

We Didn't Just Build a Plan. We Built a Movement.

By Dale Douthat, United Way of the Lowcountry

Two years ago, we made a decision at United Way of the Lowcountry to move forward with an idea when we knew we didn't have all the answers. We knew the data. We knew that nearly 4 in 10 households in Beaufort County and nearly half in Jasper County were struggling to make ends meet — working, but not earning enough to get ahead. In the United Way world, we use the acronym ALIC (asset limited, income constrained, employed). We knew this large percentage of individuals and families in our communities were making impossible choices every day between rent, childcare, healthcare, and food.

What we didn't know is what exactly we could do about it, but one thing was for certain, if we wanted to make a real impact we couldn't do it alone.. So instead of launching another program, we did something much harder. We called on our community to come together and build something bigger than any one of us.

This Is What Movement Building Actually Looks Like

In the summer of 2024, a small group of funders took a leap of faith and provided the initial investment to convene a coalition. With the help of the 1000 Feathers consulting firm, what started as a series of facilitated conversations grew into genuine alignment. Over the spring and summer of 2025, representatives from more than 20 organizations — spanning education, healthcare, housing, government, faith communities, and economic development — gave their time, expertise, and conviction to a shared process.

That's not a small thing. Getting that many organizations and community leaders to agree on anything is hard. Getting them to agree on a shared vision, a shared set of philosophies, and two priority areas? That takes trust...and a willingness to set aside institutional ego and ask: *What does our community actually need?*

What emerged from that process is a Lowcountry Movement On Self-Sufficiency— a bold, community-wide effort to rebuild the systems and conditions that make self-sufficiency possible for every family in Beaufort and Jasper counties.

Why This Moment Matters

We are not one new program or one more grant away from solving self-sufficiency. The Lowcountry has generous, hardworking people and organizations doing important work. Too often, that work has happened in silos — well-intentioned and underpowered because it wasn't connected to something bigger.

What we have now is different. We have a movement with a shared vision: *a strong and connected community where everyone in Beaufort and Jasper counties has what they need to be self-sufficient and thriving.* We have shared philosophies that root our work in systems change, not individual blame. And we have two focused priority areas — **housing** and **cradle to career** — where our collective energy and investment can make real, measurable impact.

Most importantly, we have structure. A Backbone Organization (that's us at United Way), a Steering Committee with 22 members from 20 organizations, a Core Team providing leadership and alignment, and — as of now — **three taskforces (one for housing and two for cradle to career)**

ready to plan, implement, and monitor the real work ahead, using the agreed upon priority areas as their guide.

Priority Area #1: **Launch a large-scale, collective communications effort in the Lowcountry** targeting local government, top employers, and private investors to increase public-private partnerships and remove regulatory barriers to housing.

Priority Area #2: **Reimagine the Lowcountry's early childhood education system**—through cross-sector partnership and innovation—to expand the supply of high-quality childcare, reduce childcare cost barriers for families, and create clear, well-compensated career pathways for early childhood educators.

Priority Area #3: **Create pathways** to earn credentials, build technical expertise, and develop skills needed for the jobs of today and tomorrow in the Lowcountry.

The Work Is Just Beginning — And That Is the Point

Launching taskforces isn't the finish line but it does represent a really important moment in time: from ideas to action. For two years, we've been building the foundation: understanding the problem deeply, earning each other's trust, aligning on where to focus, and designing a structure that can amplify movement. That work was essential. It was unglamorous. And it was worth every bit of energy we poured into it.

Now comes the part that is often more visible and feels more like we are getting to work, but make no mistake, we've been working for a long time.

A Call to Our Partners and Funders

If you are a partner organization in this movement: thank you. The two years of relationship-building, hard conversations, and collaborative design that brought us here were not possible without your commitment. The taskforces need your continued engagement. This is the moment to lean in.

If you are a funder watching this work unfold: we are building something that deserves sustained investment. The structure we have built is designed to last, to adapt, and to create the kind of systemic change that makes other investments more effective. Self-sufficiency is not one organization's work. So this movement doesn't belong to the United Way. It's the community's work and communities that get this shared ownership and responsibility right often become models for what's possible everywhere.

If you are an organization that hasn't yet engaged: there is still room at the table, and we want you there.

This movement will take all of us. But for the first time in a long time, I believe all of us are ready and all of us are rowing in the same direction.

Dale Douthat is the President & CEO of United Way of the Lowcountry. To get involved with the Lowcountry Movement on Self-Sufficiency, visit uwlowcountry.org/Alice or call 843.982.3040.