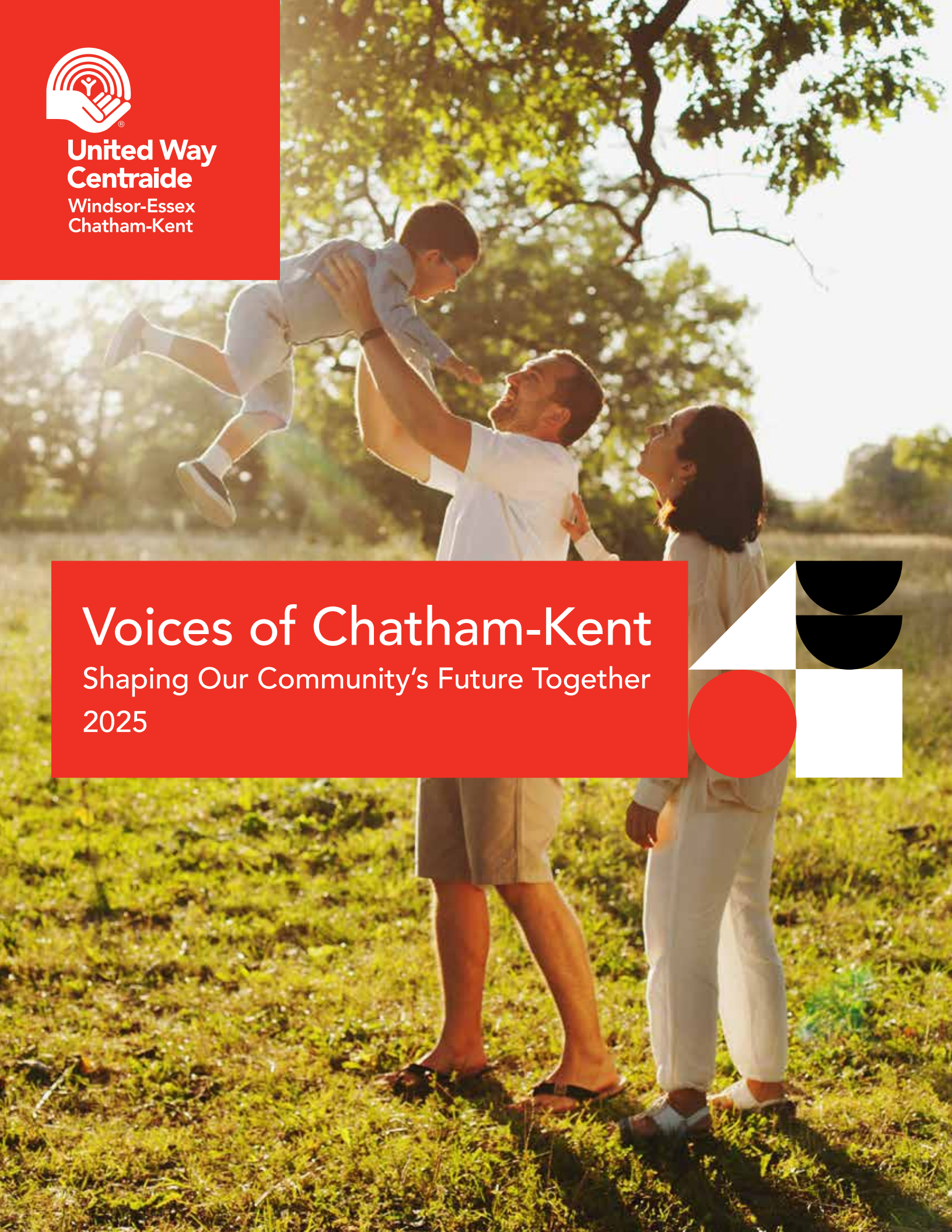
United Way Centraide
Windsor-Essex
Chatham-Kent



Voices of Chatham-Kent

Shaping Our Community's Future Together

2025

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LAND ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The land that is known as Chatham-Kent today was established as part of Treaty #2, the McKee Purchase Treaty of 1790. At that time the land was also inhabited by the Three Fires Confederacy: the Odawa, Potawatomi and Ojibwe. The Lunaapeew also lived in the area at the time, stewarding the land. The People of the Three Fires Confederacy, also known as the Anishinaabeg, and Lunaapeew Peoples agreed to the mutual sharing of the land, with obligations and responsibilities to the environment. Today, Chatham-Kent neighbours the Lunaapeew at Eelūnaapèewi Lahkèewiit which is part of the McKee Purchase Treaty, as well as the unceded territory of the Bkejwanong Walpole Island First Nation. Chatham-Kent continues to be home to diverse First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples. As beneficiaries of the treaty, we recognize all Peoples have responsibilities including collective responsibilities to the land and water.

LORRAINE GODDARD

A letter from the CEO

As I write this foreword for the *Voices of Chatham-Kent: Shaping Our Community's Future Together* report, it has been a little more than a year since the official unification of United Way/Centraide Windsor-Essex County and United Way of Chatham-Kent in July 2024—now collectively known as United Way Windsor-Essex Chatham-Kent (UWWECK). This unification is grounded in a set of guiding principles: to ensure Chatham-Kent residents have a voice in decision-making, to maintain a strong local presence, and to guarantee that funds raised in each community remain in that community.

With unification comes a new opportunity to rebuild and reimagine United Way's role in Chatham-Kent. Established in 1948, United Way has a long-standing history of driving social change. We honour the legacy of leadership provided by Karen Kirkwood-Whyte, former CEO of United Way of Chatham-Kent, and the countless volunteers who built a strong foundation over the decades. Their contributions continue to inspire our evolution toward an organization that embraces equity, results-driven action, transparency, and inclusivity—core values that guide our mission to be a true community impact organization.

