

THRIVING TOGETHER



UNITED WAY
Rock River Valley

GIVING IN ACTION



**FALL
2025**

MISHEL
BROWNING

Community
Resiliency Manager



211

CALL 2-1-1 OR TEXT YOUR ZIP
CODE TO 898-211 FOR HELP

- Rent Assistance
- Food Banks
- Affordable Housing
- Health Resources
- Childcare
- After-School Programs
- Elderly Care
- Financial Literacy
- Job Training

211 REVAMP FOCUSED ON CONNECTION, STABILITY AND HOPE

We are taking major steps to revitalize the 211 Helpline, a free and confidential service that connects residents to food, housing, health care, and crisis support. For new Community Resiliency Manager Mishel Browning, the initiative is about more than updating a phone line—it's about restoring trust and making sure families know where to turn in times of need.

"I've always wanted to help people, and when I learned about 211, I thought it was such a powerful resource that not enough people in our community even know exists," Browning said. "If residents can see there's a reliable way to get help, it brings a sense of stability and hope."

Since stepping into the role a month ago, Browning has met with more than 25 local organizations and plans to meet dozens more. These conversations have already revealed consistent concerns: housing and

childcare. "Almost everyone I've spoken with has said housing is the number one need," she explained. "But what also stood out to me was childcare. It can be a barrier to attending a job interview or even just getting to work. I hadn't realized how significant that challenge is for so many families."

Accuracy is another top priority. Outdated information has frustrated residents in the past, so United Way is working agency by agency to verify services and contacts. "If someone calls for help, they should get the right number, the right address, and the right resource every time," Browning said.

Browning also believes visibility is key. In the coming weeks, she plans to personally drop off brochures at every school and hospital in the Rockford area. "Building trust starts with putting a face to 211," she said. "People need to know there's

someone here to listen, advocate, and make sure their concerns are addressed."

She also envisions 211 as a lifeline during emergencies. Whether it's a flood, storm, or fire, 211 has the potential to provide real-time updates on resources and shelter availability. "People can send photos of storm damage directly through 211, and we can coordinate with the city or fire department to get help where it's needed," she said. United Way is also exploring partnerships with the City of Rockford and local shelters to provide daily updates on available beds and emergency assistance.

For Browning, the work circles back to a simple truth: "At its core, 211 is about connecting people to hope. When we strengthen it, we strengthen the entire community."

EFFICIENT,
IMPACTFUL
GIVING

IRA Qualified Charitable Distributions, Appreciated Stocks, & Donor Advised Funds

United Way of Rock River Valley is very grateful to receive gifts of IRA Qualified Charitable Distributions, Appreciated Stocks, and Donor Advised Funds.

We are a 501(c)3 Organization with EIN: 36-2167843

Please make checks payable to United Way of Rock River Valley and mail them to the following address:

United Way of Rock River Valley
601 North Main Street, Suite 300
Rockford, IL 61103

Questions? Please contact Kay Larrick, director of stewardship at kay@unitedwayrrv.org, (331) 716-0136.

BUILDING TRUST AND OPPORTUNITY ON ROCKFORD'S WEST SIDE

Our Irving Avenue Strong Neighborhood House is a trauma-informed hub on Rockford's west side, offering youth programs, family support, and stronger ties between residents and public safety. Partnering with the Community Healing Center, Rockford Police, and the Youth Services Network (YSN), the house delivers coordinated services while building the community's trust.

New Mission Statement

The Strong House recently adopted a new mission and guiding principles, developed with resident feedback and internal review. The update clarifies its trauma-informed approach, aligns partner roles, and provides a framework for measuring impact. Leaders say it strengthens collaboration and ensures daily activity reflects the house's priorities.

Four Guiding Pillars

- **Safety & Stability:** A trauma-informed, predictable environment.

- **Youth Growth & Empowerment:** After-school and leadership programs.

- **Resources & Opportunities:** Immediate supports and long-term stability.

- **Collaboration & Relationships:** Nonprofits, residents, and police working together.

Programs include tutoring and mentoring through YSN, counseling and healing circles from the Community Healing Center, and police-led activities that emphasize relationship building. We highlight the importance of routine—predictable schedules, consistent staff, and neighborhood amenities like youth artwork, meals, and resource tables.

Success is measured not only in services delivered but in stronger community ties—neighbors supporting each other, youth connecting with mentors, and police engaging as community members.

