that punishes progress — the moment income increases, rent goes up too, leaving no room to actually recover or get ahead. It traps families in a cycle where working harder doesn't lead to stability, it just changes which bills fall behind. It's survival on repeat, not sustainability.

Flintstone life

I was just out of a car for 2 months! It was very hard! Me and both my kids had to take 3 different ways to and from school and work! So it was hard to work and get them to school.

We survived

I am a single mom of two. One with Autism, the other one had a liver transplant and cancer. To say our life was stressful was an understatement. Now my children are adults but when they were under 18, I needed the support from a lot of local agencies. When my children were little we had public housing, relied on food stamps, cash assistance and state insurance. My children both attended Head Start, for preschool. This low income program gave me support and my children a Head Start. Thankfully I have agencies that have always been there to help me become more self sufficient. Today I am proud to say I have a college degree and I have the skills to be successful.



#makingharddecisions

I lost my home and it was a really difficult time for me and my family. I had to make smart choices for my family and get us out of the situation. I had to place my son with my mom for his best interest. It was the hardest thing I've ever done but I had to do it for the welfare of my child.

#alone with no help

I'm writing to share my story and ask for any guidance or support available. I am a single mother doing my best to provide for my child, but these past months have been some of the hardest of my life. I had an emergency C-section that came with complications, and I had to stop working suddenly. I didn't have the luxury of taking proper time to recover — I went back to work only five weeks after giving birth, even though I was still in pain and struggling physically and emotionally. It wasn't because I was ready, but because I had no other choice. My bills, rent, and daily expenses kept piling up, and I didn't have anyone to depend on. Trying to recover from surgery, care for a newborn on my own, and return to work so soon has taken a huge toll on me. There are days when I barely sleep, and still have to push myself to keep going. I've reached out to different programs and organizations for help, but there seems to be little to no assistance in Lawrence for single mothers like me. I've called around, filled out forms, and explained my situation repeatedly, but I often hear, "We don't have funds right now," or "You don't qualify." The stress of trying to keep a roof over our heads and food on the table has been overwhelming. Some months, I'm forced to choose between paying a bill or buying necessities for my baby. It's heartbreaking and exhausting to work so hard and still feel like I'm falling behind. I love my child more than anything, and I'm determined to provide a safe and stable home. But doing this completely alone, with no family help and very little community support, is breaking me down. I'm reaching out in the hope that someone can listen, understand, and perhaps guide me toward real help or resources that could make a difference.

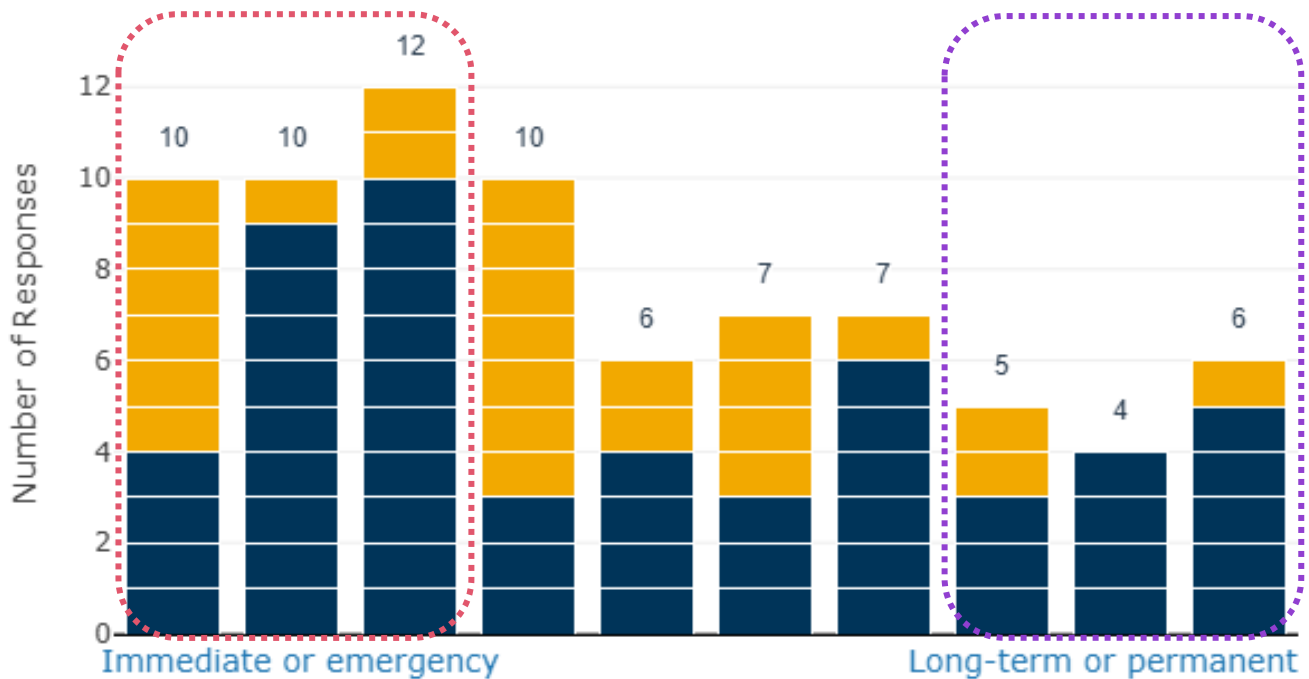
The Life of a Single Working Mom

I am a single mother and the manager of a local nonprofit. I love my career and take it very seriously. My calling is to serve my community and care for my children. Both bring deep meaning to my life. It's rewarding beyond words to nurture others and see the impact of that care. But working in social services is demanding work and so is being a single mom. Many people rely on me every day, including my staff, my volunteers, and my kids. The weight of that responsibility is heavy when resources are thin. I work every day with single mothers in much worse circumstances than my own. I see the poverty, the trauma, and the struggle that they experience every single day. Witnessing the heartache and stress of other single moms makes me so grateful for my privilege and for the income that I do have. Yet it's still hard to maintain balance when your children can't join extracurriculars because the fees are out of reach. It's hard to manage stress when you can't afford a dentist to fix a broken tooth or when you're stretching the last few dollars to feed your kids before payday. It's hard to care for your mental health when therapy simply isn't affordable and certainly not in the budget. Working single moms have to prioritize our money for the essential needs and neglect other needs because our money doesn't stretch far enough to meet the basic standards that are required to live and thrive in America. They say money can't buy happiness and I agree to an extent. But when basic needs aren't being met and you're living in constant survival mode, even the strongest among us begin to fray. When single mothers aren't thriving, children aren't thriving either, and that is when poverty and trauma become generational. Financial support for single mothers isn't about luxury. It's about stability, dignity, and the ability to continue showing up for our children, our work, and our communities. When we invest in single mothers, we're not just helping a single individual. We're strengthening the very people who hold our communities together and ending generational cycles.

Activity 2: When supports are most needed

Let's explore how participants responded to the slider question below. Each bar represents the number of responses placed at a specific range on the sliding bar, from 'immediate or emergency' support to 'long-term or permanent' support. Reflect on the pattern and discuss with the group.

My story involves help or support that was...



yellow = single parents (40%)

Discussion Questions:

1. What do you notice about the pattern of responses to this question? What stands out to you or surprises you?
2. What might we learn from experiences and perspectives placed near 'emergency or immediate' support versus 'long-term or permanent' support?

Activity 2: Community stories

Stories from the left side (*immediate or emergency support*)

Grateful-but-survivalmode4us

I am just surviving thinking about last month fall 2025. I have a 9 and 10 year old. My daughters still struggle with emotional regulation after going through two divorces. My daughter stated that she wanted to die and has details laid out. I took her to the crisis center in Lawrence. Although Bert Nash was under-staffed, they were a big help. I feel like we are just surviving as it is a struggle every single day that Boys and Girls club is not open. I worry about leaving my girls at home. I have a home camera but a nanny is needed for help.

Single mom of 3

Being a single mother to 3 children is hard, but also thwy best thing I love being a mother and all the stress is worth it, doing it alone is hard no help nobody to talk to sometimes other than your kids didn't have food stamps earlier in the year no transportation no nothing. I'm grateful to be where I'm at in life right now with the help of my resident services , very understanding to my situation. There were times I cried and also times I laughed like never before because of my children and the smiles on their faces just makes everything so worth it.

