



United Way  
of Greater Philadelphia  
and Southern New Jersey

# POVERTY LISTENING TOUR: A FINAL REPORT

**PREPARED BY:**  
Christopher Wink &  
Sabrina Vourvoulias

**MADE POSSIBLE BY:**  
United Way of Greater  
Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey

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# Generocity

This Generocity.org report shares diverse community perspective on combating poverty in Philadelphia. It is based on hundreds of interviews and a year of reporting. Generocity is a news site focused on the nonprofit, philanthropic and civic sector in Philadelphia, published by Technically Media, an independent digital media company. This work was made possible by the generous support of United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey (UWGPSNJ).

In Fall 2020, Generocity set out to better understand what was and wasn't changing about poverty during the chaotic pandemic. Over the next year, a team of Generocity journalists worked with community leaders to hear firsthand from neighbors experiencing hardships, and opportunities, in five distinct Philadelphia neighborhoods confronting high rates of poverty. Through this, we produced nearly two dozen pieces of journalism for this series, in addition to informing much else of our daily reporting. This report is a collection of Generocity's findings through our Listening Tour and the resulting editorial series. Find the full series at [generocity.org/project/poverty-action-series/](https://generocity.org/project/poverty-action-series/)

**United Way  
of Greater Philadelphia  
and Southern New Jersey**



This work was made possible by the generous support of United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey. Celebrating 100 years, United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey (UWGPSNJ) is on a mission to end poverty and expand opportunity for all by investing in Early Learning, Community Resiliency, Financial Empowerment, and Career Pathways. Serving Pennsylvania's Chester, Delaware, Montgomery and Philadelphia counties, and New Jersey's Atlantic, Burlington, Camden, Cape May and Cumberland counties, United Way creates solutions that break the cycle of poverty. As part of a network of independent local nonprofit organizations, United Way provides countless ways to give, advocate and volunteer. To learn more, visit [www.unitedforimpact.org](http://www.unitedforimpact.org).



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47-year-old **Ani Fari** is an Indonesian immigrant and resident of South Philly. Fari had a mild case of COVID, but she had to quarantine and missed work, so there is no money coming in.

Fari's 50-year-old husband has HIV and a weakened immune system, and Ani was concerned he would also contract COVID. For several weeks, they slept in different rooms as they quarantined.

Last Thursday, Ani tested negative for COVID, but she still worries about her husband getting the virus.

She also worries about how to get by. And until a chance encounter at the church she attends, she doesn't even know there is a way out of her dead end.

A year of pandemic and social unrest amid generations of poverty can be described with data. This report intends to add stories like Ani's and Fari's to help guide us to answer the question: where must efforts to alleviate poverty go now?

Maps are handy in getting you where you haven't been before, or where you haven't been in ages. But a map is only as useful as the infrastructure undergirding it — and if the neighborhood you are transiting into has three bridges but none of them is connected to each other, or to the streets surrounding them, you're not going to get very far.

When Generocity began our **Poverty Listening Tour** series, we had no idea that the figurative maps we had been following — the ones that for years promised to lead Philadelphia out of its status as the poorest big city — were full of lonely bridges and disconnected streets.



After a year of reporting and hundreds of interviews, what we've discovered is not that Philadelphia lacks the will to arrive at its destination — but that the efforts to do so remain fractured and disaggregated, without the necessary overarching and underlying connective infrastructure.

Even as COVID-19 ravaged communities, Generocity journalists embarked on a listening tour of people in five of Philadelphia's poorest neighborhoods, to hear from them directly how access to benefits and workforce development could (and should) be employed in economic mobility efforts. We met our sources through trusted messengers and where they wanted to meet. This was a broad-based focus group that didn't look anything like a focus group. This is a Generocity Listening Tour.

Many of our sources had used services from community organizations affiliated with the Philadelphia Poverty Action Plan, a public-private collaboration that set a goal to lift 100,000 Philadelphians out of poverty by 2024.

This patchwork of community and social service organizations — all of them little giants in the work they do — appears to be both Philadelphia's safety net, and its limitation. As one activist put it: "We are only servicing poverty, not solving it."

We also took a look at successful strategies from elsewhere — the Better Chicago initiative, New York and San Francisco's poverty trackers and New York City's disability workforce development program — for reducing poverty. No city has addressed poverty comprehensively, nor have any city's most vulnerable residents survived 2020-2021 unscathed. But there are lessons that can inform poverty alleviation moving forward.

What follows are our takeaways from our year-long transit through Philadelphia's poverty map.



# KEY FINDINGS



**You are the leader you are waiting for.** It is common to call for bold action and then criticize those bold efforts. Philadelphia poverty remains entrenched due to uncoordinated efforts.



**Develop an air attack and a ground game.** Top-level coalition building and direct action efforts can be in conflict but both are necessary. Consider investments in both regional/national policy and intensive neighborhood level interaction.



**Benchmark against various peer cities.** Leaders should be far more comfortable contrasting strategies and tactics from other cities to deploy a menu of options.



**Treat internet connectivity as a utility.** The digital divide is part of every barrier to economic mobility in the city. There is need for a new paradigm that is not dependent on corporate social responsibility.



**Incorporate economic growth priorities.** Philadelphia is not just poor, it is also not wealthy. Entrepreneurship; advanced skills development and other market-based strategies may be effective politically and address limited redistributive opportunities.

# Behind the stories

MEET THE TEAM THAT PRODUCED THIS PROJECT



**BRANDON DORFMAN**  
REPORTER



**ERIN FLYNN JAY**  
REPORTER



**JAYA MONTAGUE**  
REPORTER



**PEAK JOHNSON**  
REPORTER



**WILL BLEIER**  
REPORTER



**HANAE MASON**  
REPORTER



**ALYSSA BIEDERMAN**  
REPORTER



**KRYSTINE SIPPLE**  
REPORTER



**JENNY ROBERTS**  
REPORTER



**SABRINA VOURVOULIAS**  
EDITOR



**CHRISTOPHER WINK**  
TECHNICALLY MEDIA CEO



**VINCENT BETTER**  
TECHNICALLY MEDIA VP





## Anti-poverty efforts in Philadelphia: A partial timeline

1965

Mayor James H.J. Tate created the Philadelphia Anti-Poverty Action Committee.

1967

Mayor Tate approved an ordinance replacing the committee with the Philadelphia Anti-Poverty Action Commission.

1976

Mayor Frank Rizzo replaced the Anti-Poverty Action commission with the Philadelphia Allied Action Commission, with direct election to the commission by members of the poor community.

1985

The functions of the Allied Action Commission were taken over by the Mayor's Office of Community Services (MOCS), moving responsibility anti-poverty efforts to the Mayor's office.

2001

Mayor John Street launches the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative, backed by \$290 in city bonds.



