

From Poverty to Prosperity: Breaking the Cycle of Generational Poverty

By Jane Shurtleff

Every generation wants a better life for the next. But what if our economic, legislative and social systems are barring access to the education, healthcare, housing and jobs necessary for future generations to prosper? This lack of economic mobility is a root cause of systemic generational poverty in Pima County, according to its *Prosperity Initiative* report.ⁱ By implementing Prosperity Initiative policies, the government, nonprofit and business organizations featured in this article are working together to break the cycle of generational poverty in Pima County communities. Businesses, in particular, play a unique role in deploying new economic mobility and workforce development systems to raise those in poverty toward prosperity.

Pima County's Prosperity Initiative: Reducing Generational Poverty

The Prosperity Initiative is a regional partnership to reduce generational poverty in Pima County and the City of Tucson. It is a proactive plan to remove systemic causes of poverty and unfair barriers for families living in high-poverty, low-opportunity communities. Pima County's poverty rate is 13.8%, with 17.8% of its children under the age of 18 living below the poverty line in 2024.ⁱⁱ In addition, according to Jim Kiser's report *Going Backwards*, data shows that Tucsonans born in 1992 earned between \$1,700 and \$2,000 less annually at age 27 than those born in 1978, after adjusting for inflation.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Prosperity Initiative report documents evidence-based, real-life practices applicable at the city, town and county levels. These practices were adopted by Pima County and the City of Tucson as a series of 13 policies and three cross-policy strategies to guide future county and city decisions on housing, health, education and workforce development.



The Prosperity Initiative policies focus on increasing household income of parents and children, reducing household expenses and increasing household assets for low-income families to break the cycle of poverty. Unfortunately, paths to prosperity are not equally available to the communities with the highest per capita poverty levels in the county – specifically, people of color, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Tucson’s American Indian and Alaska Native population experienced the largest poverty rate at 27%, nearly six percentage points above the national rate. And Tucson’s Hispanic population experienced a 17.8% poverty rate, one percentage point higher than the national rate.^{iv}



“Poverty is a system driven by discrimination, and as with many communities in the Southwest, we have more families of color, particularly Latino and Native American. That diversity is a part of our rich heritage and strength as a community. If we can create equivalencies and remove the barriers to homeownership, healthcare, education and income, we would have a much more prosperous community.”

– Bonnie Bazata, senior aide to the Pima County Board of Supervisors

Bazata believes the systems that have perpetuated poverty in our community can be changed at regional and local levels. For example, Pima County is supporting local food banks to address reductions in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program that are impacting an estimated 30,000 children. Its investment of more than \$10 million in Preschool Early Education Program Scholarships provides full-day preschool scholarships to increase kindergarten readiness and lower childcare costs, giving parents a greater opportunity to work and advance their careers. County funding for affordable housing projects is providing homes for low-income individuals and families, while other funds focus on eviction prevention to avoid homelessness. And the Pima County Board of Supervisors recently approved \$3,936,620 in funding for the Community & Workforce Development Outside Agency Program to help nonprofit organizations provide vital economic development, health and social services to low-income, rural and economically underserved communities.



“Economically, broader access to high-speed internet is fundamental to enabling opportunities and growing prosperity.”

– Michelle Simon, director, Pima County Office of Digital Inclusion

Expanding broadband services to underserved communities is vital to improving residents’ quality of life. Financed by Pima County Public Library, 120 hot spots were placed around the county to deliver free internet to hundreds of thousands of people. The county is also implementing its first “middle mile” infrastructure, a 134-mile fiber optic ring encompassing Pima County’s urban core, bringing high-speed broadband to unserved and underserved areas, including rural and tribal communities. Greater broadband access enables remote work and business development opportunities and provides online skills training and certification courses to job seekers.



“According to the Prosperity Initiative policies, organizations and businesses with employees have a direct role in helping to support low-income families’ economic well-being.”

– Helen Schaffer, implementation lead for Pima County’s Prosperity Initiative

As one of the largest employers in Southern Arizona, Pima County sees its employees as the best source of information about their working environment and how it can improve their lives. The County is putting Prosperity Initiative policies into action for its employees via a low-cost personal loan program through Kashable, helping them to consolidate debt and improve their credit rating. Other county initiatives include pay increases, lower health insurance costs, childcare, and student loan and tuition reimbursement programs. Learn more at pima.gov/3137/The-Prosperity-Initiative.

The City of Tucson: A Plan for Transformation



“Our goal is to expand economic and community mobility for all our citizens. We’re creating clearer pathways from education to employment, incentivizing equitable economic development, coordinating workforce and support services, and enabling small and local businesses as engines of mobility.”