Single mother of 4

This year I think is the year I've struggled the most; well right now I am actually... I have a 5 bedroom home because I had 4 kids living in the home.. I recently took my oldest who is 19 off because she has become an adult and now living on her own.. anywho I usually save my tax money but I had bought a car to get my kids and I got to places in a timely manner.. it took the rest I had saved.: now it has recently broke down.. my rent went up due to my income going up last year and I now don't make that much.: so I'm nearly making it at this house I'm now at.. it's so expensive.. I'm a struggling with my income right now and staying on top of my bills...

#TheFirstBorn

In 2024 I was homeless for a short period, by the grace of god I was still employed and I had a working vehicle. I have 3 daughters and alot of motivation. My oldest was 15 at the time and she saw the emotions, the dedication, and the strength during this time and it sparked a fire under her! Since that time she has excelled at nearly everything she did. Becoming a young lady, getting her 1st job, attending leadership classes, helping with her 2 sisters, all while in school full time holding a great GPA. She inspires me and gives me hope that my children will be greater than me. Teaching my kids to better is such a wholesome feeling.

You Are My Sunshine

This last year I've been mainly "just surviving" I do my best to ensure my daughter doesn't realize how much I'm actually struggling but its definitely not an easy task. The economy has gotten so much worse over the past few years and I feel like I've just had my head barely above water consistently since its gotten worse. I struggle every day financially and I'm too embarrassed to reach out for help. I've always been the one to take care of myself and I've never been good at asking for or accepting assistance but giving my daughter the best life possible is what has kept me going. She's my saving grace and the light during the dark times

A single mother trying to provide for her children. #grateful

I lost my job, it was also my daughter's birthday coming up. I was behind on my bills, I didn't have no family to ask or run too for help. I literally live here by myself with my kids and no one for help, no family or anything for support. Everything is up to me. I called resident services and I was able to get help with my bills, other places helped with little things I was able to go pick up for my daughter for her birthday.



Stories from the right side (*long-term or permanent support*)

#SINGLEMOMSTRENGTH #DIFFERENTLEGACY

This past year held a mix of exhaustion and quiet victories. After spending so many years working 2-3 jobs at a time as a single mom, I know what it feels like to carry the entire weight of my family on my back. I've stretched myself thin, held everything together, and kept pushing forward even when life felt like it was asking too much of me. One moment stands out. It was a morning after a hard overnight shift. I came home exhausted, the kind of tired sits in your bones after years of being the provider, the protector and everything in between. The house wasn't perfect. Things needed fixing. Bills still needed to be paid. I had to get ready for the day job. I was definitely in survival mode. But then my son walks up, gives me a big hug and says "Thank you for your hard work mom, I appreciate it. I love you." My other son offered to go do errands for the day. I received a "Good morning mama, I love you" message from my daughter. Something in the room softened, and something in me did too. In that moment, I realized that even though I had spent years just trying to survive, my family was actually thriving. Not because everything was easy, but because I had given my kids a foundation built on love, resilience, gratitude and compassion. Things they learned by watching me fight for us over and over again. Standing there, exhausted but surrounded by their support, I felt something I don't always feel. I really did build something good. I didn't just keep us going, I raised a family that knows how to show up for each other.

"The Uncommon"

Just surviving. I've been homeless for about 5 years now. I recently just got off the street. Thanks too [redacted] from Bert Nash and [redacted] from Tenants to Owners. I went through a lot of loss and grief starting from 2016. I lost my daughter then after that I lost my brother and shortly after that I lost my mom. Marriage went down the drain kid's father is very abusive. My kids are adopted out. You know everybody seems to say just get a job will help everything. Well for me it's not that easy. I've had four stomach surgeries two heart ? surgeries and two back surgeries. So I panhandle for all the things that the agencies can you get us. Most of the panhandling money I do receive I give back as much as I can to others in need. During this time of surviving I lost some very good close friends of mine. One of them I found in her tent murdered, stabbed to death. It's been hell of an experience out here. But I wouldn't change it for the world. I made some really amazing people I actually got to see humanity for what it is now. And there are some very good souls out here still with very big hearts.

Breaking point

"When we hit the wall" We were a year into reintegration when I realized my partner was just going through the motions and his behaviors were beginning to surface again. I filed for divorce and brought my children to Lawrence so we could all have a fresh start. Finding an affordable rental was challenging on one income and with minimal credit history. Even with child support, we barely made it through the month. I was constantly playing the "paying game", letting one bill go so I could pay the other. Filling water jugs in anticipation of it getting shut off, having "pioneer nights" where we lit the house with candles and bundled under blankets, "camped" in the living room or back yard and cooked over a fire, I did what I could to "make a game of it" but the kids knew we were struggling. I could bring food home from work sometimes but made too much to qualify for food stamps or other resources. My family was supportive of course but I was careful not to let them know how much we were struggling as they had their own financial stressors. Then there was the mental strain of everything we'd been dealing with. Fortunately the kids were involved with scouts and sports but this didn't address the trauma of an unhealthy parental relationship. Finding counseling services that I could afford was hard, particularly for 2 kids (and forget about my own mental health). It was particularly frustrating that when I had insurance, I had to pay more per visit than when I didn't and I incurred more debt. Mental health meds made them sick, one child started cutting to deal with the strain and we didn't felt heard when any of this was reported to the doctor. One child struggled at school with ADHD and dyslexia, and thought an IEP was in place, did not receive the additional service and support needed to attend school and maintain the little peer support they'd built. When I lost my job, everything imploded. I got behind on rent, the car started failing, the kids fought their own ghosts and I struggled to feel relevant. The only "bonus" to hitting rock bottom is that we qualified for some services but why did it have to get that bad first? Fortunately we had family who would not let us falter or we could have become another failed statistic. It's taken time, tears and scars but we're still on this side of the dirt and trying to find the silver linings so that's success in my book.

Activity 3: Final reflections

In 'sensemaking', it's critical for us to think about how community voices impact our perspectives and empower collective action and change. After everyone has considered the data patterns and read the community stories, reflect on the questions below.

1. What do these stories and patterns tell us about the situations or challenges families are facing in Douglas County?
2. What do these stories suggest about what's currently working to help address some of those challenges? What strengths or bright spots emerged?
3. What do these stories tell you about what Douglas County families need the most?
4. If you had a magic wand and could remove any barriers to change, what is one thing that needs to happen to help all families thrive in our community? Who needs to know about this action and/or can help make it happen?