2013

Mayor Michael Nutter rebrands the MOCS, the Mayor's Office of Community Empowerment and Opportunity (CEO) and issues a Shared Prosperity Plan.



2017

Mayor Jim Kenney's soda tax goes into effect, and his \$500 million public works program, Rebuild, is approved.



2019

The Poverty Action Plan is created by a special committee on poverty reduction and prevention and by City Council resolution.



Sources:

\* <https://economyleague.org/providing-insight/leadingindicators/2020/12/16/philpov19#:~:text=Philadelphia%20is%20the%20%E2%80%9Cpoorest%E2%80%9D%20of,has%20been%20declining%20since%202011.>

\* "Will Philadelphia's Poverty Action Plan Succeed in Raising 100,000 Out of Poverty?" by Bryan Wilkinson, Social Innovations Journal.

## A long history of effort, a short history of success

As outlined in a March 2020 report featuring an introduction by Philadelphia City Council President Darrell Clarke, the central goal of this city's current anti-poverty strategy, the Poverty Action Plan, is to reduce the number of Philadelphians living below the poverty line by 100,000 people within 4 years.

That vision is considerably more aggressive than the last comprehensive poverty alleviation plan, called the Shared Prosperity Plan from 2013.

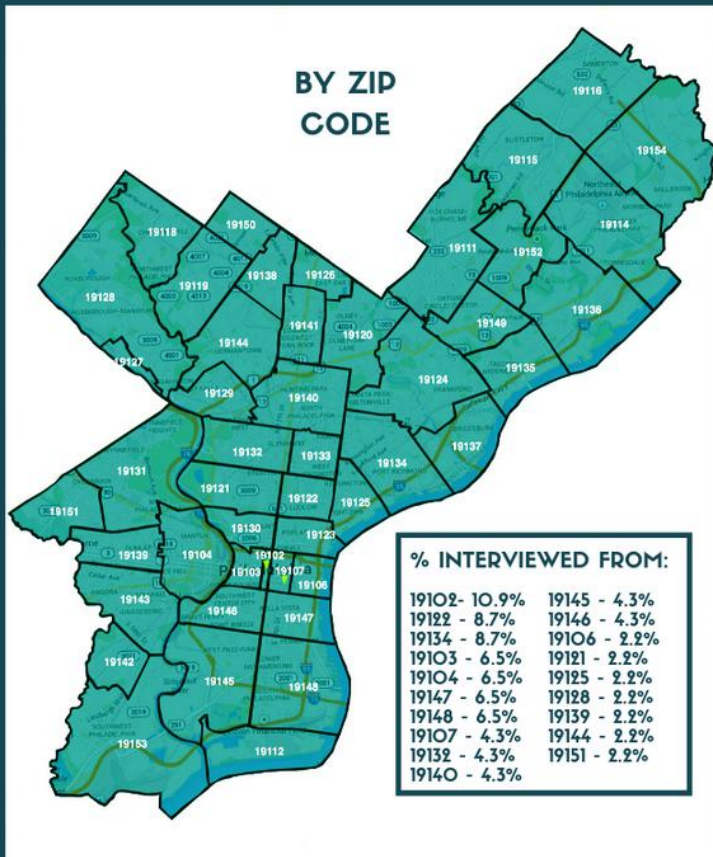
That plan used data from 2011 that set Philadelphia's poverty rate at 28.4%, meaning 437,492 Philadelphians were estimated to be living in poverty. In 2018, the rate had moderately declined to 24.5%, or 387,980 residents. Put another way, during the longest sustained period of economic growth in post-war American history, a seven-year, concentrated effort to reduce poverty in Philadelphia brought fewer than 50,000 people out of poverty.

As University of Pennsylvania's Associate Director of Finance Bryan Wilkinson wrote for the Social Innovation Journal: "For the Poverty Action Plan to succeed, a commitment to the programming and policy changes recommended by the Plan must be adopted across all organizations operating in the region."

Troublingly a patchwork of well-intentioned by disparate efforts may fall short unless clear leadership emerges.

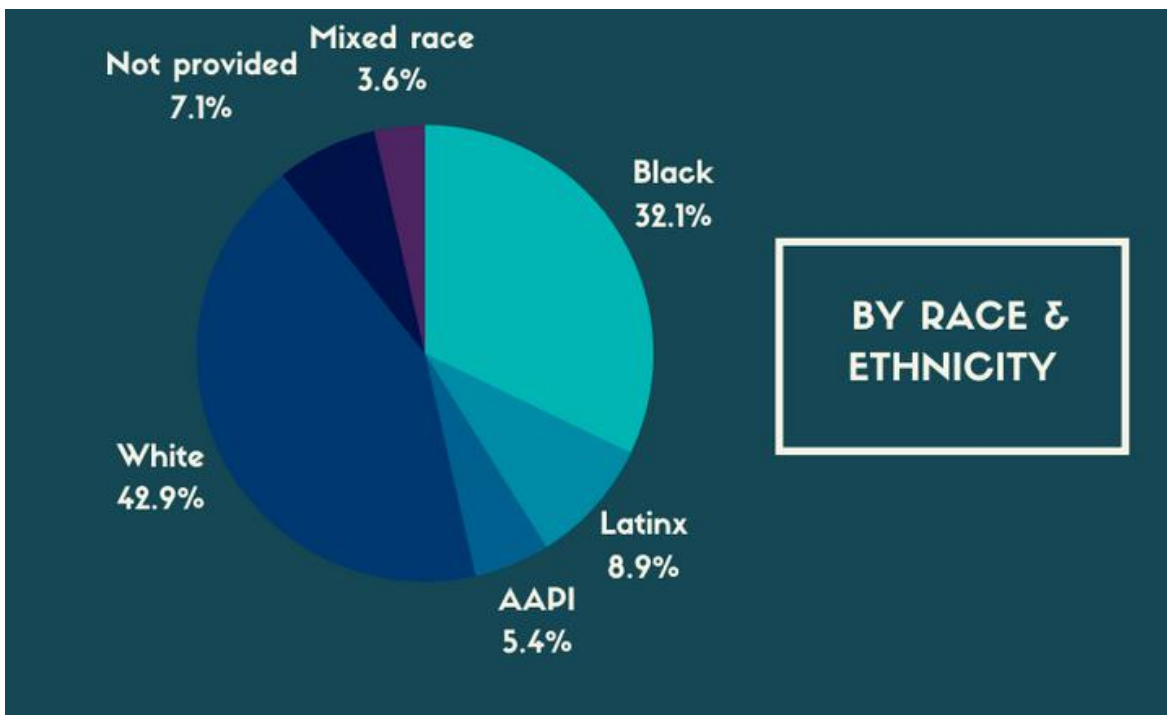
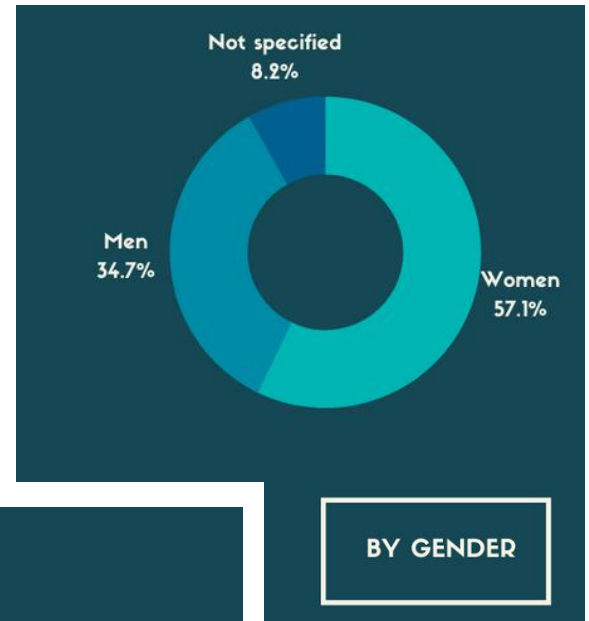
# SOURCES