This report marks an important first step in deepening our understanding of the Chatham-Kent community. It presents local data and community feedback collected through surveys and consultations, offering valuable insights to help UWWECK identify where we can make the greatest measurable difference.

Achieving this impact will require UWWECK to be laser-focused, a trusted partner, and a strategic investor. We recognize that the persistent challenges facing communities are complex and require dedicated effort, collaboration, and long-term investment to drive real, lasting change.

Now that this report is complete, the next phase of our work is to define a community investment strategy rooted in local data, community needs, and our capacity to effect meaningful outcomes. We will engage residents and partners to help raise the resources needed to implement this strategy, while seeking opportunities for collaboration and alignment to maximize our collective impact.

We thank the people of Chatham-Kent for their generosity and ongoing support throughout the years, and we look forward to building a brighter, more equitable future—together.

Our Journey in Chatham-Kent

Historical Context

United Way's Legacy in Chatham-Kent

United Way has been embedded in the fabric of Chatham-Kent for over 77 years. Established in 1948 by the Chamber of Commerce and the Labour Council with the support of Sydney Amherst Morse (then-President of Union Gas), United Way began as a collective response to urgent social needs. From its inception, the organization has prioritized local engagement, community-driven solutions, and cross-sector collaboration.

Over time, United Way of Chatham-Kent (UWOCK) has evolved from a traditional fundraising entity to a proactive community builder. A significant shift occurred in 1997 with the launch of the *Nurture the Future* project, which introduced an "incubate, nurture, and divest" approach, allowing the organization to pilot initiatives, strengthen them, and transition them to independence. This model positioned UWOCK not just as a funder, but as a driver of innovation and systems change.

Following the 1998 municipal amalgamation, United Way formally adopted the name United Way of Chatham-Kent, reaffirming its commitment to serve the entire region. Regional partnerships deepened through key initiatives like the integration of the Tilbury Information and H.E.L.P. Centre (2005) and the launch of Women United (2007)—a network of women leaders dedicated to advancing local priorities for women, children, and families.

Throughout its history, UWOCK has remained committed to its core mission: to build strong, healthy, and inclusive communities where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Regionalization and Renewal

The Transition to United Way Centraide Windsor-Essex Chatham-Kent (UWWECK)

As part of a broader strategy to increase efficiency and community impact, United Way Chatham-Kent joined with United Way/ Centraide Windsor-Essex County to form a regional entity: United Way Centraide Windsor-Essex Chatham-Kent (United Way or UWWECK). This transition brought operational changes—such as integrated leadership, governance, and administration—while preserving the unique identity, needs, and priorities of each community.

What Has Changed:

- Consolidation of back-end systems and leadership structures across Windsor-Essex and Chatham-Kent.
- A renewed focus on strategy and systems alignment, data driven decision-making and measurable community impact.

What Remains Consistent:

- Chatham-Kent continues to lead locally through local board members, advisory groups, partner networks, and community engagement.
- Local fundraising, investment decisions, and partnerships remain grounded in Chatham-Kent priorities. Every dollar raised in Chatham-Kent stays in Chatham-Kent, supporting programs that reflect local realities and priorities.

Community voice remains a cornerstone of United Way's work in Chatham-Kent. Local advisory councils, community roundtables, and resident engagement sessions ensure that the strategies deployed in this region reflect the lived experiences and aspirations of the people who call it home. The unification process is not a departure from local identity, but a platform to strengthen it by bringing new capacity, broader insight, and shared learning across communities.

"We'd be lost without the United Way."

– Consultation Participant

Our Approach Moving Forward

Equity as a Foundation

Our renewed approach places equity at the centre. This means intentionally directing resources to where they are needed most, especially in communities that face disproportionate barriers due to poverty, racism, systemic inequities, or geographic isolation. Equity recognizes that fair access is not the same as equal access; it ensures that individuals and families receive the specific supports they need to thrive based on their unique circumstances.

Strategic, Systems-Focused Investment

UWWECK is shifting its focus from short-term relief to long-term change. This involves:

- Supporting upstream solutions that prevent issues before they escalate.
- Strengthening the capacity of local organizations and networks.
- Supporting a shared success model that advances measurable outcomes.

By funding collaborative and scalable models, United Way aims to tackle the root causes of social challenges and foster resilient, inclusive communities across Chatham-Kent.

A Renewed Role for United Way

United Way is evolving from a traditional funder into a more collaborative, impact-focused partner. We are working alongside cross-sector organizations, leveraging data, amplifying resident voice, and aligning resources to create lasting, community-wide change.

This transformation is part of a national shift. Across Canada, United Ways are embracing more adaptive, equity-driven roles:

- *United Way Greater Toronto* serves as a catalyst for regional anti-poverty coalitions.
- *United Way Calgary* prioritizes healthy relationships and social inclusion to strengthen community cohesion.
- *United Way British Columbia - Southern Interior Region* has taken the lead on emergency response and disaster recovery, coordinating funding and volunteer efforts during major events like wildfires and floods.

These models reflect a shared goal: building stronger communities by working differently, together.

Local Adaptability: Meeting Communities Where They Are

A defining strength of United Way is its ability to tailor its approach to the distinct needs of each community. While United Way Centraide Canada shares a national mission with local United Ways—to empower individuals and build strong communities—each United Way operates independently to address the unique needs and realities of its community. Each location can tailor its approach based on regional context and evolving needs. In some regions, this might mean focusing on youth mental health or disaster relief, while in others, it may involve addressing social isolation or economic recovery.