Douglas County Thrives

Community Sensemaking Session



Lied Center of Kansas, Lawrence, KS | December 15, 2025

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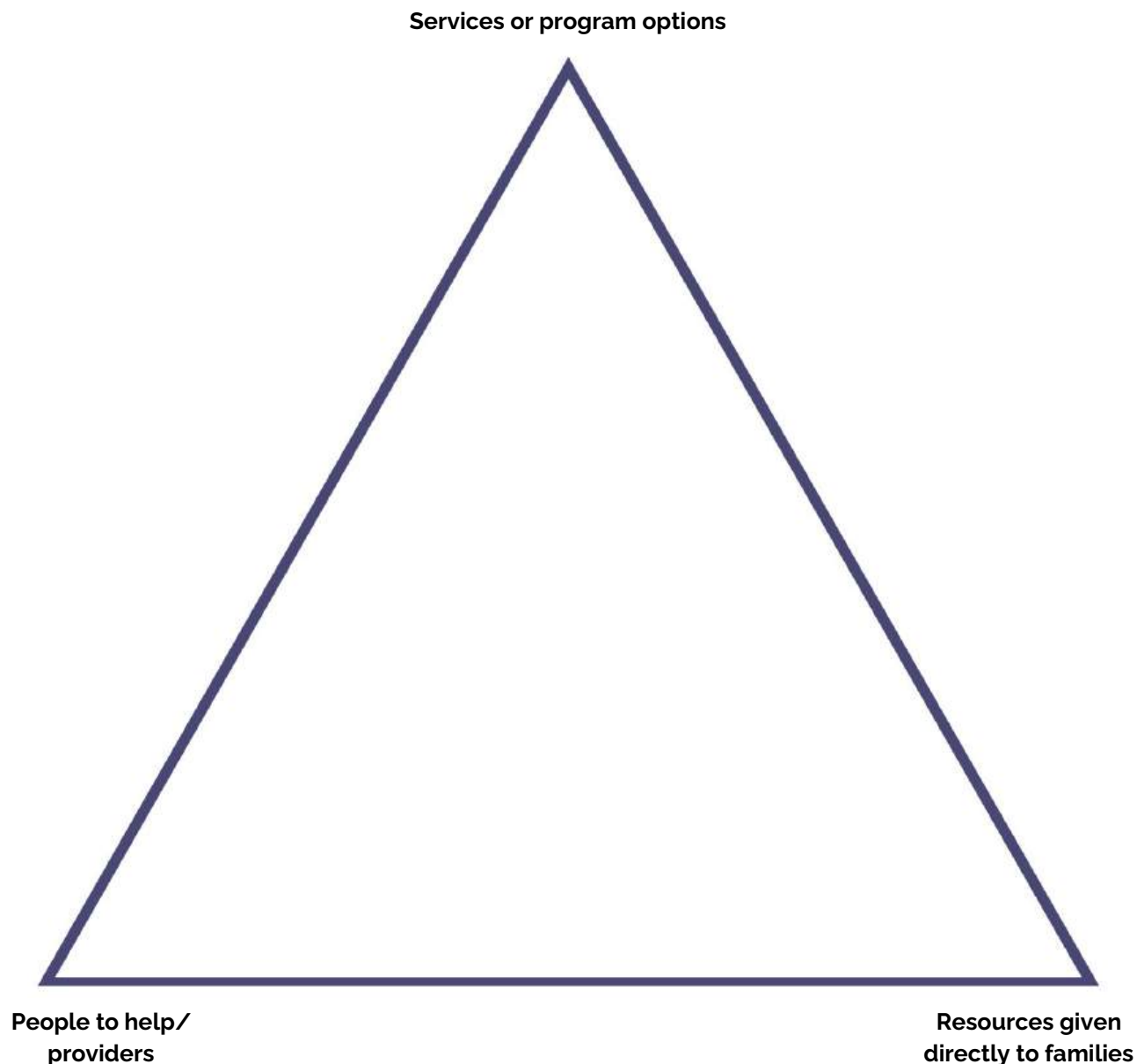
Our Goal

Our goal today is to explore and make meaning of the stories and data together, center community stories at the heart of productive discovery and action planning and recommend changes that move all families in Douglas County beyond "just surviving" to "thriving".

Activity 1: Consider your perspective

Consider the prompt below and the triangle of three response options. Place a dot on the triangle where it best represents your perspective based on your own experiences.

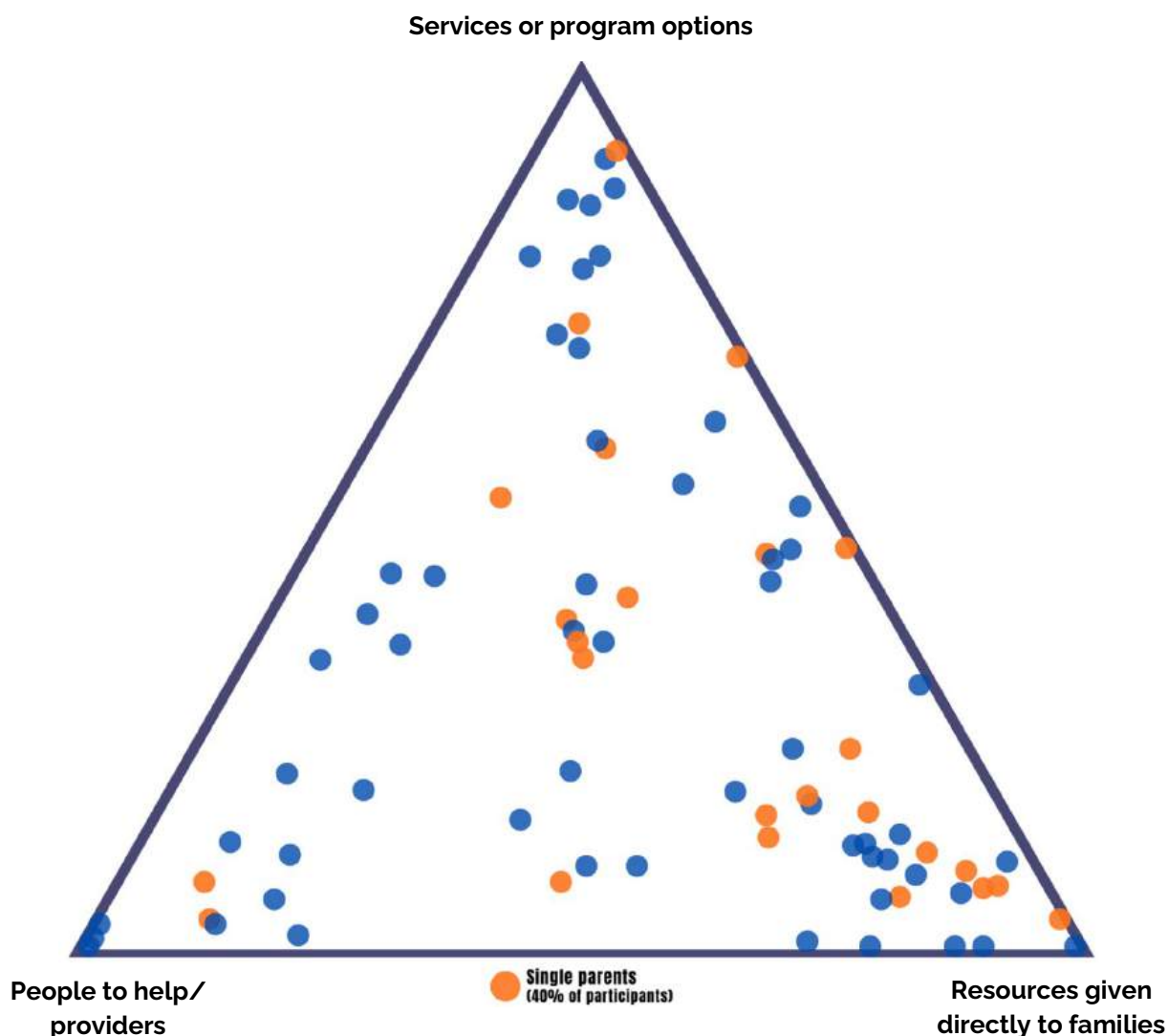
**When I think about what's available for families in my community,
we need more...**



Activity 1: Perspectives from our community

Let's explore how Douglas County participants responded to the same triangle question below. Each dot represents an experience and perspective. Reflect on the pattern and discuss with your group.