## DEMOGRAPHICS



The Poverty Listening Tour was intended to be as representative of Philadelphia as possible.

A plurality of sources were Philadelphians living in poverty. Most engaged directly on these issues. Still, regional policymaker, researchers and economic development experts were included. We meticulously tracked where our sources lived and how they identified to reflect this city as a whole.



## Looking back at Generocity's listening tour

The intertwined crises of 2020-2021 were inconsistent in their destruction. Even with the stress of isolation, professionals with remote-flexible jobs saved more, learned to bake and rediscovered themselves. Meanwhile low-paid frontline workers and at-risk communities lost many of their lifelines.

Philadelphians know well that this city is the poorest big city in the country. Less well known is that Philadelphia is not just poor but it is also not wealthy. In analysis of a dozen big cities, Generocity found Philadelphia has fewer income earners, just as it has more residents living in poverty.

COVID-19 brought on a bit more of both. In 2020, Philadelphia had one of the country's highest increased year over year rates in attracting well-paid tech workers as pandemic-remote life pushed relocations to lower-cost centers with other amenities. At the same time the city's poorest residents were ravaged.

It should be noted that the U.S. federal government did dispense one of the world's most generous per capita fiscal stimulus programs during the pandemic. Notably, poverty decreased nationwide in 2020 — exceedingly rare for a major recession and shuttered economy. Meanwhile, the percentage of Philadelphians living in poverty has been declining since 2011; 2019 had the lowest percentage of Philadelphians living in poverty since 2005. The context of this tour was not that Philadelphia was at the depths of its poverty rate, nor that the pandemic was as damaging as it likely could have been. Instead, Philadelphia's progress on combating poverty has been slower than other big cities and the wickedness of generational poverty means future gains will be increasingly more difficult.





Throughout 2020, Black, Latinx, and other Philadelphians of color from low-income communities accounted for a disproportionate number of those affected by COVID-19 — both physically and economically — disproving, once-and-for-all, the adage that disease doesn't discriminate.

In a city of neighborhoods divided by redlining maps almost a century ago, the pandemic made everything worse.

South Philadelphia communities along Passyunk, Point Breeze, and Snyder Avenues lost vital early childhood and afterschool programs as the government issued quarantines and stay-at-home orders. Many people in Chinatown were laid off as businesses started to close. A West Philadelphia divided by class saw a growing need for job and career training.

And across the city, small business owners and entrepreneurs watched their dreams die as they were unable to keep up with the pandemic and ineligible for federal stimulus.

“I know a family that had two children; the husband and the wife and they had a business on South Street,” Cheri Honkala told Generocity. Honkala is an anti-poverty advocate who co-founded the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, an activist organization now known as the Poor People’s Economic Human Rights Campaign.

She spoke of the devastation that COVID-19 brought to the city. “They had a restaurant and they all worked at the restaurant and that was their plan for life. And they couldn't make the transition to having people eat outside, or doing the delivery piece, or competing by having the most slick website for delivery.”

“So they lost everything,” she continued.

But as Philadelphia toils under the burden of a 25% poverty rate amid a global plague, all while the country's broken economic system furthers the gap between rich and poor, there is a glimmer of hope.

The city's most prominent academics, activists, nonprofit organizations, politicians, and all-around forward thinkers came together this year to tackle Philadelphia's top-tier problem — poverty — not backing down, even in the face of COVID-19. When the world came together to face a pandemic, and the country found itself reckoning with systemic racism, the Philadelphia region, too, prepared to put in the work to bend back the moral arc of history.

Last year, City Council established the Poverty Action Fund in partnership with the United Way of Greater Philadelphia and Southern New Jersey, using research from the aptly-titled Poverty Action Plan developed throughout 2019.

Two bills sponsored by Councilmember María Quiñones-Sánchez and passed unanimously established the fund in conjunction with UWGPSNJ and seeded it with \$10 million, making it one of Philadelphia's most significant efforts to tackle poverty in recent years.



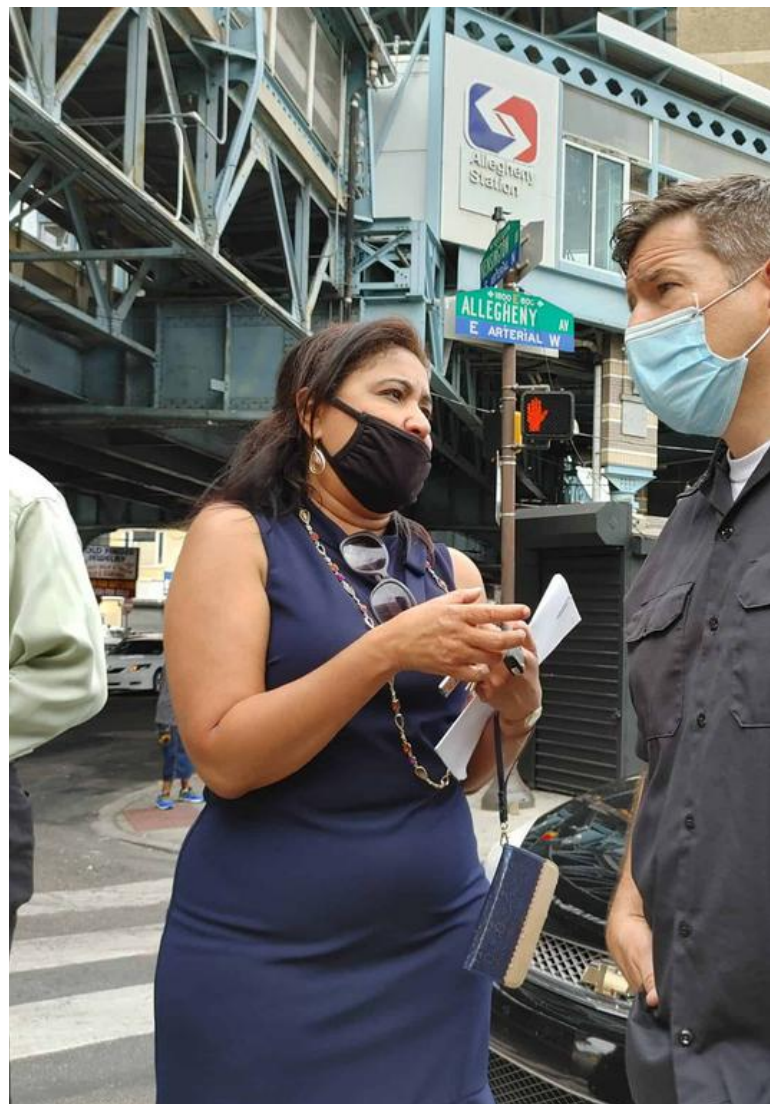
With funding from UWGPSNJ — one that included no editorial influence or oversight — Generocity’s team of reporters documented the city’s push to bring equity to the economic landscape amid a chaotic period of change.