A STRONGER MISSION FOR A STRONGER COMMUNITY

"The Strong House creates a safe, trauma-informed space where youth are empowered, families find resources, and neighbors and police work in trust."

Together, we promote growth and build a stronger community."

Looking ahead, we may expand evening hours, STEM and arts programs, and wraparound supports.

The updated mission and principles aim to guide these decisions and ensure the Strong House continues to evolve with the needs of the local community.

NEW VOLUNTEER LITERACY AND MENTORING PROGRAMS LAUNCH

We are expanding our commitment to student success with the launch of a new Volunteer Literacy and Mentoring program at Jackson Charter School. Starting in October, every first grader—36 in total—will be matched with a dedicated adult mentor who will work with them throughout the school year using the research-based University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI) Foundations curriculum.

Each week, pairs of volunteers and students will meet consistently, building not only reading skills but also relationships that foster confidence and growth. Studies show that children thrive when they have consistent, engaged adults in their lives—a key principle guiding this initiative.

We are also deepening our support at Constance Lane Elementary, with

a special focus on recruiting mentors from within the neighborhood. This approach helps strengthen connections between students and their community. Local

congregations such as Brooke Road United Methodist Church and Victory United Methodist Church are playing a vital role, particularly in supporting students whose first language is not English, including Swahili speakers.

"I'm so excited to launch this volunteer reading mentorship at Jackson and expand supports at Constance Lane," said Dan Berman, United Way of Rock River Valley's Youth Opportunity Manager. "Having dedicated adults in children's lives, beyond parents and teachers, goes such a long way in helping develop confidence and grow literacy skills."

Community members interested in making a difference as a literacy mentor are encouraged to contact **Dan Berman** at dberman@unitedwayrrv.org.



TOCQUEVILLE DINNER HONORS TOP DONORS

On August 21, longtime Tocqueville members Dave and Jeanne Rydell hosted the annual Tocqueville Dinner at Rockford Country Club to honor donors contributing \$10,000 or more each year. The evening celebrated their generosity and showcased the impact of their support in our community. This past year, four new donors joined the Tocqueville Society, and we look forward to growing that number again. To learn more, contact **Kay Larrick** at kay@unitedwayrrv.org or (815) 988-1552.



From L to R: Brent and Susie Bernardi, Mary Jo Brown, Russ and Gin Johansson, Dorothy and Paul Baits, Dave and Jeanne Rydell, Jim and Julie O'Rourke, Scott and Suzi Sullivan, Tyler Smith and guest Kim Jerie. Not pictured: Ginny Meyer (joined after photo).

UNITED WAY RELEASES 2024-2025 IMPACT REPORT



We are excited to share our new 2024-2025 Impact Report, which highlights the progress our community has made together and outlines the road ahead. The report includes updates on our United for Literacy initiative, showcases programs that support children, families, and neighborhoods, and features testimonials from

partners who are bringing literacy to life throughout Winnebago County. It also details our priorities for the upcoming year, such as expanding access to books, strengthening parent engagement, and enhancing community connections through neighborhood outreach and 211 services.

Scan the QR code to read the full report and see how your support is helping shape the future of our community.



CEO REFLECTIONS



JULIE BOSMA,
PRESIDENT & CEO

APPLAUSE AND APPRECIATION

Welcome to the first issue of *Thriving Together: Giving in Action*! I'm excited to share our newly reimagined quarterly print newsletter, featuring refreshed branding and a closer look at the incredible impact you help make possible. *Giving in Action* delivers deeper-dive stories and agency highlights, showing how your support transforms our community.

Alongside this, we're launching a new monthly e-newsletter, *Thriving Together: The Essentials*, for quick updates on our ongoing activities. While *Giving in Action* explores impact in depth, *The Essentials* keeps you connected to the latest news and happenings.

From thanking our Tocqueville donors at their annual dinner in August, to revamping our 211 resource helpline, to partnering with the Irving Avenue Strong Neighborhood House, we are constantly reminded of the extraordinary people who come alongside us to support our work.

Our impact keeps growing. Last year we distributed 63,254 books; this year we set a goal of 75,000—and reached 123,798! We planned for 12,500 interactions with children through reading programs and events—and had 20,820! We aimed to support one family literacy event per month, yet delivered 70 events, nearly seven times our goal.

Am I bragging? Absolutely! But none of this is possible without you—our donors, supporters, and partners. Your generosity fuels every story of success, and for that, we give heartfelt applause and appreciation.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Julie Bosma'.