This adaptability ensures that United Way remains deeply connected to the communities it serves. Through community consultations, data analysis, and strong relationships with service providers and residents, United Ways continuously assess what's most needed and what works best. In Chatham-Kent, this local-first approach ensures that investments are community-informed, locally relevant, and responsive to both long-standing challenges and emerging issues. It's not only a strategic advantage—it reflects a core commitment to honouring the voices, identities, and lived experiences of those we serve.

Looking Ahead in Chatham-Kent

UWWECK is proud to align with this growing momentum across the country, with Chatham-Kent playing a leadership role in shaping a more responsive, community-centred United Way. By combining local insight with regional collaboration and remaining grounded in the lived experience of our residents, we are building a stronger, more equitable future together.

"I would recommend that United Way choose a few things and do them extremely well versus many things done decently."

– Survey Respondent

Listening to the Community

Why We Listened

United Way's renewed approach in Chatham-Kent is grounded in the principle that those closest to the challenges are also closest to the solutions. To build a meaningful, equity-focused investment strategy, we began by listening.

From January to June 2025, UWWECK led a comprehensive community engagement process to better understand residents' lived experiences, priorities, and ideas for the future. This process included nearly 600 community touchpoints through a large-scale public survey, targeted validation sessions, and local data analysis. Together, these insights informed every aspect of our proposed investment approach.

Our objectives were clear:

- Ensure future investments reflect the needs identified by those with lived experience, not assumptions.
- Centre resident voice in long-term strategic decisions.
- Identify both urgent needs and upstream opportunities.
- Build a shared understanding of what matters most across Chatham-Kent.

Community Consultation Survey

Process and Reach

Between January 15 and March 31, 2025, UWWECK conducted a community consultation survey across Chatham-Kent. Our goal was to reach 400 responses—a representative sample of the 2021 Chatham Kent Census Division population (~104,000)—which would provide a 95% confidence level with a ±5% margin of error. We received 391 responses, just under our target, offering a strong foundation of community voice to guide future planning.

The survey asked residents about:

- Community priorities and where investment should focus.
- Barriers to accessing help.
- Equity and opportunity across neighbourhoods.
- Strengths and gaps in available services.
- Ideas for long-term, community-led change.

Responses were mapped across six regions—Chatham, East Kent, North Kent, South Kent, West Kent, and Wallaceburg—to ensure both rural and urban representation. Demographic data was also collected to assess the equity of participation. (See *Appendix A* for full methodology and survey questions.)

What We Heard

Through nearly 400 survey responses and follow-up conversations, residents shared a clear and compelling vision for a stronger Chatham-Kent—one rooted in dignity, opportunity, and equitable access to supports. Their feedback paints a nuanced picture of where the community is struggling, where it's strong, and where investment is needed most.

When asked which issues deserved the most attention and investment, residents consistently identified three top priorities, in order of importance:

- **Affordable Housing:**
  The top concern across all neighbourhoods. Residents described rising rents, long waitlists, and increasing homelessness. Even those who are employed reported being priced out of safe housing, placing strain on families, seniors, and youth.
- **Mental Health and Addictions Support:**
  Closely following housing, residents expressed concern about limited youth-focused services, difficulty navigating supports, and growing waitlists. Many shared stories about unmet needs and the toll on children, families, and communities.
- **Access to Healthcare:**
  Especially in rural areas, people cited long travel distances, a shortage of family doctors, and lengthy wait times for basic care. Wallaceburg was repeatedly named as a community with significant medical access challenges.

Other frequently named priorities included:

- Food security and the rising cost of groceries.
- Youth development, including a lack of programs and mentorship opportunities.
- Employment and job training, particularly for young adults and newcomers.
- Transportation, especially in rural areas where access to services is often limited.

Across open-ended comments, residents also called attention to:

- The need for wraparound supports for people facing multiple issues at once.
- A desire for more early years and youth programs to prevent future harm.
- The importance of safe, welcoming community spaces where people can connect and belong.

This feedback reflects a clear desire for investment that goes beyond temporary fixes. Residents want targeted, equity-focused efforts that address root causes and build lasting change.

"Our kids are falling behind. Long waitlists, lack of youth programs — it's going to catch up with us."

– Survey Respondent

Organizing for Action

While residents identified urgent issues, the type of response each requires varies. To help focus resources and manage expectations, UWWECK proposes grouping priorities as follows:

- **Advocacy Priorities:**
  Issues like affordable housing and healthcare access require system and policy changes. While UWWECK will not build housing or deliver healthcare, we can support advocacy, raise awareness, and mobilize community efforts to push for public investment and reform.

- **Strategic Investment Areas:**
  Areas such as youth development, mental health promotion, and food security offer clear opportunities for UWWECK to lead or fund programs and partnerships that drive measurable change.

- **Areas Under Government Responsibility:**
  Issues like regional transportation or large-scale healthcare delivery fall under government responsibility. UWWECK will collaborate where possible but will not lead investments.

This framework ensures transparency around UWWECK's role and focuses energy where we can create meaningful impact.

Barriers to Accessing Help

Of those who accessed community services in the past year, 73% experienced barriers. The most common challenges included:

- Long wait times (59%)
- Not knowing where to go or what's available (48%)
- Cost (40%)

Navigating services—not their availability—was the most consistent challenge across responses.

"I think the vision needs to be long-term, so some of the measures will need to be big, bold goals, with some smaller measures to track progress."

