In June, 2010, United Way of Central Carolinas (UWCC) commissioned the UNC Charlotte Urban Institute (the Institute) to conduct a comprehensive community needs assessment for its five-county service area. The primary purpose of the study was to pinpoint the community's greatest needs and identify gaps in the current array of human services. This study is one of several endeavors UWCC is pursuing as part of a broader effort to redefine the organization to better address the critical needs of the community it serves.

Based on an analysis of data and feedback from numerous local service organizations and experts from the community, the Institute identified the most significant needs and service gaps in the UWCC region. From these findings, it developed a set of recommendations on actions UWCC could take to tackle these issues. These recommendations identify where UWCC could direct its funding by presenting the types of programs and services that have the greatest potential to spark long-term change and how UWCC could modify its funding practices to more effectively support its partner agencies and the community at-large.

This summary presents a brief description of the research activities, findings of the study and an overview of the recommendations. For a more detailed account of the research, findings, and recommendations, refer to the full report available at www.uwcentralcarolinas.org and http://ui.uncc.edu.
Change for good begins here.
About the Region and the Research

The UWCC Region

United Way of Central Carolinas (UWCC) serves Charlotte, North Carolina and the surrounding area, which stretches across five counties – Anson, Cabarrus, Mecklenburg (Charlotte), Union, and the Mooresville/Lake Norman area in southern Iredell County. Mecklenburg County, home to Charlotte, is the most populous (by far) of the region’s counties, and Anson the most rural and sparsely-populated.

This region is one that is characterized by growth, expanding in population by 35% in the 1990s and again in the 2000s, to a 2010 population of nearly 1.5 million people. The population is diverse – 59% white, 24% black, 11% Hispanic, and 4% Asian – and the Hispanic population has more than doubled in just ten years. On the whole, the population is well-educated, with nearly 35% having a college degree or higher, but the recession hurt the region severely, leaving over 13% of the population in poverty.

The Community Needs Assessment

The purpose of this study was to assess the most critical needs of the United Way of Central Carolinas (UWCC) region and to identify the most significant and effective channels to address these needs. To accomplish this, the Institute’s research team used a multi-faceted approach that focused on UWCC’s three current funding areas – Children and Youth; Crisis, Housing and Stability; Health and Mental Health – and encompassed the five counties the organization serves – Anson, Cabarrus, Iredell, Mecklenburg and Union. The components of the study included a review of previous community assessments, secondary data analysis, a survey of local human service agencies, and a series of four expert panels – one for each of the funding areas and a general panel.

The most significant needs identified in the region can be grouped into three broad categories, which are slight variations on the UWCC funding areas – Education, Housing and Poverty, Health and Mental Health. Across these areas, two intertwining themes pervade: the need for preventive services and public awareness. Accordingly, this report makes several key recommendations for UWCC to strengthen its impact in the community. These include suggestions to fund programs that encourage prevention and campaigns that educate the public about the community’s needs and available services; fund a broader range of programs than just direct service providers; and improve the funding process itself so that it is more focused and can make serious progress on specific causes instead of spreading funding thinly across the entire spectrum. This report offers viable recommendations for UWCC to take a lead in initiating change for the good of all those in need in this community.
The recommendations presented in this report are based on several key findings about the primary needs of the UWCC community. These needs are grouped into three categories: education, housing and poverty, and health and mental health. Underlying all of these issues is poverty. Poverty is often talked about as a cycle because the causes and effects of poverty are mutually reinforcing. This is certainly apparent when looking at how needs in each of the three areas of study influence those of the other two.

**Education** is the most important and encompassing need in the UWCC region. This includes both educational and developmental opportunities for children and youth as well as educating the general public about how to access and use available services.

**Primary Needs**
- Early child care and education programs
- K-12 education and out-of-school programs
- Post-secondary educational opportunities
- Workforce development initiatives

**Housing and Poverty** is the second area of significant need in the UWCC region. In terms of the housing need, it is not the overall supply of housing units but the characteristics of the available housing stock that are at issue. The underlying cause of these housing issues is poverty.

**Primary Needs**
- Severe shortage of affordable housing (especially rental housing for those with low incomes and multi-family housing in suburban counties), compounded by poor public image
- Holistic support services needed to help people maintain housing
- Shortage of crisis and transitional housing
- Limited public transportation system inhibits access to services and employment

**Health and Mental Health** is the third area of major need in the UWCC region. Encompassing a wide range of needs, the overarching theme in this category is for greater emphasis on prevention.

**Primary Needs**
- Too little emphasis on preventive services, especially in the areas of primary care, dental care, obesity, and maternal health and teen pregnancy
- Lack of accurate information about new federal health care reform law
- System fragmentation constrains access to mental health services
- Growing health (and housing) needs of seniors and their caregivers
Key Community Needs

- **11.0%** unemployed. (2010)
- **3x** 2000 rate

- **189,718** uninsured adults. **60.8%** of adult Latinos, **25.0%** of black adults, **13.1%** of white adults are uninsured. (2009)

- **10,657** seniors 65+ have self-care difficulties (2009)

- **17,268** foreclosures (2010)

- **74.2%** graduation rate (2009-10)

- **45.6%** of renters spend over 1/3 of their income on rent (2009)

- **84.4%** of white, **51.1%** of black, and **54.2%** of Hispanic students are at or above grade level (2009-10)

- **27.5%** of adults and **18.3%** of children are obese (2009)

- **27,658** children under 6 in live in poverty. (2009)

- **52,959** of households receive food stamps (2009)

- **64.5%** of pregnant teens get early prenatal care (2009)
Recommendations

Pursue a Theme of Prevention

One of the resounding themes throughout this research was the vital role of prevention in breaking the debilitating cycle of poverty which was identified as the underlying cause of most of the needs in the community. Putting more resources into preventive programs can reduce the number of people in need of treatment in the long run. While treatment programs will, undoubtedly, always be necessary, prevention measures must coincide to help control the growing demand for more extensive treatment programs in the future.