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we need more...**



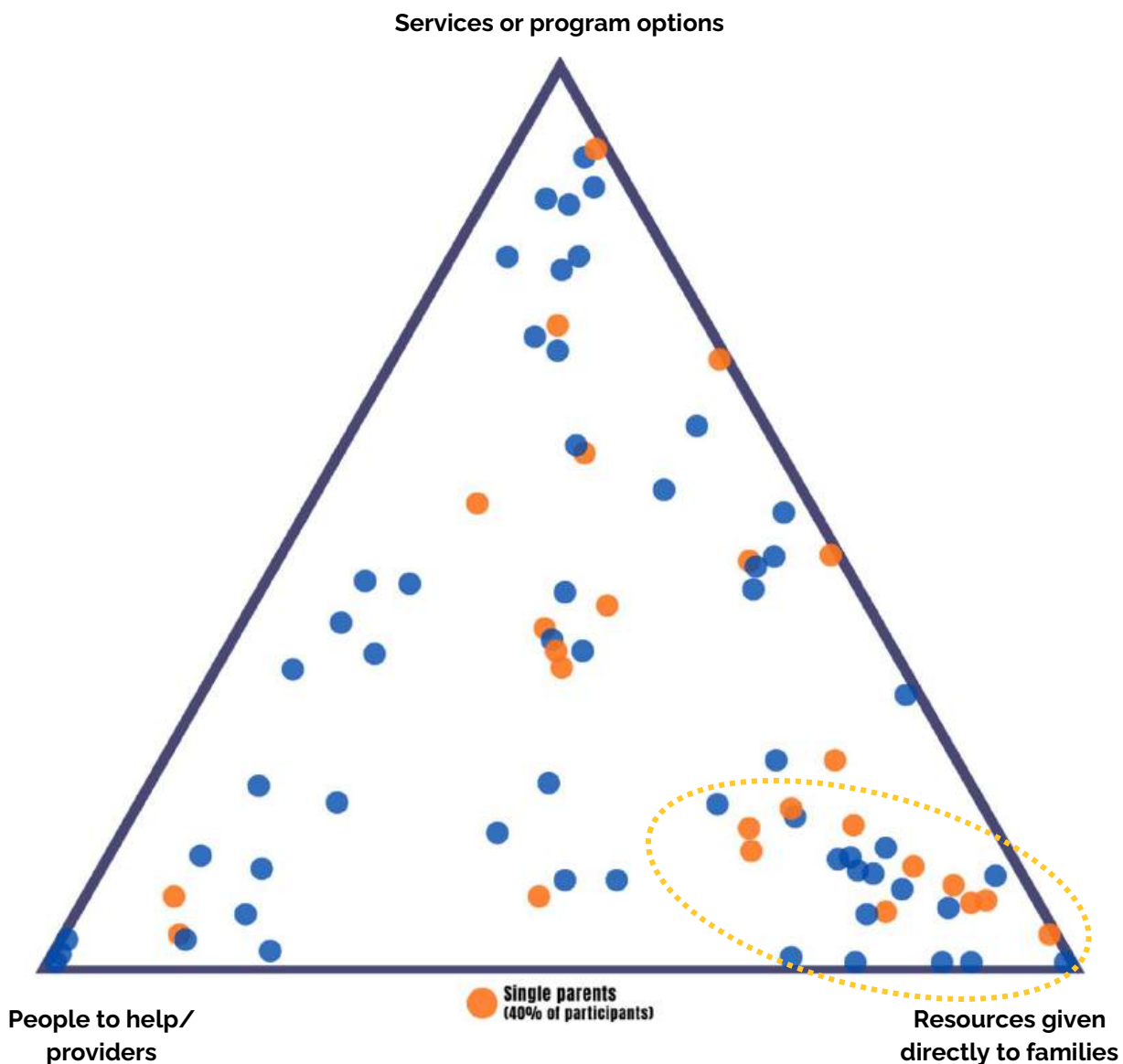
Discussion Questions:

1. What do you notice about the pattern of responses to this question? What stands out to you or surprises you? How does it compare to your response to this question?

Activity 1: Stories from our community

The yellow dotted circle below highlights a group of community members and the stories they shared with us, several of which are included on pages 5–6. Take a few moments to read the stories and then discuss the questions on page 7 with your group.

**When I think about what's available for families in my community,
we need more...**



Stories near the bottom right corner *(resources given directly to families)*

Moving

I moved back to Douglas county with a transitional housing voucher. It was a great blessing to myself and my son. While I was pregnant I was not sure I was going to have any housing at all for my son. I found a place to rent in Lawrence and thought it was great but quickly found out the opposite was true. The stress of the situation there and even contemplating having to move a third time in one year (once while 7 months pregnant, again with a four month old) was almost debilitating at times. I did not find much support in advocating for being able to stay there (which would have been my preference). Even agencies that are organized to help single parents like myself didn't seem to have the knowledge or motivation to help. It felt like I was being pressured from all sides, especially my landlord to just move. Well I did after much dragging my feet and trying other things. In the end, I did find a much better place. Now my son and I have a great place to call home, but I am just not sure why things continue to happen in this manner, that we don't have more choice, voice and less pressure, to just do what others want or see fit, especially for people that have experienced homelessness (such as my self). It can feel as if we are being displaced over and over again.

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Single mom. Personal medical. Children medical. Child food allergies and a GI disease that restricts food. Food cost verse food stamps isn't realistic. Food pantries carry un healthy and cheap so if you require healthy or restricted foods you don't benefit from pantries.

#The Cost of "Affordable"

This past year, my family is and have been in "survival mode." When the rent structure changed and I lost my job, everything tightened overnight. Covering basic expenses became a constant balancing act — choosing which bills to pay first, stretching every dollar, and trying to stay afloat while managing my health. Things haven't improved, because every decision meant to create stability — like finding new employment or refinancing my vehicle to lower payments — ends up creating more strain somewhere else. This is not affordable living. The rent structure is designed in a way that punishes progress — the moment income increases, rent goes up too, leaving no room to actually recover or get ahead. It traps families in a cycle where working harder doesn't lead to stability, it just changes which bills fall behind. It's survival on repeat, not sustainability.

Flintstone life

I was just out of a car for 2 months! It was very hard! Me and both my kids had to take 3 different ways to and from school and work! So it was hard to work and get them to school.

We survived

I am a single mom of two. One with Autism, the other one had a liver transplant and cancer. To say our life was stressful was an understatement. Now my children are adults but when they were under 18, I needed the support from a lot of local agencies. When my children were little we had public housing, relied on food stamps, cash assistance and state insurance. My children both attended Head Start, for preschool. This low income program gave me support and my children a Head Start. Thankfully I have agencies that have always been there to help me become more self sufficient. Today I am proud to say I have a college degree and I have the skills to be successful.

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#alone with no help

I'm writing to share my story and ask for any guidance or support available. I am a single mother doing my best to provide for my child, but these past months have been some of the hardest of my life. I had an emergency C-section that came with complications, and I had to stop working suddenly. I didn't have the luxury of taking proper time to recover — I went back to work only five weeks after giving birth, even though I was still in pain and struggling physically and emotionally. It wasn't because I was ready, but because I had no other choice. My bills, rent, and daily expenses kept piling up, and I didn't have anyone to depend on. Trying to recover from surgery, care for a newborn on my own, and return to work so soon has taken a huge toll on me. There are days when I barely sleep, and still have to push myself to keep going. I've reached out to different programs and organizations for help, but there seems to be little to no assistance in Lawrence for single mothers like me. I've called around, filled out forms, and explained my situation repeatedly, but I often hear, "We don't have funds right now," or "You don't qualify." The stress of trying to keep a roof over our heads and food on the table has been overwhelming. Some months, I'm forced to choose between paying a bill or buying necessities for my baby. It's heartbreaking and exhausting to work so hard and still feel like I'm falling behind. I love my child more than anything, and I'm determined to provide a safe and stable home. But doing this completely alone, with no family help and very little community support, is breaking me down. I'm reaching out in the hope that someone can listen, understand, and perhaps guide me toward real help or resources that could make a difference.

The Life of a Single Working Mom

I am a single mother and the manager of a local nonprofit. I love my career and take it very seriously. My calling is to serve my community and care for my children. Both bring deep meaning to my life. It's rewarding beyond words to nurture others and see the impact of that care. But working in social services is demanding work and so is being a single mom. Many people rely on me every day, including my staff, my volunteers, and my kids. The weight of that responsibility is heavy when resources are thin. I work every day with single mothers in much worse circumstances than my own. I see the poverty, the trauma, and the struggle that they experience every single day. Witnessing the heartache and stress of other single moms makes me so grateful for my privilege and for the income that I do have. Yet it's still hard to maintain balance when your children can't join extracurriculars because the fees are out of reach. It's hard to manage stress when you can't afford a dentist to fix a broken tooth or when you're stretching the last few dollars to feed your kids before payday. It's hard to care for your mental health when therapy simply isn't affordable and certainly not in the budget. Working single moms have to prioritize our money for the essential needs and neglect other needs because our money doesn't stretch far enough to meet the basic standards that are required to live and thrive in America. They say money can't buy happiness and I agree to an extent. But when basic needs aren't being met and you're living in constant survival mode, even the strongest among us begin to fray. When single mothers aren't thriving, children aren't thriving either, and that is when poverty and trauma become generational. Financial support for single mothers isn't about luxury. It's about stability, dignity, and the ability to continue showing up for our children, our work, and our communities. When we invest in single mothers, we're not just helping a single individual. We're strengthening the very people who hold our communities together and ending generational cycles.

Activity 1: Reflections

After everyone has considered the data patterns and read the community stories, reflect on the questions below and discuss with your group.

1. What do you notice in the stories on pages 5–6 about the challenges families in Douglas County are facing? ***Write your answers on the provided quote bubble stickies and arrange them on a sheet of flip chart paper with your group.***



2. Do they resonate with your own experiences and/or the experiences of families you know?

Activity 2: Consider your perspective

Consider the prompt below and the sliding scale of two response options. Place a dot on the line where it best represents your perspective based on your own experiences.