– Survey Respondent

"People wamt to stay here, but they can't afford to"

– Survey Respondent

Perceptions of Equity and Opportunity in Chatham-Kent

Over 60% of respondents felt that not everyone in Chatham-Kent has an equal opportunity to live a good life. This was even higher among respondents aged 18–34, where 73% reported inequity.

Groups most frequently identified as underserved included:

- Low-income households
- People with disabilities
- Rural residents

Chatham was described as having more opportunities compared to smaller towns.

"Chatham residents have higher opportunities than those in the smaller towns and communities."

– Survey Respondent

Strengths to Build On

Despite these challenges, residents also expressed pride in the community's strengths:

- A strong sense of local identity and community pride
- High levels of civic engagement and volunteerism
- Support for local businesses and grassroots initiatives
- Cultural assets, natural beauty, and a collective willingness to help

These strengths offer a foundation for collaboration and long-term investment.

"We need to create wraparound services/ programs that address homelessness. Recognize that homeless people exist and need to live somewhere. Tent cities exist for a reason."

– Survey Respondent

"Even if the support exists, people don't know how to find it."

– Survey Respondent

What Local Data Tells Us

Community voice was clear, and local data backs it up. The challenges identified by residents are echoed across multiple data sources, from Census profiles to health unit reports and community plans. Together, this data paints a vivid picture of where supports are most urgently needed and where long-term investment can make the greatest impact.

Housing Pressures

Safe, stable housing is increasingly out of reach for many.

- The average rent for a 1-bedroom unit has more than doubled since 2019—from $816 to $1,759.[1]
- Over 1,300 households are currently on the housing waitlist.[2]
- Homelessness has risen 171% since 2019.[3]
- The cost of living now outpaces median after-tax household income by over $14,000/year.[4]

These trends align with what residents shared in the consultation survey: housing costs are squeezing families, youth, and seniors out of stability.

Mental Health Needs

Mental health surfaced not just as a distinct concern, but as a factor that touches every part of life—education, housing, employment, and overall well-being.

- Local rates of diagnosed depression (23.2%), anxiety (25.5%), and trauma (8.3%) are all higher than the provincial average.[5]
- Young people 15 to 24 are more likely to experience mental illness or substance use disorders than any other age group.[6]

"Youth mental health waitlists are out of control."

– Survey Respondent

Healthcare Gaps

Health care gaps were most often raised by residents in rural areas and Wallaceburg, pointing to systemic barriers in access.

- 15.2% of Chatham-Kent residents lack access to a regular primary care provider, with Wallaceburg reporting the highest rate at 17.1%.[7]
- Residents reported long travel distances, limited public transit, and doctor shortages.

These barriers are especially difficult for seniors, newcomers, and people living in smaller or rural communities.

Poverty and Income Gaps

Although poverty was often described through its effects, such as housing stress or food costs, data shows that financial strain is widespread.

- 12.1% of residents live in low-income households, including 13% of children and 13% of seniors.[8]
- Wallaceburg has the highest poverty rate at 17%, with nearly one in five children affected.[9]
- Although Chatham-Kent's Gini coefficient[1] (0.273) is lower than the Ontario average (0.308)—suggesting lower income inequality—residents still perceive significant disparities, particularly for single parents, newcomers, and rural households.[10]

"Not everyone has equal opportunity."

– Survey Respondent

"Even two-income families are struggling to put food on the table."

– Survey Respondent

"We can't get care when and where we need it."

– Survey Respondent

Youth, Education, and Early Development

While not always named as a top priority by residents, the data underscores serious challenges that could limit long-term opportunity.

- The 2023 Early Development Instrument (EDI) results show that children in Chatham-Kent are most vulnerable in the areas of physical health and well-being, followed by emotional maturity and social competence.[11]
- Vulnerability rates in East Chatham (40%) and Wallaceburg (43%) are significantly higher than the Ontario average (31.1%), indicating a need for earlier and more targeted support.[12]
- More than 55% of Grade 9 students in local school boards are not meeting the provincial standard for math.[13]

These findings point to a need for upstream investment in early learning and child development, which are foundational areas that shape future success.

Food Insecurity

Rising grocery costs are affecting families across Chatham-Kent.

- 1 in 5 households in Chatham-Kent is food insecure.[14]
- Monthly food costs for a family of four now exceed $1,100, making it harder to afford other basic needs.[15]

Food insecurity cuts across income levels and is linked to other stressors, including transportation, housing, and job security.

[1] The Gini coefficient is a measure of income inequality ranging from 0 (perfect equality) to 1 (perfect inequality); a higher number means a greater gap between the highest- and lowest individuals in a population.

Community Validation Sessions

To strengthen representation and ensure missing or underrepresented voices were captured, UWWECK held 17 validation sessions between April 24 and June 9, 2025, engaging 182 community members. These sessions were designed to confirm, clarify, and build upon the consultation survey findings by creating deeper conversations with community members, particularly those less likely to engage in formal surveys.

Who We Engaged

Participants included long-time residents, newcomers, seniors, youth, and individuals from equity-deserving groups. Demographic information was voluntarily collected to assess representation see *Appendix B*). Of 167 participants who provided this data:

- Representation was noted from all major equity-deserving groups: seniors, low-income households, Indigenous Peoples, newcomers/immigrants, people with disabilities, racialized communities, and 2SLGBTQ+ individuals. 34 individuals indicated they did not belong to any equity-deserving groups.
- Most respondents reported living in Chatham-Kent for over 11 years.
- Household size data showed most common responses were one- or two-person households.
- Age range was diverse, though the 18–24 age group was underrepresented.