Nine journalists worked on the Poverty Listening Tour, going from neighborhood to neighborhood to not only uncover the root causes of economic hardship such as racism, gender inequality, and the War on Drugs but to document the real solutions being put forth by nonprofits every day.

From Point Breeze to Mantua, Fairhill to Kensington, and everywhere in between, Generocity spoke with the people living in, learning from, and working against poverty in the age of COVID-19.

The result is one of the most comprehensive and in-depth reviews of the poverty question in the city over the past few years, recorded by a group of area journalists with first-hand knowledge of the locales and topic-at-hand.

“We don’t measure poverty right,” Omar Woodard, the former Executive Director of Greenlight Fund Philadelphia, told Generocity reporter Hanae Mason for her story on tracking poverty in the city this past February. “The federal poverty level doesn’t make much sense and hasn’t been updated in a long time. So I’m not entirely sure that even if given the way and how we structure data and how we define what’s poor, I’m not sure we’re solving for the right problems. And so that’s an underlying issue.”



While decent journalism can't supplant the much-needed data points and statistics required to tackle the poverty issue, it can provide a counterbalance and broaden viewpoints, which is what Generocity sought to do with the Poverty Listening Tour.

The work began in earnest with two pieces by Northeast Philadelphia native and journalist Brandon A. Dorfman. He dug deep with an overview of the Poverty Action Fund itself and followed up with an article on the problem of benefits access in the Kensington neighborhood of Philadelphia.

Dorfman spoke with a cross-section of Philadelphia's nonprofit and political leaders for his first piece, establishing a foundational basepoint from which the listening tour could understand the city's poverty issue.

**"We don't measure poverty right. I'm not sure we're solving for the right problems. And so that's an underlying issue."**

**Omar Woodard  
Greenlight Fund**



In conversations with City Councilmembers María Quiñones-Sánchez and Allan Domb, North 10 Philadelphia's Latesha Sims, University of Pennsylvania Professor Dr. Roberta Rehner Iversen, and others, Dorfman learned that while poverty is endemic to the area, it's segmented by geography. Center City and its surrounding neighborhoods have flourished in recent years; five others in the region have poverty rates above 40 percent.

There are racial boundaries, too, noted Dorfman last December. Latinx communities have a poverty rate that hovers around 40%, with the city's Black population coming in second at 30%. Such deep poverty is a question of moral concern and economic prosperity for the city as a whole, according to United Way President and CEO Bill Golderer, who dubs the Poverty Action Fund his Marshall Plan for the city.

As he told Generocity, the goal is to bring 100,000 Philadelphians out of poverty over the next several years.

"It took us a long time to get here," Golderer said last December, referring to the city's decades-long increase in the poverty rate. "It's going to take us a little bit of time, realistically, to move out and it's going to be a sacrificial investment."

**"It is going to take us a little bit of time, realistically, to move out [of the high poverty rate] and it's going to be a sacrificial investment."**

**Bill Golderer  
United Way**



## First stops

Generocity's first stop on the listening tour was Kensington, a neighborhood too often propagandized as on the verge of dying by anyone with a soapbox and an audience. But the truth is more complicated. Kensington is a proud but struggling neighborhood, a mix of Latinx and white communities, with a small African American population and a poverty rate above 40%. The area was once buoyed by Schmidt's Brewery and filled with manufacturing jobs, but now the average annual income is around \$12,000, making it Philadelphia's most impoverished neighborhood.





**\$12,669**

The average annual income in Kensington, making it the most impoverished neighborhood in the poorest big city in the nation.

More than  
**40%**  
poverty rate in the area, which is a mix of Latinx and white communities, with a small African American population.



Average life expectancy is five years less than the rest of the city.

Almost  
**50%**  
of households report the primary language spoken at home is not English.

And when people speak of Kensington, they're most likely using it as a metaphor for the opioid or overdose epidemic, though many will fail to note the swarms of suburbanites from Bensalem and Bucks County and other such places now transplanted to the area.

Last December, Dorfman spoke to several activists and nonprofit leaders to find out how the dismantling of the social safety net contributed to the ongoing despair in the region.

In his piece on the stubborn problem of benefits access in Kensington, Dorfman spoke to Prevention Point's Jose Benitez, the aforementioned Cheri Honkala, Community Legal Services' Maria Pulzetti, and others, and learned that the destruction of the welfare state that begun under Presidents Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton changed Kensington from a vibrant community to what it is today. Under the former leadership of Mayor John Street and Police Commissioner John F. Timoney, the area became a militarized zone, making things worse.

As Benefits Data Trust CEO Trooper Sanders told Generocity, the system makes it difficult for people to obtain benefits, especially for people of color.

Politicians led a sustained frontal assault on the social safety net, starting with Clinton's Welfare Reform Act in 1996 to the dissolution of cash assistance to the decline of the number of families on TANF. Today, Kensington residents are part of a larger group of Pennsylvanians that leave upward of \$450 million worth of benefits unclaimed.

EXPLAINER

# WHAT IS THE EITC?

In a typical year, the federal tax credit lifts more than 8.5 million people out of poverty

Information sourced from The Conversation: <https://tinyurl.com/y6d3o9fu>

The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is a federal tax credit for low-income working people. Eligible taxpayers receive the credit after they file their taxes. Unlike a deduction, even those who didn't pay any income tax can receive the credit, which they'll get as part of their refund. 29 states, plus the District of Columbia, have established their own EITCs to supplement the federal credit. State EITCs are refundable, in all but six states (DE is one of those six). In those states that offer EITC,

if a refundable credit exceeds a taxpayer's state income tax, the taxpayer receives the excess amount as a payment. A nonrefundable EITC can offset state income taxes but no other state-level taxes.