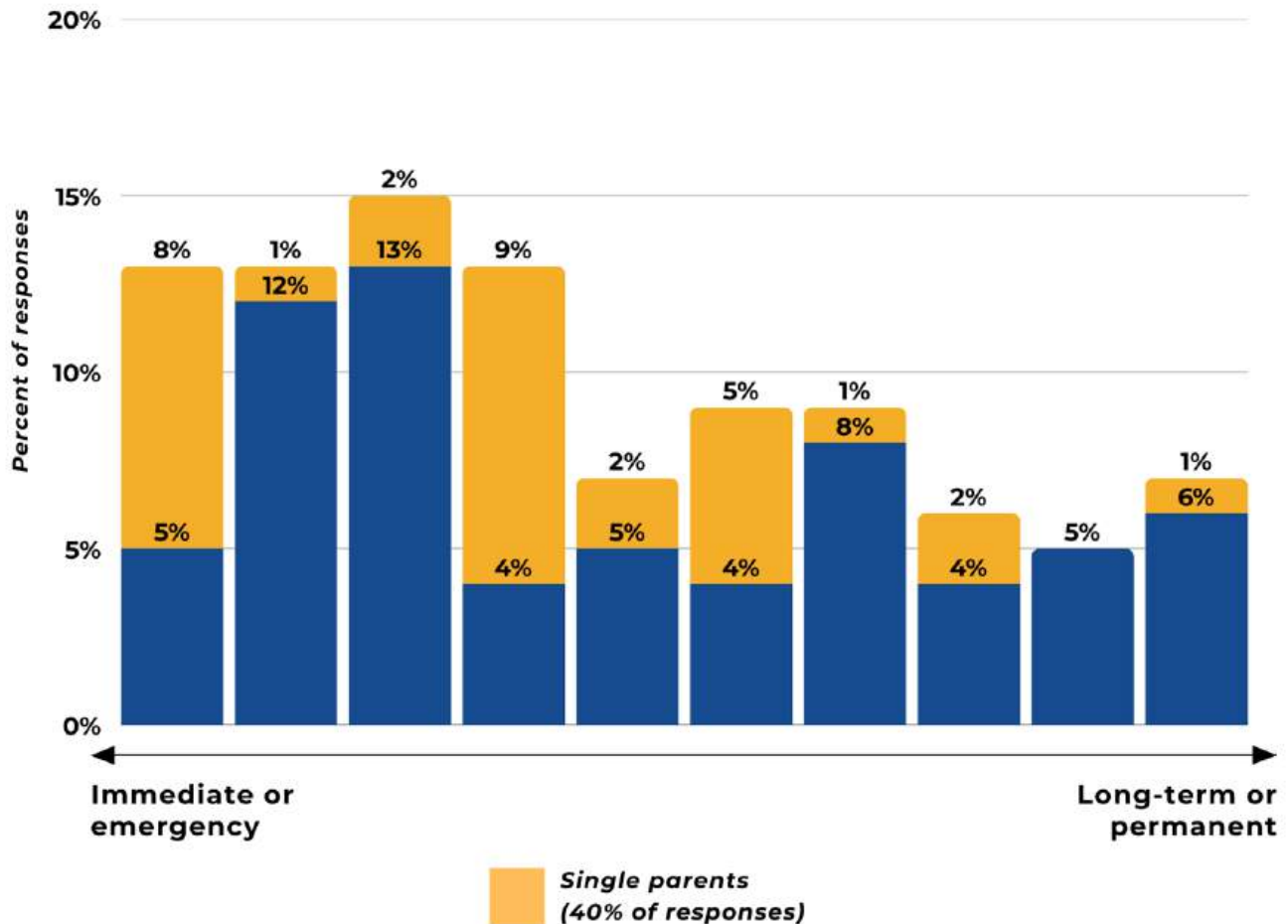
When I need help or support for me or my family, it is usually help that is...



Activity 2: Supporting Douglas County families

Let's explore how participants responded to the same sliding scale question below. Each bar represents the number of responses placed at a specific range on the sliding bar, from 'immediate or emergency' support to 'long-term or permanent' support. Reflect on the pattern and discuss with the group.

My story involves help or support that was...



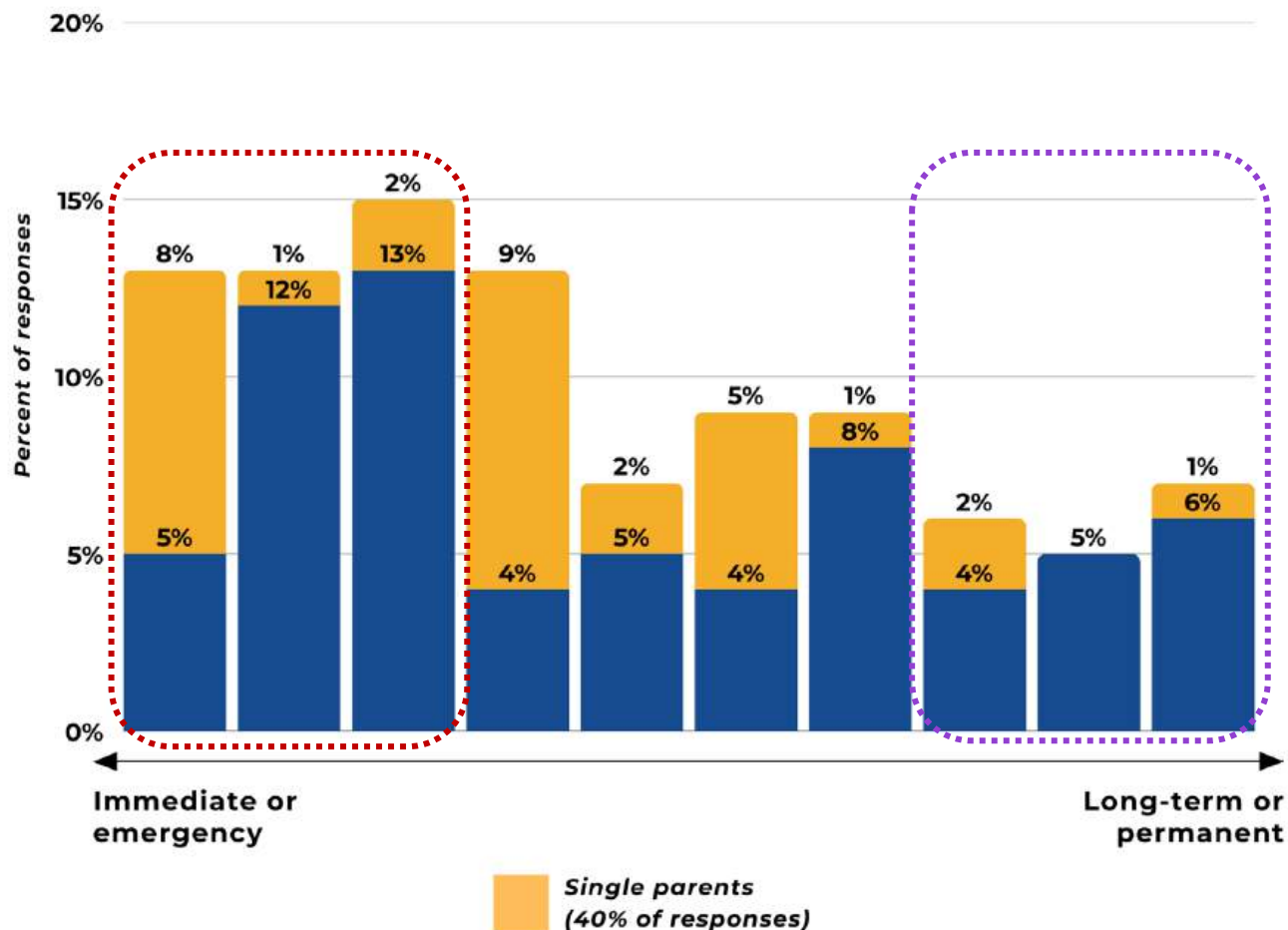
Discussion Questions:

1. What do you notice about the pattern of responses to this question? What stands out to you or surprises you? How does it compare to your response to this question?

Activity 2: Stories from Douglas County families

The red and purple dotted sections below highlight groups of community members and the stories they shared with us, several of which are included on pages 11–12. Take a few moments to read the stories and then discuss the questions on page 13 with your group.

My story involves help or support that was...



