

Go Ask ALICE

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You don't need to take Catholic Charities' word for it. Go ask ALICE.

"ALICE," an acronym developed by the United Way for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed, describes a significant portion of the population in the United States who are working one or more jobs, but consistently falling short on their basic monthly household expenses, such as child care, food, health care, housing, and transportation.

The United Way's ALICE Project began in Morris County, New Jersey in 2009 as a grassroots movement to quantify the number of households that live above the official poverty threshold, but are still struggling or failing to make ends meet. The impact and importance of the Morris County ALICE Project led to subsequent United Way studies in several states, including Ohio.

In October 2017, the Ohio United Way released its own ALICE Report, confirming what Catholic Charities and many other human service nonprofits have been realizing for years: the number of households experiencing serious financial hardship far exceeds the number of households technically living below the poverty line. Using data from the last U. S. Census in 2015, the Report confirms that 40% of Ohio's households have difficulty affording life's basic necessities.

The Ohio United Way's ALICE Project has been able to quantify and validate the existence of "the working poor," a group with whom Catholic Charities has become more familiar over the past decade or so. In fact, a significant portion of Catholic Charities' current caseload includes families where one or both of the adults in the household are working.

So if people are working, why are they so close to poverty's edge?

One reason is the prevalence of low-wage jobs. About 75% of Ohio's jobs pay between \$10 and \$15 per hour. Over the course of a year, a full-time \$15 per hour job translates into \$30,000 per year, which, given the cost of living, falls about \$30,000 short of what a household of four (two adults, a preschooler and an infant) needs to cover basic living expenses.

An unexpected car repair, an out-of-pocket medical expense, or absence from work due to a child's illness can topple the house of cards that is the financial situation for many ALICE families.

When the Catholic Charities agency directors sat down to talk about Ohio's ALICE Report, no one was surprised about the published findings. For several years, our agencies have been seeing more and more people who are working, but just can't seem to get ahead. The ALICE Report quantified those working poor families who tend to fall through the cracks or go uncounted since they officially live above poverty's threshold.

The U. S. Census Bureau's *2011-2015 American Community Survey* finds that 15.8% of Ohioans live in poverty. The average poverty rate for the six counties of the Diocese of Youngstown is higher than the state average at 16.9%. Ashtabula County, at 20.1%, is one of 12 Ohio counties with dangerously high poverty rates. When ALICE figures get placed on top of those poverty rates, the percentages double.

Despite the challenges poverty presents locally, Catholic Charities will be there to provide help, create hope, and work with others to develop strategies that provide a "hand up" to those bearing poverty's burden.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops has declared January "Poverty Awareness Month." Here are some ways that you can help Catholic Charities provide help and create hope for those in need:

- Pray that we all respond compassionately to those we encounter who need our assistance
- Learn about issues that impact the human family
- Advocate for just laws and policies that impact the most valuable in our society
- Oppose cuts in spending that impact Catholic Charities and other social service organizations, as well as the people served
- Support "Keep the Kids Warm," an annual fundraising campaign that provides utility assistance for poor and working poor families with children
- Support the Annual Bishop's Appeal, which provides critical funding for the work of Catholic Charities throughout the Diocese of Youngstown

For more information about Catholic Charities and its programs, visit its website at www.ccdoy.org.