- PA does not offer an EITC supplement.
- NJ has a refundable EITC supplement (39% of federal credit).
- DE has a nonrefundable EITC (20% of federal credit).

## FEDERAL EITC PAYMENT AVG.

34¢

for every dollar of earned income for a family with one child.



40¢

for every dollar of earned income for a family with two children,



45¢

for every dollar of earned income for a family with three or more children.



## BENEFITS AND LIMITATIONS



EITC only helps individuals who are working. A fifth of its 25 million beneficiaries in 2019 lost their jobs in March due to COVID; 16% were still unemployed in June.



EITC provides very little support to those without children — their EITC is often too small to offset their federal income and payroll taxes.



The minimum age for receiving the credit is 25, so millions of young people graduating from high school and college into an economic recession do not receive the credit.



Since EITC's inception in 1975, it has reduced child poverty by 25%. EITC has lifted about 10.6 million people out of poverty and reduced its severity for another 17.5 million.

Infographic by Generocity.org - Jan. 7, 2021; photo by Jhon David from Unsplash

Philadelphia journalist Erin Flynn Jay went to South Philadelphia next to explore the effects of COVID-19 on poverty alleviation efforts. Area nonprofits such as Diversified Community Services, the Southeast Asian Mutual Assistance Association Coalition, and United Communities Southeast Philadelphia relied on walk-in traffic to meet the needs of their respective communities pre-pandemic. Quarantines and stay-at-home orders exposed some gaps in their plans and left them scrambling to meet their needs.

“How do we provide services virtually and remotely and make up for the technology gap that exists in our community? We’re still working on that now,” DCS executive director Otis Bullock told Flynn.

Throughout January, Flynn took a whistle-stop tour to some of the city’s most impoverished neighborhoods, digging deeper into the issue of benefits and the social safety net.

She engaged with communities in Fairhill, Mantua, and Southwest Philadelphia — communities often overlooked by area reporters outside of crime and homicide beats — and not only examined the root causes of poverty but also produced strong solutions-first journalism.



**“How do we provide services virtually and remotely and make up for the technology gap that exists in our community?”**

**– Otis Bullock  
Diversified  
Community  
Services**

In the Fairhill section of eastern North Philadelphia, Flynn spoke with Ceiba’s executive director Will Gonzalez. He chronicled the organization’s efforts to join with Asociación Puertorriqueños en Marcha, Congreso, Esperanza, HACE, and the Norris Square Community Alliance to bring free tax preparation services to the area. The Earned Income Tax Credit is a tool for building wealth and lifting people out of poverty, she wrote.

Later that month, Flynn went to Mantua, where she learned that upward of 50% of households access SNAP benefits and are eligible for others such as TANF, WIC, and LIHEAP. But according to Kathy Desmond, president of People’s Emergency Center, there’s no coordinating strategy for enrolling people in benefits and connecting them to the proper resources in the area. Like many other communities, people in Mantua have to worry about “Benefits Cliffs,” an increase in income that tapers off benefits before economic self-sufficiency is possible.

Flynn also went to Southwest Philadelphia, where organizations like the Coalition of African and Caribbean Communities, or AFRICOM, help residents with health and social services, economic development, conflict resolution, and more. Chief operating officer Dr. Eric Edi told Generocity that a simplified, holistic benefits application would encourage more people to apply, eliminating hesitancy.



**“Many who went to the welfare office reported that the current [benefits] application process could be stressful and frustrating.”**

**– Dr. Eric Edi  
AFRICOM**

“The clients would be happier because many who went to the welfare office reported that the current application process could be stressful and frustrating,” Edi told Flynn this past January. “The ‘Pennsylvania Application for Benefits’ needs an overhaul. Not everyone has the digital capacity to complete an online application and upload required documents. Those who walk in the welfare office do complain about the hours they must wait before being served.”

## **Looking for sustainable solutions**

In early February, a trio of Generocity’s reporters into Philadelphia’s outsized poverty issue through the lens of often overlooked and marginalized groups and the nonprofits working on sustainable solutions to the problem.

Temple University alum Jaya Montague told readers that Philadelphia has one of the highest populations of people with disabilities in the country, and that of those dealing with poverty in the city, 22% are persons with a disability.

# KINGSESSING- PASCHALL

## DOES TELEHEALTH WORK HERE?



POPULATION: 40,701  
 MEDIAN AGE: 34.2  
 MEDIAN INCOME: \$26,259

Like the rest of the Southwest Philadelphia, Kingessing-Paschall has a significant African immigrant population, primarily from Liberia, Sierra Leone and Ethiopia.



### HEALTH SNAPSHOT

15%

OF RESIDENTS ARE UNINSURED

18%

OF RESIDENTS HAVE DIABETES

43%

OF RESIDENTS SUFFER FROM HYPERTENSION

3590

RESIDENTS PER PHYSICIAN IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

### DIGITAL ACCESS SNAPSHOT

42%

OF KINGSESSING HOUSEHOLDS ARE WITHOUT BROADBAND

39%

OF PASCHALL HOUSEHOLDS ARE WITHOUT BROADBAND

15%

OF RESIDENTS OF KINGSESSING ACCESS THE INTERNET SOLELY VIA MOBILE PHONE

### OTHER FACTORS IMPACTING ADOPTION OF TELEHEALTH IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD:

- Lack of digital literacy
- Language access
- Lack of trust in the system
- Lack of knowledge about services
- Reluctance to seek healthcare, particularly men
- Culture of "in-person" appointments
- Fear of anti-immigrant bias

Generocity

Three years ago, Mayor Jim Kenney created the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities and city-wide disability workforce programs run through private nonprofits such as the Sierra Group and JEVS, but New York City might have a model that works better.

North Philadelphia journalist Peak Johnson spent time in Chinatown, where he spoke with the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation's Pingho Lee and Yue Wu. Many Chinese immigrants work in the service and hospitality industries that were hit hard during the pandemic. Now, there's a great need for benefits access, including unemployment and rental assistance.

But language barriers and misinformation discouraged many employees from applying. As Johnson learned, many Chinese immigrants didn't know their rights.

Temple News alum William Bleier went to West Philadelphia to learn more about short-term credentialing and its impact on economic mobility. The West Philadelphia Skills Initiative, the Beachell Family Learning Center, Community College of Philadelphia, and Public Health Management Corporation offer community members short-term job training and credentialing programs to help increase their career opportunities.

"We have an island of concentrated wealth in University City, and we have neighborhoods that lack access to the economic opportunities that are being generated by the anchors," Sarah Steltz, WPSI's executive director, told Bleier in February.