Stories from the left side (*immediate or emergency support*)

Grateful-but-survivalmode4us

I am just surviving thinking about last month fall 2025. I have a 9 and 10 year old. My daughters still struggle with emotional regulation after going through two divorces. My daughter stated that she wanted to die and has details laid out. I took her to the crisis center in Lawrence. Although Bert Nash was under-staffed, they were a big help. I feel like we are just surviving as it is a struggle every single day that Boys and Girls club is not open. I worry about leaving my girls at home. I have a home camera but a nanny is needed for help.

Single mom of 3

Being a single mother to 3 children is hard, but also thwy best thing I love being a mother and all the stress is worth it, doing it alone is hard no help nobody to talk to sometimes other than your kids didn't have food stamps earlier in the year no transportation no nothing. I'm grateful to be where I'm at in life right now with the help of my resident services , very understanding to my situation. There were times I cried and also times I laughed like never before because of my children and the smiles on their faces just makes everything so worth it.

Single mother of 4

This year I think is the year I've struggled the most; well right now I am actually... I have a 5 bedroom home because I had 4 kids living in the home.. I recently took my oldest who is 19 off because she has become an adult and now living on her own.. anywho I usually save my tax money but I had bought a car to get my kids and I got to places in a timely manner.. it took the rest I had saved.: now it has recently broke down.. my rent went up due to my income going up last year and I now don't make that much.: so I'm nearly making it at this house I'm now at.. it's so expensive.. I'm a struggling with my income right now and staying on top of my bills...

#TheFirstBorn

In 2024 I was homeless for a short period, by the grace of god I was still employed and I had a working vehicle. I have 3 daughters and alot of motivation. My oldest was 15 at the time and she saw the emotions, the dedication, and the strength during this time and it sparked a fire under her! Since that time she has excelled at nearly everything she did. Becoming a young lady, getting her 1st job, attending leadership classes, helping with her 2 sisters, all while in school full time holding a great GPA. She inspires me and gives me hope that my children will be greater than me. Teaching my kids to better is such a wholesome feeling.

You Are My Sunshine

This last year I've been mainly "just surviving" I do my best to ensure my daughter doesn't realize how much I'm actually struggling but its definitely not an easy task. The economy has gotten so much worse over the past few years and I feel like I've just had my head barely above water consistently since its gotten worse. I struggle every day financially and I'm too embarrassed to reach out for help. I've always been the one to take care of myself and I've never been good at asking for or accepting assistance but giving my daughter the best life possible is what has kept me going. She's my saving grace and the light during the dark times

A single mother trying to provide for her children. #grateful

I lost my job, it was also my daughter's birthday coming up. I was behind on my bills, I didn't have no family to ask or run too for help. I literally live here by myself with my kids and no one for help, no family or anything for support. Everything is up to me. I called resident services and I was able to get help with my bills, other places helped with little things I was able to go pick up for my daughter for her birthday.

Stories from the right side (long-term or permanent support)

#SINGLEMOMSTRENGTH #DIFFERENTLEGACY

This past year held a mix of exhaustion and quiet victories. After spending so many years working 2-3 jobs at a time as a single mom, I know what it feels like to carry the entire weight of my family on my back. I've stretched myself thin, held everything together, and kept pushing forward even when life felt like it was asking too much of me. One moment stands out. It was a morning after a hard overnight shift. I came home exhausted, the kind of tired sits in your bones after years of being the provider, the protector and everything in between. The house wasn't perfect. Things needed fixing. Bills still needed to be paid. I had to get ready for the day job. I was definitely in survival mode. But then my son walks up, gives me a big hug and says "Thank you for your hard work mom, I appreciate it. I love you." My other son offered to go do errands for the day. I received a "Good morning mama, I love you" message from my daughter. Something in the room softened, and something in me did too. In that moment, I realized that even though I had spent years just trying to survive, my family was actually thriving. Not because everything was easy, but because I had given my kids a foundation built on love, resilience, gratitude and compassion. Things they learned by watching me fight for us over and over again. Standing there, exhausted but surrounded by their support, I felt something I don't always feel. I really did build something good. I didn't just keep us going, I raised a family that knows how to show up for each other.

"The Uncommon"

Just surviving. I've been homeless for about 5 years now. I recently just got off the street. Thanks too [redacted] from Bert Nash and [redacted] from Tenants to Owners. I went through a lot of loss and grief starting from 2016. I lost my daughter then after that I lost my brother and shortly after that I lost my mom. Marriage went down the drain kid's father is very abusive. My kids are adopted out. You know everybody seems to say just get a job will help everything. Well for me it's not that easy. I've had four stomach surgeries two heart ? surgeries and two back surgeries. So I panhandle for all the things that the agencies can you get us. Most of the panhandling money I do receive I give back as much as I can to others in need. During this time of surviving I lost some very good close friends of mine. One of them I found in her tent murdered, stabbed to death. It's been hell of an experience out here. But I wouldn't change it for the world. I made some really amazing people I actually got to see humanity for what it is now. And there are some very good souls out here still with very big hearts.


Breaking point

"When we hit the wall" We were a year into reintegration when I realized my partner was just going through the motions and his behaviors were beginning to surface again. I filed for divorce and brought my children to Lawrence so we could all have a fresh start. Finding an affordable rental was challenging on one income and with minimal credit history. Even with child support, we barely made it through the month. I was constantly playing the "paying game", letting one bill go so I could pay the other. Filling water jugs in anticipation of it getting shut off, having "pioneer nights" where we lit the house with candles and bundled under blankets, "camped" in the living room or back yard and cooked over a fire, I did what I could to "make a game of it" but the kids knew we were struggling. I could bring food home from work sometimes but made too much to qualify for food stamps or other resources. My family was supportive of course but I was careful not to let them know how much we were struggling as they had their own financial stressors. Then there was the mental strain of everything we'd been dealing with. Fortunately the kids were involved with scouts and sports but this didn't address the trauma of an unhealthy parental relationship. Finding counseling services that I could afford was hard, particularly for 2 kids (and forget about my own mental health). It was particularly frustrating that when I had insurance, I had to pay more per visit than when I didn't and I incurred more debt. Mental health meds made them sick, one child started cutting to deal with the strain and we didn't felt heard when any of this was reported to the doctor. One child struggled at school with ADHD and dyslexia, and thought an IEP was in place, did not receive the additional service and support needed to attend school and maintain the little peer support they'd built. When I lost my job, everything imploded. I got behind on rent, the car started failing, the kids fought their own ghosts and I struggled to feel relevant. The only "bonus" to hitting rock bottom is that we qualified for some services but why did it have to get that bad first? Fortunately we had family who would not let us falter or we could have become another failed statistic. It's taken time, tears and scars but we're still on this side of the dirt and trying to find the silver linings so that's success in my book.


Activity 2: Reflections

After everyone has considered the data patterns and read the community stories, reflect on the questions below and discuss with your group.

1. What do you notice in the stories on pages 11–12 about the challenges families in Douglas County are facing? ***Write your answers on the provided quote bubble stickies and add them to the flip chart paper with your previous quote bubble stickies.***



2. What do all the patterns and stories you've considered today suggest about what Douglas County families need the most? ***Write your answers on the provided star-shaped stickies and add them to a new sheet of flip chart paper with your group.***



Activity 3: Final reflections

In 'sensemaking', it's critical for us to think about how community voices impact our policies and programmatic decisions and empower collective action for change. Take a moment to reflect on the questions below and then briefly discuss with your group.