Where and How We Engaged

Sessions were hosted across Chatham-Kent in both public venues and with community groups.

Public Locations	Targeted Group Engagements
Active Lifestyle Centre (Chatham)	Adult Language & Learning
Chatham-Kent Public Library branches (Blenheim, Chatham, Ridgetown, Tilbury and Wallaceburg)	Canada Mental Health Association (CMHA) Peer Group
Goodwill Career Centre Information Fair	Children's Treatment Centre
Tilbury HELP Centre	Early Childhood Educator (ECE) Training Course
Wallaceburg Adult Activity Centre	Food Policy Network
Wheatley Village Pantry	ROCK P2P Group

Engagement formats included small focus groups (5–12 participants), one-on-one interviews, and informal drop-in conversations. Sessions were promoted via social media, partner referrals, and community flyers.

What We Asked

Participants were given a summary of the consultation survey findings, demographic insights, and top priorities that emerged. Guided conversations focused on the following questions:

1. Did you find anything surprising in the identified priority areas?
2. Are we missing any critical priority areas?
3. What specific changes or investments do you think would make the biggest difference in that area?
4. What specific actions would help address this gap?
5. What role should United Way play in that process?
6. How can we ensure that the voices of equity-deserving groups are central in our future planning and decision making to create more inclusive opportunities for all community members?"
7. What specific indicators or outcomes would make you feel confident that the investments and changes being made are improving life in Chatham-Kent? How can we track and report those changes?
8. What immediate steps should be taken to begin addressing the community's top priorities, and who should be involved in the first stages of the action planning process?

What We Heard

Participants affirmed the relevance of the nine identified priority areas. Many stressed that mental health must be treated as a foundational lens, connected to everything from housing and food security to youth development and employment.

Top Priority Areas	
Mental Health & Wellness	**115**
Food Security	**84**
Homeless Prevention	**81**
Support for Youth	**80**
Education & Literacy	**47**
Addictions Services	**36**
Support for Seniors	**30**
Training Opportunities	**28**
Social Connection	**25**

"Coordinating services in the community would be super helpful. For example, there are many different organizations that provide food and outreach to people living with homelessness. Some days we see 4 or 5 organizations attend the same area, and all of them are providing food. Other days, no one comes out, and there are no food options."

– Consultation Participant

Key Themes

Several key themes stood out:

1 Transportation and Access

Transportation was one of the most frequently mentioned barriers, particularly for residents in rural and remote parts of Chatham-Kent. Participants spoke to the high cost of gas, long travel distances to services, and limited or non-existent public transit options. Many noted that without access to a personal vehicle, attending appointments, accessing supports, or maintaining employment becomes extremely difficult. For those relying on taxis or buses, the cost and scheduling often made it impractical or impossible. These transportation challenges were compounded by difficulties accessing medical support and finding stable, well-paying jobs, especially in outlying areas.

2 Service Navigation and Information

Participants expressed frustration with how difficult it can be to navigate available services. Many described a lack of clear, up-to-date information about what supports exist and how to access them. There are community resources available that provide information about local services (e.g., 211). Challenges arise when the information provided is out of date or incorrect. Ensuring the information is accurate would be a good first step. Others noted that it often falls on individuals to do their own research and make multiple calls just to get basic help, a barrier that is especially challenging for those in crisis or unfamiliar with the system.

3 Coordination, Not Duplication

There was strong consensus that Chatham-Kent doesn't necessarily need more services—it needs better coordination among the services that already exist. Residents gave detailed examples, especially around food security. One concern was that several organizations provide food or outreach to people experiencing homelessness, but efforts are uncoordinated. For example, some days, multiple organizations show up at the same location to provide meals or support, while on other days, no one comes at all. This leads to duplication in some instances and complete service gaps in others. Participants emphasized that this lack of coordination results in wasted effort and confusion for both service providers and residents. They felt that greater alignment, such as a shared calendar, centralized planning, or case coordination, would allow existing programs to be more efficient, consistent, and impactful.

4 Equity in Engagement

There was strong and repeated emphasis on the need to centre equity-deserving groups in all future planning. Participants made it clear that the burden of engagement should not fall on the community, but on institutions.

- They stressed the importance of meeting people where they are—whether that's in trusted community spaces, through partner organizations, or in everyday environments.
- Social media was highlighted as a key tool to engage younger residents and keep broader audiences informed.

Several residents noted that true inclusion requires intentional effort: outreach must be proactive, respectful, and ongoing, not a one-time consultation.

Desired Outcomes

Participants identified several indicators that would demonstrate meaningful progress:

- Decreased poverty rates
- Fewer children growing up in poverty
- Higher educational attainment
- Reduced food insecurity
- Increased sense of community connectedness

A Call for Systemic & Upstream Solutions

Across sessions, participants advocated for upstream, preventative investments over reactive measures. Many described a vision for a connected system of support, particularly for children and youth, that would walk alongside residents from early childhood through adulthood. This includes:

- Early learning and school readiness
- In-class supports and family assistance
- Access to physical and mental health care
- Career exploration and post-secondary guidance
- Life skills, job training, and mentorship opportunities

Participants stressed that waiting until someone is in crisis is both costly and avoidable. Instead, they called for upstream approaches that meet people's needs early and consistently, helping them thrive, not just survive.

Many also spoke to the importance of holistic support systems, where vulnerable individuals are identified early and provided with the wraparound resources needed to succeed. This includes ensuring basic needs are met, such as access to food, safe housing, education, employment opportunities, and supportive environments.