Sources: The Health of Philadelphia's Neighborhoods 2019 Report from the Department of Public Health of the City of Philadelphia; articles in Generocity.org and Inquirer.com; Global Philadelphia: Interview with Dr. Eric Edji of AFRICOM.

Generocity's listening tour took a left turn at the end of February by seeking solutions to the poverty question with a series of articles that asked readers, "What if?". Across the country, countless organizations work day-in and day-out on solutions-first tactics that lift people out of poverty, and they do so without the want of or need for recognition. What if Philadelphia applied some of these methodologies to their fight against economic hardship? Would it allow people to rise up?

**"We have an island of concentrated wealth in University City, and we have neighborhoods that lack access to the economic opportunities that are being generated by the anchors."**

**Sarah Steltz**  
**West Philadelphia Skills Initiative**



West Philadelphia journalist Hanae Mason, who formerly served as the community programs manager the Mt. Airy CDC, asked how a poverty tracker would work in Philadelphia and what it would accomplish. The city's Office of Community Empowerment and Opportunity uses recent census SPM data and outside groups such as The Pew Charitable Trusts and The Economy League help to fill in the gaps. But, as Greenlight Fund's Omar Woodard argued above, Philadelphia doesn't measure poverty correctly.

Mason explored two poverty trackers in New York and San Francisco. Robin Hood is part of a New York City-based foundation that partners with Columbia University. Tipping Point is a Bay Area foundation that developed its tracker, Taking Count, in partnership with U.C. Berkeley. She then detailed how the project could work here in Philadelphia.

“Collecting and understanding the data is not enough,” wrote Mason. “Knowledge must then be aligned with plans for action, advocacy, and accountability.”

**“Collecting and understanding the data is not enough. Knowledge must then be aligned with plans for action, advocacy and accountability.”**

**Hanae Mason**  
**Generocity.org**



As February wore on, Brandon A. Dorfman looked at education, asking if what the Windy City’s A Better Chicago program does could work in the City of Brotherly Love. A Better Chicago is a venture philanthropy program that incorporates accountability, measurement, and transparency into its model, with a goal of closing both the education and economic gap for disadvantaged students. They have over 2,200 donor partners helping around 32,000 students in poverty, and it’s all valued at about \$40 million.



Dorfman dove deep into A Better Chicago’s success, speaking to the organization’s partner programs, such as Chicago Scholars, but also found comparable groups in the Philadelphia area innovating in the fight against poverty. Nonprofits like Greenlight Fund Philadelphia, Pew’s Health and Human Services Fund, and the Fund for the School District of Philadelphia all follow A Better Chicago’s blueprint in one way or another.

“We do try to look at a combination of outputs and outcomes, understanding that some of the outcomes may not be as well-defined as an approach that’s been around for decades,” Pew’s Kristin Romens told Generocity, explaining that, like A Better Chicago, accountability looms large in their grant programs.

## City Council’s poverty “moonshot”

As February led to March, City Council bet big on its self-proclaimed poverty “moonshot,” committing \$10 million to its now historic public-private partnership with UWGPSNJ. The initial \$5.5 million investment, dubbed the Family Stability Community Challenge — the first of several Community Challenges — funded neighborhood organizations offering financial services during tax season.

Four area nonprofits received awards, including Campaign for Working Families, Local Initiatives Support Corporation, African Cultural Alliance of North America, Inc., and Diversified Community Services.



Generocity chronicled each recipient, along with the team that oversees the funding itself. In March, Erin Flynn Jay spoke with Denise Gomez DelSignore, the woman with direct oversight of the Family Stability Community Challenge issued by the Poverty Action Fund. DelSignore hopes that the challenge will help more people access benefits and erase some of the stigmas surrounding the process.

“It’s important for these trusted organizations to deliver benefits and tax in a way that’s digestible for families and that encourages them in the fact that they’re there to support them through the process (and) making this easier or more feasible for them,”

**“It’s important for these trusted organizations to deliver benefits and tax in a way that’s digestible for families and that encourages them in the fact that they’re there to support them through the process.”**

**Denise Gomez DelSignore  
Family Stability Community Challenge**



DelSignore told Generocity.

The Generocity team then split up and spoke to each winning organization to better understand how they would use the grant money.

Brandon A. Dorfman spoke with Anna Stormer of the Local Initiatives Support Corporation and Ceiba’s Will Gonzalez, who also heads the Latino Equitable Development Collective. Both groups partnered together, receiving \$1 million from the Poverty Action Fund’s Family Stability Challenge to foster economic mobility in the city’s Latinx community. As Gonzalez told Generocity, the goal is to improve the way both organizations provide

multiple services at one point of contact while bringing what he called “economies of scale” to their partnership.

Journalist Alyssa Biederman did a deep dive into the African Cultural Alliance of North America for Generocity. ACANA received \$1 million for outreach within African, Asian immigrant, and low-income communities, all of which is a part of the No One Left Behind coalition. CEO Voffee Jabateh told Biederman that ACANA is a small organization that runs on a shoestring budget and struggles to be taken seriously. But with more than 20,000 African

**"We've been here for 20 years. We should not be struggling to get known. We've proven ourselves. We are prepared to keep shouting and making noise until government officials realize that we are equally important."**

**Voffee Jabateh**  
**No One Left Behind coalition**



immigrants in the region and a growing poverty rate among them, the work they do continues to grow in importance. “This grant will bring the community the idea that you don’t have to struggle too much,” Jabateh told Generocity in March.

Writer Krystine Sipple, who has deep expertise in the management of small nonprofits, went to Point Breeze to look at Diversified Community Services.

The organization's \$1.5 million grant award will allow them to expand outreach in the areas of housing support, benefits access, and tax services. Point Breeze is a low-income, predominantly minority community, DCS executive director Otis L.



**"Those opportunities really help the family achieve financial stability, and that's the goal."**

**– Mary Arthur**

Bullock told Sipple, and unlike other nonprofits, DCS takes a multigenerational approach, helping both adults and children.

Rounding out the poverty listening tour was Temple alum Jenny Roberts, who sat down with grant recipients Campaign for Working Families. CWF received \$1 million from the Poverty Action Fund to not only continue their work helping families file their taxes throughout central North Philadelphia but also to strengthen community partnerships with groups such as Clarifi, Benefits Data Trust, and Community Legal Services.

"We're really excited about being able to refer someone and know that they're going to get the services," Mary Arthur, president, and CEO of Campaign for Working Families, told Roberts in April. "Then those opportunities really help the family achieve financial stability, and that's the goal."

Not too long ago, it was common for the city's papers of record to report on poverty from a tourist's perspective and to play up the darker, seedier aspects of a problem many still think belongs to someone else. Just six years ago, The Inquirer called Kensington Avenue "the street of tortured souls lost in heroin's handgrip," a description that dismisses the lives of all peoples living in the neighborhood today.