1. What is one idea or concept you are taking with you from our work and discussions today?

2. Given what you've learned and discussed today, what is one action or change you would like to see happen in our community over the next 6-12 months? Who can help make that action or change happen? **Write your action on the provided light bulb cutout and hang it on the string in the room.**



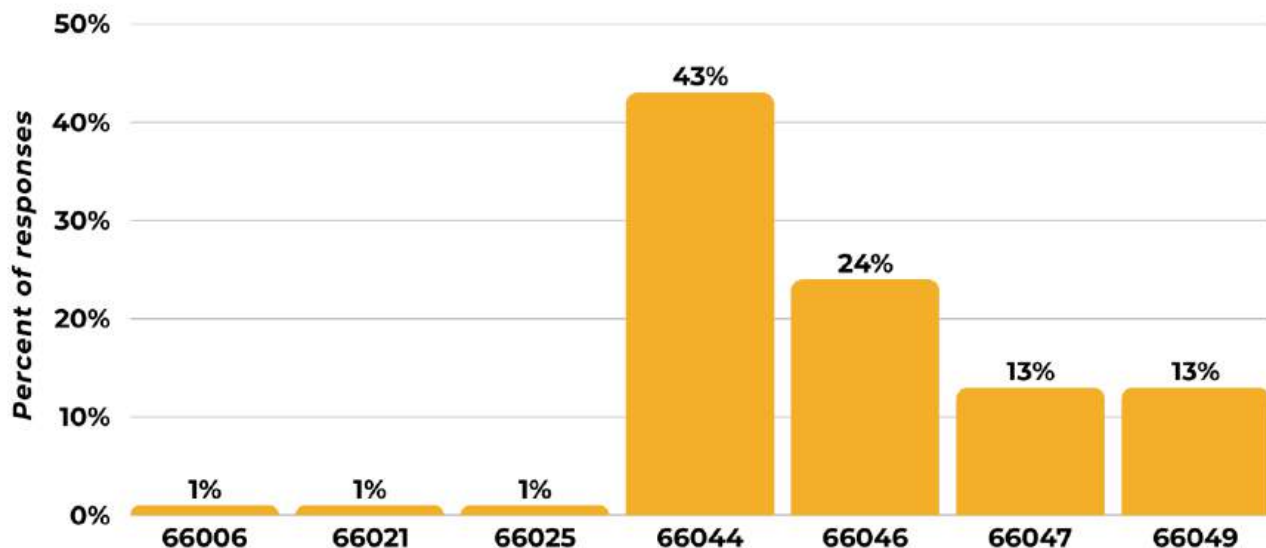
Appendix: Who shared their voices with us?

We asked participants to tell us a bit about their identities and circumstances through a series of multiple-choice questions to help us understand more about their experiences.

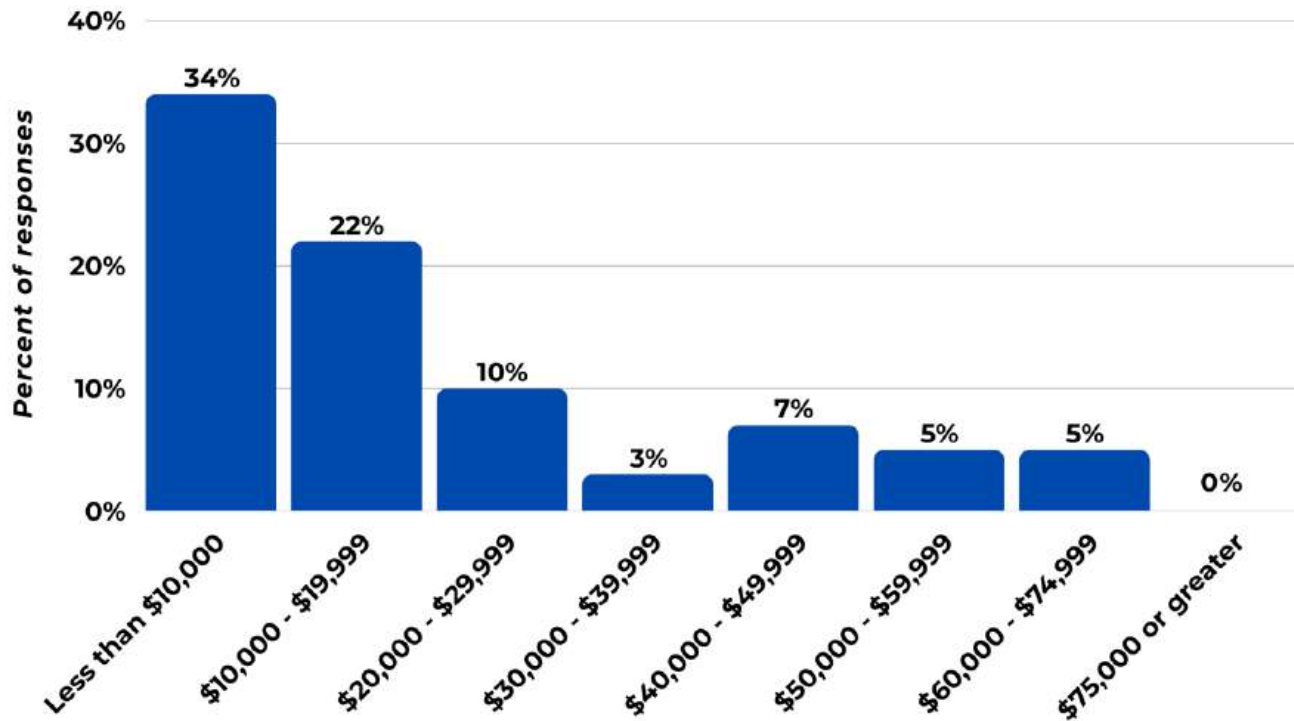
Of the 94 participants who responded from Douglas County:

- 40% identified as single parents
- 80% have at least one child under 5 years old living in their household
- 20% identified as a co-parent
- 15% have children with disability/varying abilities
- 62% identified as low-income
- 51% are unemployed
- 51% are struggling with their mental health
- 47% lack transportation
- 46% are experiencing food insecurity
- 34% are experiencing housing issues
- 32% are recipients of government benefits
- Most respondents are between 25 and 34 years old (27%) and 35 and 44 years old (36%)

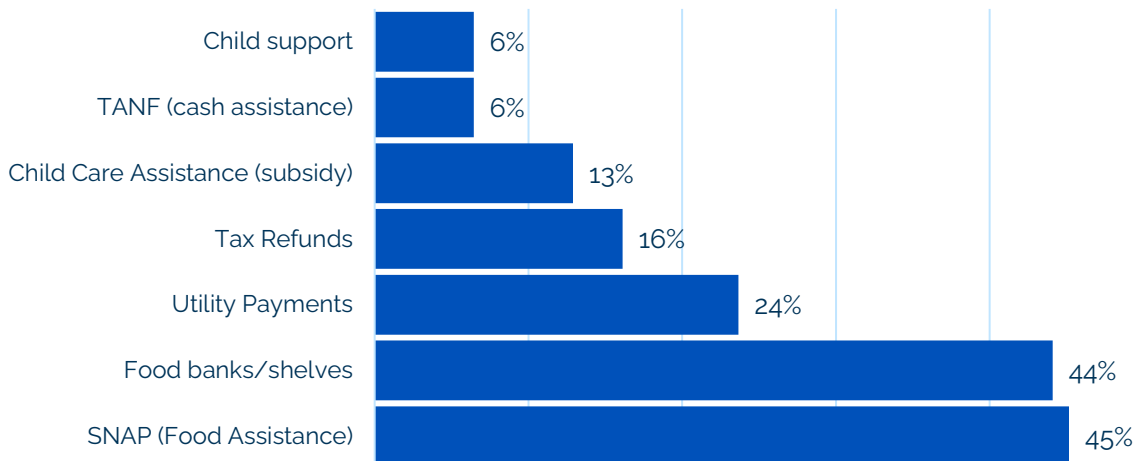
Douglas County zip codes of participants:



Annual household incomes of participants:



When asked what concrete supports made a difference for their family in the last year:





Douglas County Thrives

A Community Sensemaking Initiative

A Douglas County Economic Mobility Project | February 18, 2026

Center for Public Partnerships & Research



Center for Public
Partnerships and Research



Douglas County Thrives

- **Who:** Douglas County Community Health Improvement Plan economic mobility project team, KU-CPPR, and community members
- **What:** Community sensemaking survey, story collection, sessions. Focus – experiences of single parents/caregivers
- **Why:** Increase the percentage of single female headed households able to meet basic living expenses so that all families can thrive.
- **How:** Economic mobility grant. Centered community perspectives/ family stories in action planning.

Project Timeline

- **August – September:** Survey design, planning
- **October – November:** Collected stories, organized events
- **December:** Two community sensemaking sessions
 - Children's Community Center: focused on families seeking services (Dec 8)
 - Lied Center: Open to broader public, informed by session one (Dec 15)
- **January:** Compiled session outcomes and summarized findings

Community Sensemaking Approach

- Survey
- Open-ended prompt
- Self-coded significance
- Community-based knowledge and meaning-making
- Actionable insights rooted in community narratives

Partners

- LiveWell Douglas County
- Just Food
- DCCCA
- Douglas County Housing Authority
- Ballard Community Center
- Heartland Health Community Health Center and Community Health Workers
- Children's Community Center
- Child Care Aware of Kansas
- United Way of Kaw Valley
- K-State Extension Douglas County
- Tenants to Homeowners
- Lawrence Parents as Teachers
- Lawrence-Douglas County Public Health

We Want to Hear from You!