This feedback signals a strong desire for equity-driven, long-term strategies that address root causes, promote shared responsibility, and align services in a more intentional and coordinated way. It also reinforces the value of building from local strengths, such as strong community pride, long-standing partnerships, and a genuine willingness to work together for change.

Our Investment Approach

UWWECK is adopting a new investment approach rooted in equity, community voice, and long-term impact.

We are proposing a shift toward a focused, generational strategy that tackles root causes and enables systemic change. This work is shaped by what we heard from the community and grounded in what the data tells us is needed most.

A Shift Toward Collective Action

Throughout the consultation process, residents consistently voiced a need for upstream, preventative solutions to long-standing issues—such as homelessness, food insecurity, youth mental health, and poverty. They called for services that are better coordinated, easier to access, and not offered in isolation.

This call for change reflects a broader national shift: across Canada, communities are recognizing that improving the social determinants of health requires systems-level thinking, stronger partnerships, and collective action.

In response, UWWECK is exploring a shift toward a collective impact approach, one that brings together residents, service providers, funders, and systems leaders to work toward shared goals. This model emphasizes collaboration, community leadership, shared measurement, and continuous improvement. It aligns with UWWECK's long-standing belief that lasting change is only possible when we work together across sectors and alongside the people most affected.

Our investment approach is guided by five core principles:

1. **Equity-focused:** Prioritizing populations and neighbourhoods facing systemic barriers.
2. **Community-driven:** Informed by resident voice and grounded in local data.
3. **Upstream and long-term:** Focusing on prevention and sustainable solutions.
4. **Place-based:** Responding to the distinct needs and strengths of specific communities.
5. **Collaborative:** Building strong partnerships across sectors and systems.

Cradle to Career as a Possible Path

One model that embodies this collective impact mindset is the Cradle to Career (C2C) strategy, a long-term, place-based approach focused on improving outcomes from early childhood through to adulthood. C2C is not a single program. It's a way of organizing resources and efforts across systems to ensure all children, youth, and families have the support they need to thrive.

C2C has shown measurable success in multiple communities:

- **Harlem Children's Zone (New York City):** This neighbourhood-based initiative provides intensive, wraparound supports—including early education, health care, academic tutoring, college access, and family support. Long-term investment in this model has led to transformative results. Since 2011, over 1,800 students have graduated from college.[16]

- **Strive Together (U.S. national network):** More than 70 communities have adopted a C2C approach through this network, tracking progress on key indicators like third-grade reading, high school graduation, and post-secondary success. In Promise Partnership Utah, 6 out of 8 targeted outcomes have improved since the COVID baseline (2020-2021), thanks to initiatives like universal pre-K, after-school programs, and community school models.[17]

- **ProsperUs (Windsor-Essex):** Right here in Ontario, UWWECK leads ProsperUs, a collective impact initiative grounded in the C2C framework. Programs like Ignite Academy and On Track to Success focus on early learning, academic achievement, and transitions to post-secondary education. Results include a 93% on-time graduation rate among On Track to Success students, 7.5% higher than the provincial average.[18]

These examples show that a C2C strategy is both achievable and impactful when communities align efforts, share goals, and invest for the long haul.

In Chatham-Kent, early conversations with local educators, service providers, and community leaders reflect growing interest in this approach. Stakeholders identified opportunities to better connect existing supports, reduce duplications, and build toward a more seamless, coordinated system of support for children, youth, and their families. Groups like the Chatham-Kent Child and Youth Planning Network, Chatham-Kent Police Service, Restorative Justice Chatham-Kent, and the Ontario Early Years Network have all expressed enthusiasm for exploring how a C2C model could be adapted and implemented locally.

Together, these insights point to a clear opportunity: to organize Chatham-Kent's strong, but often siloed efforts into a cohesive, community-led strategy focused on long-term success for every child and youth.

What It Could Mean for Chatham-Kent

Adopting a C2C lens locally would mean building a continuous network of support that addresses every stage of life, starting with early childhood, moving through youth development and family well-being, and extending into employment and adult success.

This approach would focus not only on meeting urgent needs but also on creating long-term opportunities. It would prioritize equity by directing resources to communities where data shows the greatest needs, including clear service gaps and barriers to success.

Why This Strategy

We heard again and again that residents don't want short-term fixes. They want meaningful, equity-focused change that tackles the root causes of poverty, exclusion, and poor health. The C2C model offers a pathway to:

- Address adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) through early, integrated supports.
- Build intergenerational equity by investing in prevention, not just crisis response.
- Coordinate services across systems and life stages for greater impact.
- Mobilize entire communities to lead, measure, and adapt together.

As one resident put it, ***"We're losing an entire generation."***

By proposing a C2C strategy as a possible path forward, UWWECK is not prescribing a program, but inviting community partners to join in designing a long-term vision. One that centres on children and youth, builds on local strengths, and ensures that everyone in Chatham-Kent has the chance to succeed.

Why We're Focusing: Not Spreading Thin

UWWECK is making a strategic decision to focus efforts where we can achieve the greatest long-term impact.

Rather than trying to respond to every issue at once, we are starting where barriers are most persistent and opportunities for systems change are strongest. This focus allows us to invest more deeply, measure progress more meaningfully, and build lasting solutions.

We are committed to working in alignment with other community partners. Many are already doing important work to meet urgent needs. Our role is not to duplicate these efforts but to complement them by filling gaps, strengthening connections, and supporting a more coordinated system of support.

We also recognize that focusing now does not mean excluding other priorities in the future. Some areas may not be addressed in this first phase, but we will revisit them as part of ongoing evaluation and future planning. Our approach is designed to be responsive and adaptive as new data, insights, and community priorities emerge.