Although many think of prevention as a health term, preventive programs are critical in all corners of the human service sector. In health, prevention helps thwart disease through early detection and the promotion of overall good health. In education, prevention takes the form of programs that increase the likelihood of finishing school and landing a lasting career. In the housing sector, prevention means helping people avert homelessness and other crisis situations through financial counseling, employment assistance, and more affordable housing.

EDUCATION

- Prevent high school dropouts by expanding dropout prevention programs to the entire UWCC region.
- Prevent unemployment by increasing vocational and technical training opportunities for middle and high school students.
- Prevent failure in school by increasing affordable, quality early child care programs.

HOUSING & POVERTY

- Prevent homelessness by increasing quality affordable housing, especially rental units.

Although UWCC does fund some prevention-focused programs, it is recommended that UWCC expand and intensify its support for these efforts. In order to achieve this, UWCC should adopt different standards to measure the success of prevention programs versus those in place for programs that essentially treat existing problems. Since the impacts of prevention programs are difficult to gauge using the short-term measures UWCC has set for treatment programs, measures to demonstrate long-term effects will need to be instituted.

HEALTH & MENTAL HEALTH

- Prevent poor dental health by funding more free dental clinics.
- Prevent inadequate care for teen moms and their newborns by expanding pre- and post-natal care programs.
- Prevent obesity (and subsequent diseases) by supporting health department-sponsored healthy eating and exercise initiatives.
Recommendations

Support Programmatic Education

One of the shortfalls of the human service sector identified in the UWCC region was the lack of knowledge among the public regarding the needs of those around them and the services that are available to meet those needs. The lack of public awareness surrounding community needs has resulted in misperceptions and negative stereotypes of issues like affordable housing and mental health needs. These biases have prevented many in need from receiving these services and, in some cases, have stifled the community’s receptivity to large-scale change.

Service provision is also hampered by the fact that many of those in need in the UWCC region are either unaware of the full array of services available to them or do not know how to navigate the fragmented service systems, preventing them from accessing necessary help. To improve the level of public knowledge on both of these fronts, it is recommended that UWCC conduct and/or fund public awareness campaigns on a number of issues related to the social-well being of its community.

EDUCATION

- Public awareness campaign about the value of vocational and technical education programs (in addition to 4-year institutions).
- Public awareness campaign promoting the value and rigor of the teaching profession.

HOUSING & POVERTY

- Community education regarding affordable housing—the misperceptions surrounding who needs it and the economic benefits it provides the community.

HEALTH & MENTAL HEALTH

- Campaign to educate the public about the new health care reform law and to enroll all newly-eligible people in Medicaid.
- Community education regarding how to navigate the mental health system, especially designed for middle and low-income people.
- Community education about the importance of primary care and affordable alternatives to emergency room services for the uninsured.
- Community education providing information about geriatric care and affordable living options for seniors.
Recommendations

Change UWCC Funding Model

One key finding uncovered through this study was the shortcomings of UWCC’s current funding procedures. For the past eighty years, UWCC has worked to connect charitable donations with people in need by allocating funding to numerous local nonprofit service providers. To maximize the effect of the resources entrusted to UWCC, it is recommended that the organization revisit and update its program funding approach.

Revisions in the funding strategy are essential to expand UWCC’s role as a catalyst for change and to enable it to do a better job of meeting the needs of the service providers it supports and, as a result, the community it serves. Specifically, two types of modifications are suggested: change the way funds are distributed and the types of programs that are funded.

Change the way funds are distributed

Under the current funding system, UWCC funds programs on an annual basis. Each year, UWCC chooses which programs to fund through a grant application process that uses volunteers to help evaluate nonprofits based on their program proposals, budgets, and evidence of previous program success. Community leaders and experts talked at length about how the current system is not as effective or efficient as it should be and proposed a number of suggestions for improvement.

- Focus funding on fewer, select causes.
- Have agencies respond to chosen causes through requests for proposals.
- Utilize a multi-year approach for funding and evaluation of reliably strong programs.
- Fund programs that implement best practices.

Change the types of programs UWCC funds

Currently, the vast majority of UWCC funding goes to programs that directly serve people in need, whether it be providing shelter for the homeless, medical care for the uninsured, or mentoring for at-risk youth. While such programs are essential, it is recommended that UWCC expand the scope of its funding to include programs that work to affect community change in different ways.

- Directly fund program education, research, planning, and coalition-building projects.
- Support programs that strengthen neighborhoods and decentralize service delivery.
- Support initiatives that holistically address the needs of children and families.
- Support the development of community-based coalitions that position UWCC to promote the five C’s: Cooperation, Consolidation, Collaboration, Communication, and Coordination.