Parents, guardians, and mentors play a key role in our community, but we know support isn't always easy to find—especially for single parents.

Share your story to help us understand how we can better support families like yours!



ourtomorrow.ws/DGCOthrives

*DGCO Thrives is an initiative of the
Douglas County Health Improvement Plan.*



Story Prompt

Think about a moment in the last year when you felt like your family was really thriving or just surviving. What was happening at the time? Tell us about that experience in the space below.

Who shared their story with us?

- **94 parents/caregivers** from Douglas County
- **72% female**
- **39%** identified as **single parents**
- **62%** said that “**low income**” was part of their story
 - Over a third reported household incomes below \$10,000
 - Well over half (66%) said they earned less than \$30,000
- **46-50%** said **unemployment, mental health challenges, and food insecurity** were part of their story.

The cost of “Affordable”

This past year, my family is and have been in “survival mode.” When the rent structure changed and I lost my job, everything tightened overnight. Covering basic expenses became a constant balancing act — choosing which bills to pay first, stretching every dollar, and trying to stay afloat while managing my health.

Things haven’t improved, because every decision meant to create stability — like finding new employment or refinancing my vehicle to lower payments — ends up creating more strain somewhere else. This is not affordable living. The rent structure is designed in a way that punishes progress — the moment income increases, rent goes up too, leaving no room to actually recover or get ahead. It traps families in a cycle where working harder doesn’t lead to stability, it just changes which bills fall behind. It’s survival on repeat, not sustainability.

A single mother trying to provide for her children. #grateful:

I lost my job, it was also my daughter's birthday coming up. I was behind on my bills, I didn't have no family to ask or run too for help. I literally live here by myself with my kids and no one for help, no family or anything for support. Everything is up to me. I called resident services and I was able to get help with my bills, other places helped with little things I was able to go pick up for my daughter for her birthday.

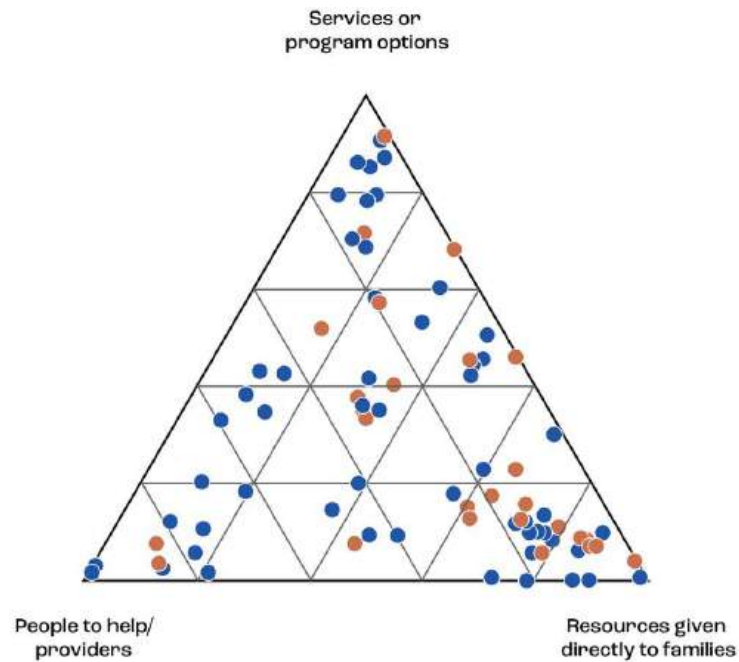
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I struggle every day financially and I'm too embarrassed to reach out for help. I've always been the one to take care of myself and I've never been good at asking for or accepting assistance but giving my daughter the best life possible is what has kept me going. She's my saving grace and the light during the dark times

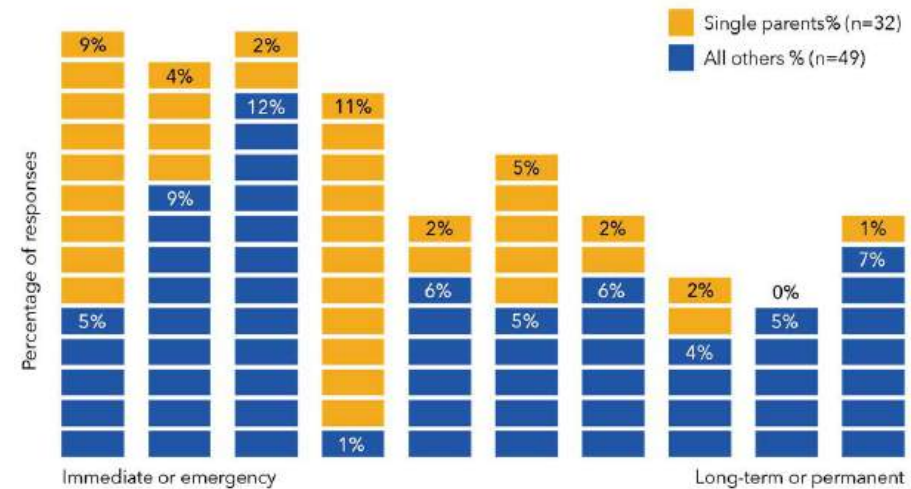
Example Survey Questions/Patterns

When I think about what's available for families in my community, we need more...



Note: Each dot represents a story (N=89). Orange dots = single parent experiences (n=37).

My story involves help or support that was...



Session Outcomes

Observed Challenges and Ideas for Action

Challenges

Families are managing multiple, overlapping pressures with little margin for error.

- Financial Strain/Economic pressure
- Structural barriers: eligibility rules, service navigation, and transportation
- Housing barriers: affordability + credit/requirements
- Basic Needs & Food Security
- Emotional toll: stress and mental health strain

Financial Strain/Economic pressure



“It feels sometimes like damned if you do, damned if you don’t. The tension between making too much to get help, like if I want to work overtime, I might be just over the edge income eligibility-wise, but not right away. That might impact me later, and I can’t predict how I’ll be doing when that shows up on my income. and then if I work overtime, I miss time with my family.”

Structural barriers



“Places that give direct support like food pantries are really helpful, but it takes time to figure out how it all works...You might qualify, might be lucky off the start. But it can take time to find the right fit.”

“Once you learn about how credit works, it’s too late...even if working...One crisis is all it takes to throw a family into chaos.”

Emotional toll: Stress and mental health strain



“When families had strong mental health and emotional health, they could handle anything...Basic needs go a long way to helping mental health.”

“Giving families directly what they need is bottom line and then making sure families have what they need to move forward.”

Community Ideas for Action



Increase income stability and reduce cost burdens

Pilot direct assistance programs for single parents; identify opportunities to reduce household cost burdens such as food, child care, utilities, and other basic needs taxes; and align benefits with the real cost of living using the ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) Household Survival Budget for Douglas County as a guide.



Simplify access and reduce system barriers

Reduce eligibility thresholds, wait times, and requirements and simplify applications, promote “no wrong door” policies and programming across the system of provider agencies, and advocate for policy solutions that reduce sudden benefit cliffs and help families on the path to economic stability.

Community Ideas for Action, continued



Strengthen service coordination and whole-family design

Establish cross-agency coordination, shared accountability, and whole-family service models that align program services around family stability goals rather than individual eligibility. Leverage lived expertise when designing services and new interventions, to help increase effectiveness.



Prioritize housing stability and affordability for single parent households.

Provide affordable housing options with fewer barriers, short-term stabilization supports, financial education and credit counseling, and housing and program policies that recognize financial realities such as fluctuating incomes or wages.



Leverage lived expertise.

Continue to leverage lived expertise when designing services and new interventions, to help increase effectiveness.

Economic Mobility Team Takeaways & Next Steps

- Ongoing refinement of Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP)
- Exploration of pilot initiatives and partnerships

Ideas.

Expertise.

Solutions.

Change.

KU

Thank you

for taking the time and holding
the space to listen to voices
from your communities!

cppr.ku.edu