We heard clearly that residents want action, not band-aid solutions. They want change that lasts, and investment that moves the needle. C2C is one possible framework that could help guide this transformation by linking early investments to long-term results and tying services together, so no one falls through the cracks.

As part of this work, we would combine community local data with community input to identify where the greatest needs exist. This approach recognizes that different neighbourhoods face different challenges and that solutions should be shaped by the unique context of each community. To support this, we plan to develop a Neighbourhood Opportunity Index[2] for Chatham-Kent, modelled after the one used in Windsor-Essex. That index used 20 indicators across income, education, housing, and health to identify the most under-resourced neighbourhoods and guide equity-focused investment.

[2] The Windsor-Essex Youth Neighbourhood Opportunity Index (NOI) was developed to identify priority neighbourhoods using 20 indicators across domains such as income, education, housing, and health. The NOI supports place-based investment by highlighting areas with the highest levels of need. To learn more: 2024 NOI Report.

What This Means For You

UWWECK's investment approach is a shared commitment to building a stronger, more equitable Chatham-Kent.

Here's what it means for the people and partners who make this work possible:

For Community Members

This plan is built from your voice. You told us what matters, what's missing, and where help is needed most. This means:

- Programs will be shaped with your input and focused on removing barriers, not just managing symptoms.
- You'll continue to have opportunities to shape solutions through feedback, storytelling, and leadership roles.

For Partners & Agencies

This shift opens the door to more intentional collaboration:

- Future funding opportunities will focus on a small number of shared priorities.
- We will support organizations that align with those goals and are ready to work collectively toward systems change.

For Donors

Your giving will go further and deeper:

- Every dollar will be directed to areas of greatest need, backed by both resident voice and solid data.
- You'll be helping fund long-term solutions, not just temporary fixes.
- You'll receive regular updates about where your investment is going, the impact it's having, and the lives it's changing.

What's Next

This report marks an important milestone, but it's only the beginning. Moving from consultation to action will take care, commitment, and collaboration. UWWECK is proud to move this work forward, but we know that real change requires shared responsibility, shared investment, and shared accountability.

To bring this strategy to life, significant financial resources will be required. The scope and scale of our work will ultimately depend on the strength and support from donors, funders, partners, and all those who believe in a more equitable Chatham-Kent. While we are ready to begin this immediately, our ability to move forward will be shaped by the resources we're able to mobilize together.

Our Path Forward

- **Timeline for Implementation:** Implementation will begin in phases over the coming months. Initial work will focus on confirming our investment strategy, engaging aligned partners, and co-designing early initiatives. Our readiness to act is high, but our ability to invest will be determined by the level of community support. A detailed timeline will be shared in future updates.
- **Continued Community Engagement:** Future efforts will focus on co-designing strategies, strengthening partnerships, and ensuring lived experience continues to inform and drive implementation.
- **Measuring What Matters:** We will use a shared measurement strategy that blends community voice and data. With partners and residents, we will co-develop outcomes, track equity-focused results, and report progress transparently.
- **Adapting and Evolving:** Our approach will be flexible and grounded in continuous improvement. We will learn from what works, make adjustments as needed, and stay accountable to community outcomes.
- **Shared Responsibility and Reconciliation:** United Way cannot do this alone. Lasting change will require residents, funders, organizations, businesses, and governments working together with urgency and purpose. We recognize the leadership, knowledge, and rights of Indigenous peoples whose traditional territories we live and work on. As part of our ongoing journey toward truth and reconciliation, we are committed to building respectful relationships, collaborating meaningfully with Indigenous partners, and ensuring their voices help guide the path forward.

Based on what we heard, C2C is one possible framework that could guide our next phase of work. It aligns with community priorities, focuses on long-term outcomes, and supports a neighbourhood-based, equity-driven approach. While no final decision has been made, we will continue exploring the C2C approach in partnership with residents and stakeholders to determine whether it is the right path for Chatham-Kent.

We enter this next chapter with clarity of purpose and deep respect for the voices that brought us here. Guided by the mission of United Way Centraide Canada – to empower everyone to improve lives and build strong communities – we are committed to turning this strategy into action. With shared courage, trust, and collaboration, we believe Chatham-Kent can continue to grow as a community where all residents are supported, valued, and have the opportunity to thrive.

Once our investment strategy is confirmed, we will co-develop a clear vision that reflects the long-term change we aim to achieve together.

[3] Chatham-Kent Traditional Territory Acknowledgment

Appendix A: Community Consultation Survey

Survey Purpose and Goals

Between January 15 and March 31, 2025, UWWECK conducted a community consultation survey to inform a new investment strategy grounded in local needs, lived experience, and equity. The survey aimed to:

- Understand residents' top priorities for investment and improvement.
- Identify barriers to accessing services.
- Gather perspectives on equity and opportunity across Chatham-Kent.
- Capture ideas for long-term change.
- Build a foundation of community voice to guide decision-making.

Survey Sample and Methodology

- Target Sample Size: 400 residents
- Completed Surveys: 391 (98% of goal)
- Confidence Level: 95% confidence with a ±5% margin of error
- Survey Format: Online with printed copies available at events and community hubs
- Geographic Reach: Responses mapped by postal code and analyzed across six areas:
  - Chatham
  - East Kent
  - North Kent
  - South Kent
  - Wallaceburg
  - West Kent
- Promotion Channels:
  - UWWECK email and newsletters
  - Partner organizations and agencies
  - Local libraries and community centres
  - Social media and municipal channels

Demographics

Connection to Chatham-Kent:

- 93% of respondents live in Chatham-Kent.
- 55% also work in the region.
- 77% have lived in Chatham-Kent for over 11 years, indicating long-term residency and strong local ties.
- Smaller proportions study (5%) or visit regularly (3%).