**"What I believe is one of the leading attributes of this effort is a deep commitment to measurement, evaluation and learning."**

**– Bill Golderer  
United Way**

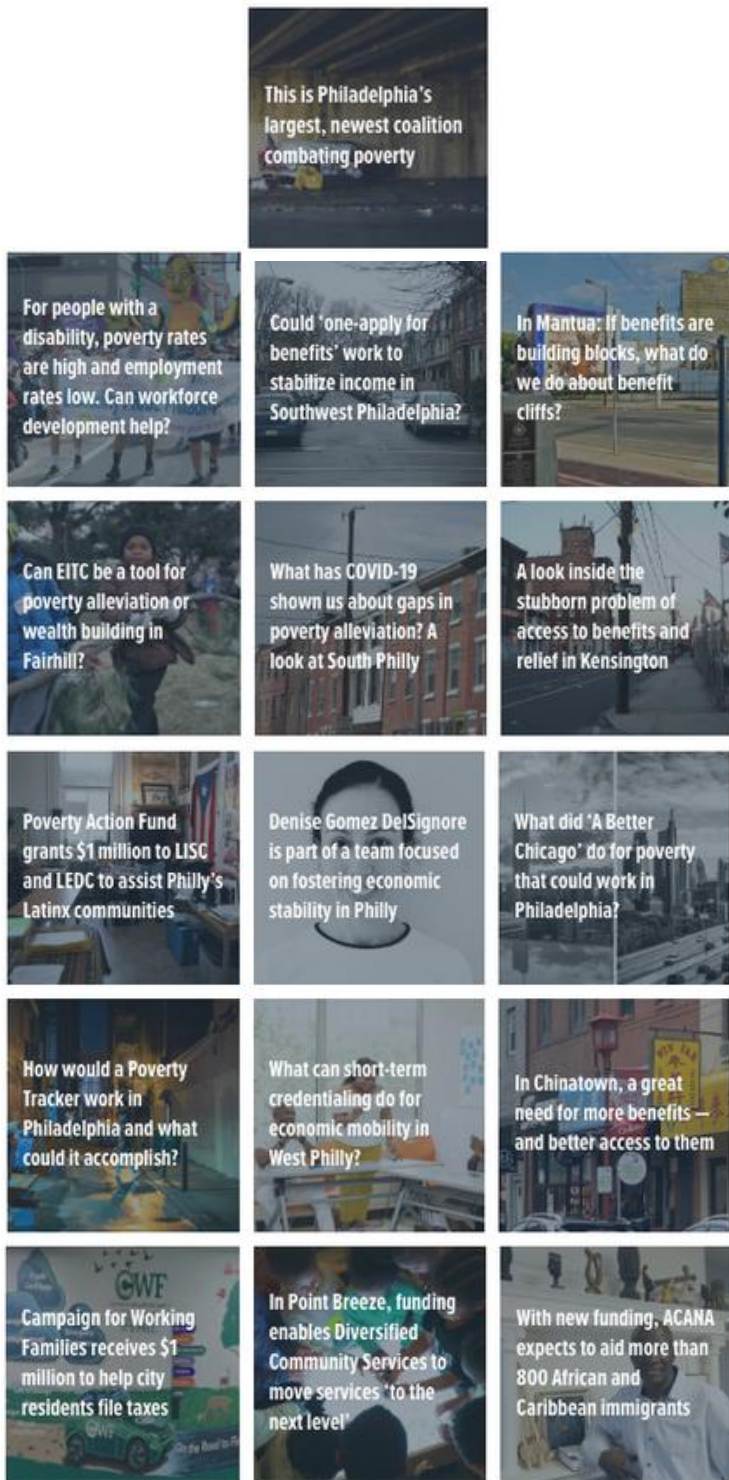
Still, as society demands better of those who write about poverty, there's apathy toward those living in poverty. As the United Way's Bill Golderer said, when he quoted Greenlight Fund's Omar Woodard in the first piece in the listening tour series, everyone has to do better.

"We have this group of folks called air traffic controllers, and if one plane goes down in the United States ... the entire world is like 'what happened?'" Golderer said last December. "And yet, at a 25 percent — frankly — societal failure rate, we're like 'that's where we are.'"

"What I believe is one of the leading attributes of this effort is a deep commitment to measurement, evaluation, and learning," he added.



# Finding the map's key



If the last year of reporting was about reassessing Philadelphia's poverty map, an established method for evaluating that map is to evaluate programs that have been tried elsewhere. Consider that the map's key.

The local efforts we reported on this past year centered almost exclusively on **benefits** as a poverty reduction tool. But other cities and municipalities, have included other tools to effect change. Here are a few examples.

## Canada decreased poverty by 20% over 3 years

Canada's poverty level has decreased by at least 20% between 2015 and 2017, helped in part due to a new methodology in solving poverty. Rather than disincentivizing collaboration, advocates got together to create community wide structures that studied the root causes of poverty in their regions and then came up with solutions in partnership with people in poverty, business, nonprofits, and the government; what began with six cities now encompasses 344 towns. Of the changes that have come from this, some notable issues include **raising the minimum wage** and **expanding the national child benefit**.

*Read the stories in Generocity's year of coverage at [generocity.org/project/poverty-action-series/](https://generocity.org/project/poverty-action-series/)*

## Peru decreased its poverty rate by 50% over 10 years

Between 2005 and 2015, Peru cut its poverty rate in half. Though there is still more work to be done, Peru can attribute its success to several reasons. The combination of inclusive economic growth and targeted, high-impact social programs showed clear results. By giving **monthly cash stipends** to female heads of household and helping youth as well as the elderly, Peru has seen a sizable decrease in economic inequality.

## Stockton's two-year experiment

A pilot project provided residents who made less than the median income in Stockton, California, with monthly cash payments. The extra money helped recipients secure employment, avoid housing instability, handle unexpected expenses that would otherwise derail their budgets, reduce debt, improve mental health, and help friends and family when necessary. A nationwide initiative is expanding the program to other cities as well.

**"Cash is a better way to cure some forms of depression and anxiety than Prozac."**

**– Michael Tubbs,  
former mayor of  
Stockton**

## "Two-Generation" approaches in Atlanta and Austin

Two-generation programs, like Home of Hope in Atlanta Georgia, help families tackle the many intricate issues that, especially when combined, lead to poverty or keep a family in poverty. These programs also help families with **basic needs like internet, room and board, free meals, and financial planning**. In Austin, Texas, the Jeremiah Program operates with the same two-generation approach families facing poverty by addressing the root causes, which often includes **mental health support, higher education classes and more**.

## New York City's poverty rate decline from 2000-2013

New York City was the only one of America's 20 largest cities to achieve a decrease in poverty rates from 2000-2013. The city used Family Rewards, a program that provided **cash payments**, and Paycheck Plus, a **bonus for work** program, among other tools.

