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United Way Fox Valley launches 2018 fundraising campaign, sets \$8.75 million goal

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(Photo: Devi Shastri/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

APPLETON - United Way Fox Cities launched its annual fundraising campaign Wednesday, aiming to raise \$8.75 million to fight financial instability and help children reach their full potential.

In 2018, United Way Fox Cities will invest \$1 million into programs that fight instability, including those that provide food, shelter, transportation and development of job and money management skills to people in need.

The organization also is investing in 11 programs that foster early learning opportunities, including Reach Out and Read, which uses children's regular check-ups to distribute books and encourage literacy.

"The message is hope," said Peter Kelly, CEO of United Way Fox Valley. "What we bring to people in the community is a lot of hope and helping to make this a stronger community."

SECURA Insurance hosted the event for the 14th year in a row, with other major donors, partner agencies, volunteers and campaign leaders in attendance.

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At the end of 2017, United Way Fox Valley developed four goals to guide its mission in the community, with specific benchmarks to achieve by 2021. Those were to build financially stable individuals and families, make sure all children reach their full potential, foster a community of mentally healthy children, youth and adults, and ensure children are free of abuse and neglect.

The benchmark goals for 2021 include:

Stabilize more working families by reducing the number of renters experiencing housing cost-burden from 39 percent to 36 percent, which will impact 960 households.

Secure a brighter future for more of children by making sure 60 percent of third grade students read at or above a proficient level.

Foster a healthier community by decreasing by 20 percent each, the youth and adults struggling with three or more poor mental health days per month.

Keep children safe by reducing the number of screened-in cases of child abuse and neglect by 23 percent.

The campaign launch event featured efforts by the [Housing Partnership of the Fox Cities](#) and the [Reach Out and Read](#) program toward fostering housing stability and early-childhood literacy.



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United Way Fox Valley CEO Peter Kelly speaks at the 2018 campaign launch event on Wednesday. (Photo: Devi Shastri/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

Without meeting basic housing and living needs, “it’s hard to make progress on the other things that we know are important, like healthy living and education,” said Joe Mathe, executive director of the Housing Partnership.

In the center of each table at Wednesday’s event were two children’s books, a representation of Reach Out and Read.

Eileen Jekot, a pediatrician for ThedaCare who works closely with the program, said having books to give to young patients helps build a bond and foster a love of reading early.



Books from the Reach Out and Read program were displayed at United Way Fox Valley's 2018 campaign kickoff event on Wednesday. (Photo: Devi Shastri/USA TODAY NETWORK-Wisconsin)

Early interventions like the reading program are crucial, Jekot said, as 90 percent of a child's brain development happens before the age of five.

Jim Kotek, CEO and president of Menasha Corporation and a co-chair of this year's United Way Campaign, said other United Way initiatives are making a difference, such as The Connector program, which provides rides to work through Valley Transit. Menasha Corporation is one of the largest users of the program.

"Many of these positions are entry level," Kotek said. "Without The Connector, would these people even be able to get to work?"

Campaign leaders said the work the United Way does in the Fox Valley to support the community makes it unique.

"The brilliance of United Way is that they see the full need of the community and connect the generosity in that community with those needs," Mathe said.