Household and Age Profile:

- Average household size was approximately 2.9 people.
- ~1,136 individuals were represented through survey households, including 276 children (24%) under age 18.
- Respondents skewed older:
  - 42% aged 45–64
  - 20% aged 35–44
  - 6% seniors aged 75+
  - Only 4% aged 18–24

Income Distribution::

- 37% of respondents reported household incomes over $100,000 before tax.
- 22% reported incomes under $60,000, suggesting potential financial vulnerability for about 1 in 5 households (based on the 2020 low-income measure, before tax [LIM-BT] threshold for a family of four).

Equity-Deserving Group Identification:

- 22.1% identified as seniors.
- 17.6% identified as people with disabilities.
- 10.3% identified as low-income households.
- 44% did not identify with any of the listed equity-deserving groups.

Questions

1. What best describes your connection to Chatham-Kent? (Select all that apply)
2. What is your postal code? (e.g., N0L 1H0)
3. What community do you live in?
4. How long have you lived in Chatham-Kent?
5. Which age group do you belong to?
6. Including yourself, how many persons live in your household?
7. How many persons in your household are under the age of 18?
8. What is your before-tax household income? (Include income from all household members)
9. Do you identify as belonging to any of the following equity-deserving groups? (Select all that apply)
10. What are the top three areas in Chatham-Kent where more resources or attention are needed?
11. In the past 12 months, have you accessed any community supports or services in Chatham-Kent?
12. Which community services have you accessed in the past 12 months? (Select all that apply)
13. What challenges did you or others face in accessing these services? (Select all that apply)
14. If United Way could focus on areas for investment to create the most impact, which would you prioritize? (Rank your top 3)
15. Do you feel that everyone in Chatham-Kent has the same opportunities to live a good life?
16. Which groups in the community do you think are most underserved? (Select all that apply)
17. What strengths in Chatham-Kent could be built upon? (e.g., strong community spirit, active volunteer groups, accessible green spaces)
18. What opportunities or unmet needs could improve quality of life in Chatham-Kent? (e.g., more affordable housing, expanded mental health services)
19. How should United Way measure success in Chatham-Kent? (Select all that apply)
20. Are there any other ways United Way should measure success in Chatham-Kent?
21. What's the best way to keep you updated about United Way's work? (Select all that apply)
22. If you would like to enter the draw for a $75 gas card, please provide your contact information below.
23. Can we use this email for future communications about our work?

Appendix B: Community Validation Sessions

Purpose and Goals

To strengthen representation and ensure equity-deserving voices were heard, UWWECK conducted 17 community validation sessions between April 24 and May 30, 2025. These sessions aimed to:

- Confirm the relevance of community-identified priorities
- Capture perspectives from individuals not reached in the initial survey
- Explore what changes would make the biggest impact
- Gather ideas for inclusive planning and measurable outcomes

Methodology

- Total Sessions: 17
- Total Participants: 182
- Format:
  - Small focus groups (5–12 participants)
  - One-on-one interviews
  - Drop-in conversations at public sites
- Discussion Guide: All sessions followed a shared script of questions (see below)
- Promotion:
  - Social media
  - Partner outreach and referrals
  - Flyers at local agencies and public sites

Participant Demographics

- Residency: Most participants had lived in Chatham-Kent for over 11 years
- Geographic Reach: All six regions of Chatham-Kent represented, including urban and rural areas
- Household Size: Most common were 1–2 person households
- Age Range: All adult age ranges represented (underrepresentation noted in 18–24 group)
- Equity-Seeking Groups Represented:
  - 2SLGBTQ+ individuals
  - Indigenous Peoples
  - Low-income households
  - Newcomers and immigrants
  - People with disabilities
  - Racialized individuals
  - Seniors

Engagement Locations

Public Locations	Targeted Group Engagements
Active Lifestyle Centre (Chatham)	Adult Language & Learning
Chatham-Kent Public Library branches (Blenheim, Chatham, Ridgetown, Tilbury and Wallaceburg)	Canada Mental Health Association (CMHA) Peer Group
Goodwill Career Centre Information Fair	Children's Treatment Centre
Tilbury HELP Centre	Early Childhood Educator (ECE) Training Course
Wallaceburg Adult Activity Centre	Food Policy Network
Wheatley Village Pantry	ROCK P2P Group

Discussion Questions

Participants were introduced to the survey findings and asked to reflect on:

1. Did you find anything surprising in the identified priority areas?
2. Are we missing any critical priority areas?
3. What specific changes or investments do you think would make the biggest difference in that area?
4. What specific actions would help address this gap?
5. What role should United Way play in that process?
6. How can we ensure that the voices of equity-deserving groups are central in our future planning and decision making to create more inclusive opportunities for all community members?"
7. What specific indicators or outcomes would make you feel confident that the investments and changes being made are improving life in Chatham-Kent? How can we track and report those changes?
8. What immediate steps should be taken to begin addressing the community's top priorities, and who should be involved in the first stages of the action planning process?

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United Way Centraide
Windsor-Essex
Chatham-Kent

Phone: 519-258-0000

Email: info@weareunited.com

Web: weareunited.com

CHATHAM OFFICE

425 McNaughton Avenue West
Chatham, Ontario N7L 4K4

WINDSOR OFFICE

#510-4510 Rhodes Drive
Windsor, Ontario N8W 5K5