**"Child poverty in the United States is persistent, it's structural. But it's also really solvable."**

**– Areeba Haider,  
Center for  
American  
Progress**

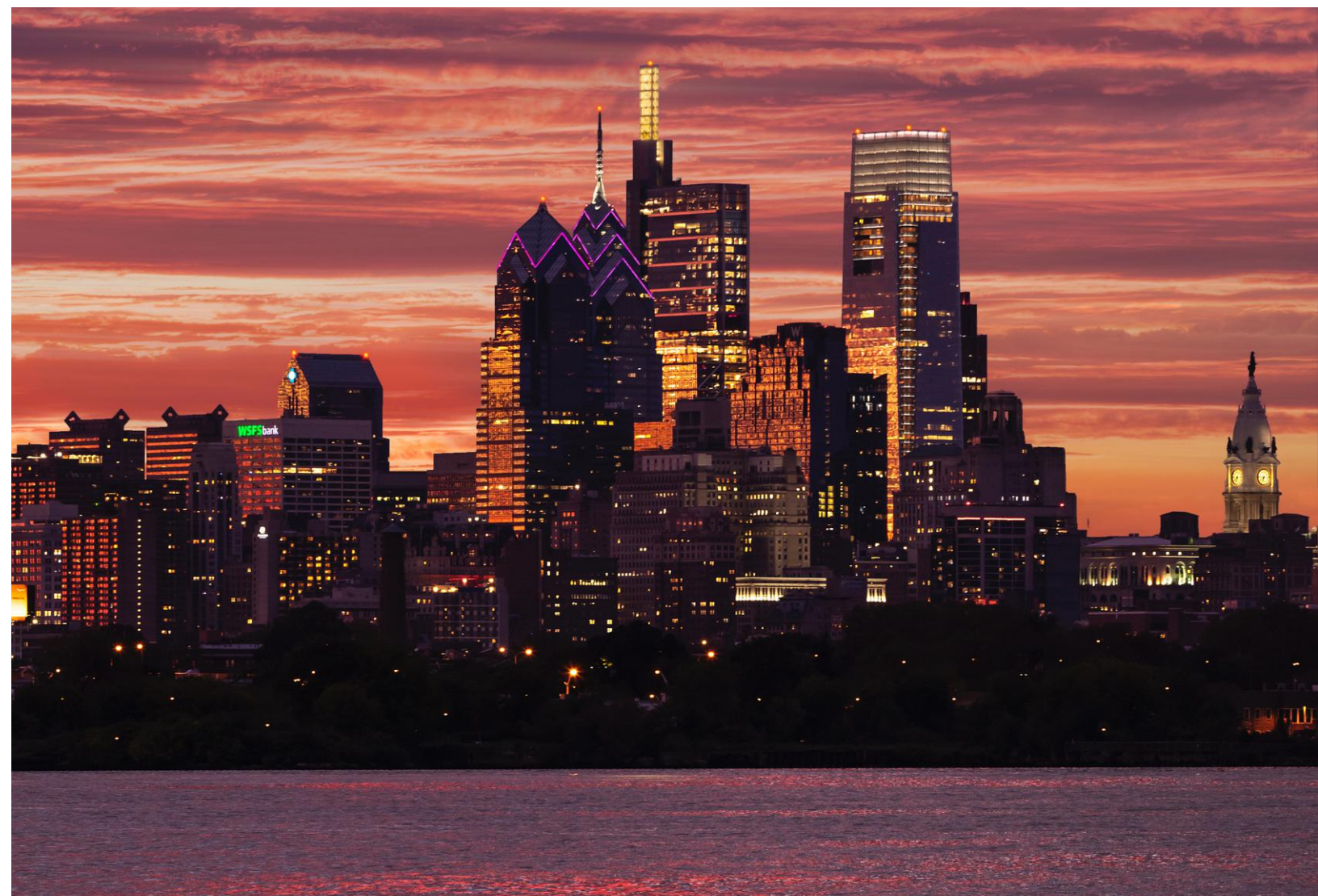
## 13 countries use some sort of unconditional cash transfer

With a few exceptions — Kenya, where a big experiment in universal basic income (UBI) is underway; Iran, which has a nationwide unconditional cash transfer program; and Alaska, which gives an annual dividend to everyone in the state — **unconditional cash transfer/basic income** initiatives are still in small-scale trial stages.

## Biden Administration's expansion of EITC and child tax credits

The American Rescue Plan is tripling the EITC for workers without children and expanding eligibility. The CTC is paying \$250-\$300 **monthly dividends** to families with children up to age 17.

A significant number of people living in poverty aren't required to file taxes so they will have to use a special tool to receive the CTC. This and other barriers may impact this expansion's actual reach.







## Addendum: Confronting language barriers

**One in five Asian households in the U.S. is considered “linguistically isolated.”**

**– Talk Poverty**

In talking to members of the Philadelphia Chinatown Development Corporation, reporter Peak Johnson discovered that a significant barrier to benefits and assistance acquisition was language.

In speaking about rental assistance from the City, for example, “no explanation on the timeline and process were published on the website, said Pingho Lee, PCDC program manager, “no application status unless homeowners called. But homeowners were hesitant to call due to the language barrier.”

The immigrant community cannot access first-hand information. Most information and updates are in English and not accessible to non-English speakers, Lee added. PCDC spent time translating these materials to make them available to their community as quickly as possible.

It isn't only PCDC. At one of Generocity's Power Breakfasts, a number of nonprofits serving non-Anglophone communities indicated if they had not taken on translation duties, the city would not have been able to get information out to the communities.

It is not a problem isolated to efforts in Philadelphia, of course. Other cities, even countries have tried to address the issue of language barriers with a variety of strategies in a variety of contexts.

## Helplines

After a contact tracing effort spurred by an outbreak of COVID-19 cases in Lincoln County, Oregon resulted in the realization that resources weren't being offered in Indigenous Mayan languages, the Oregon Health Authority created a helpline to better connect community members with translators.

## Mobile app

A new mobile app called Tarjimly connects refugees with much needed translation services, especially in times of emergency. With over 8,000 volunteer translators who speak over 90 languages, the adaptable app can break down language barriers in any situation in which a refugee has access to a mobile phone.

## Wrap-around language services

Orange County is a gold standard for supporting voters who aren't fluent in English. All voting materials come in multiple languages and online databases and voting equipment are compatible with the multilingual system. The county works with community groups and hires native speakers to translate materials for increased accuracy. The county's bilingual workforce has steadily increased, with 30% of election workers now speaking the native language of the voters needing support.

## More than just translation

Elders' Circle provides transportation and services to immigrant seniors, largely from Africa and the Caribbean. The seniors come from diverse backgrounds and speak many languages, so communication can be difficult, but the programs help seniors overcome barriers to make social connections.

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