– Elizabeth Morales, assistant city manager, City of Tucson

The City of Tucson is well into implementing economic mobility and workforce development initiatives under its Prosperity Initiative Action Plan.⁹ The City’s Small Business Navigator Program supports small-business owners and entrepreneurs, underserved minority groups, and Spanish-speaking business owners. Services include technical assistance, one-on-one counseling, workshops and training for business planning and expansion, and multilingual business assistance in English and Spanish. In Tucson’s poorer communities, transformation projects such as *Thrive in the O5* and the *29th Street Thrive Zone* provide opportunities for residents to thrive through education, services and jobs. Learn more at prosperity.tucsonaz.gov.

CC4P: A Mission to Grow Prosperity



“One of the core challenges in the current social services system is that families experiencing poverty must navigate complex systems that were never designed to work together. By aligning organizations, policies, and investments around a common framework, CC4P helps move the community from isolated interventions to coordinated, systemic solutions that support long-term economic mobility.”

– Jennie Grabel, project director, CC4P

Launched in January 2025, the Community Coalition for Prosperity (CC4P) is a nonprofit community organization dedicated to growing prosperity in alignment with the Prosperity Initiative. CC4P facilitates community engagement and advocacy with a coalition of diverse stakeholders to promote systemic change to reduce generational poverty and increase economic mobility. CC4P members include representatives from

philanthropy, nonprofits, higher education, business, content experts and people with lived experience in poverty.

CC4P facilitates alignment with the Prosperity Initiative for nonprofit agencies via a self-assessment and the CC4P GROW Alignment Cohort. This cohort enables organizations to identify how their work connects to the Prosperity Initiative and how to deepen their impact via coordinated systems-level action. CC4P working groups on Housing, Health, Education and Workforce are launching high-leverage Strategic Action Projects, such as a person-centered community-wide housing and homelessness strategy. And with support from Parent Villages, CC4P is building a structured advocacy pipeline that recruits and trains advocates with lived experience in poverty. Learn more at cc4ptucson.org.

TEP: Making Energy Affordable



“Our agency partners are an essential extension of our work and provide invaluable insight into the challenges customers face every day. We work hand-in-hand with trusted community organizations, helping us better understand our customers’ needs, connect them with resources, and identify opportunities to improve affordability and energy resilience.”

– Lisa Horuczi Markus, manager of customer experience and advocacy, TEP

Tucson Electric Power (TEP) is working alongside community partners to advance Prosperity Initiative goals and improve outcomes for some of Southern Arizona’s most vulnerable residents. Through strong partnerships with organizations such as United Way, Pima Council on Aging, The Salvation Army and Interfaith Community Services (ICS), TEP and its agency partners are connecting customers with the resources, support, and assistance they need to maintain safe and reliable electric service. Together, these organizations help identify community needs, reach customers where they are, and create pathways to both short-term assistance and long-term energy affordability.

TEP is also the first corporate donor to support the Prosperity Initiative, committing \$100,000 in philanthropic funding. TEP’s donation – which comes from corporate resources and will not impact customer rates – will help the coalition bring together local leadership across nongovernmental sectors to intentionally align with the evidence-based interventions outlined in the Prosperity Initiative.

Together, TEP and its community partners provide customers with energy education, do-it-yourself (DIY) weatherization kits, and access to financial assistance programs such as Power AZ. TEP is working closely with The Salvation Army through its “Double Your Impact” initiative, matching customer donations to TEP’s HEERO emergency utility assistance program up to \$50,000 through October 2026 to help neighbors experiencing difficulty paying their utility bills. Through these collective efforts, TEP and its partners are strengthening the network of support available to customers across Southern Arizona. Learn more at tep.com.

Moving Toward Prosperity

The Prosperity Initiative lays out policies for systems change that can break the vicious cycle of generational poverty in our communities. Businesses, working together with regional and local governments and nonprofit and civic organizations, can play a vital role in advancing Prosperity Initiative policies for economic mobility and workforce development. By actively participating in Prosperity Initiative forums and working groups, together we can help lift more people out of poverty and move them toward prosperity.

References:

ⁱ [“The Prosperity Initiative,” Pima County, AZ, 2023.](#)

ⁱⁱ [“Poverty Rates in Tucson, AZ,” MAP AZ Dashboard, University of Arizona, 2024](#), [“Persons in Poverty in Pima County, AZ,” United States Census Bureau, 2024](#) and [“Estimated Percent of People Age 0-17 in Poverty for Pima County, AZ,” FRED, United States Census Bureau, 2024.](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [“Going Backwards: In Tucson, economic mobility is declining,” Jim Kiser, July 2026.](#)

^{iv} [“Poverty Rate By Race and Ethnicity, U.S. Census Bureau, MAP AZ Dashboard, 2024.](#)

^v [“City of Tucson Prosperity Initiative: Action Plan,” City of Tucson, 2026.](#)

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