

June 2026

UnitedWE | Summary
Report: Arkansas
Town Halls



Who **WE** are.

United**WE**

United WE is a nonprofit, nonpartisan think-and-do-tank driving systemic change by focusing on women's labor force participation to strengthen the overall economy.

Our Focus

Caregiving
Occupational Licensing
Diplomacy & Civility



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Letter From Our President & CEO

Listening is one of the most powerful tools for change—especially when it comes to advancing women and communities.

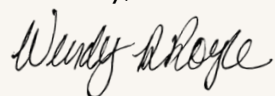
Research consistently shows that people are rarely given dedicated spaces to talk openly about what's working, name the day-to-day challenges they face, whether related to caregiving, occupational licensing, or civic engagement, and offer their own perspective on what could be better. Yet these lived experiences are not just stories; they are assets. They hold powerful insight into what is effective, where systems fall short, and what meaningful, community-informed solutions for change can look like.

At United WE, our model is simple: research, solutions, results. Through policy, programming, and partnerships, we work toward meaningful, lasting change. But our first—and most important—step is always listening.

In 2025, we set out on a mission to hear directly from women and communities across Arkansas about the barriers and opportunities they see to advancing women's labor force participation in the state. This report reflects what we heard through a five-part town hall series, including four in-person sessions and one virtual convening. Together, these conversations ensured that women's voices were not only heard, but positioned as the catalyst for the policy work United WE is helping to lead and support statewide.

What follows is a collection of data, stories, and insights shared by community members themselves. We hope this report offers a fresh opportunity to listen—and that it continues to inform and drive both your work and ours as we elevate the voices and experiences of women and bring them to the forefront of decision-making.

Sincerely,



Wendy D. Doyle.



WE Partner.

UnitedWE

Thank you to our Funding Partner:



Thank you to our Community Partners:



Introduction

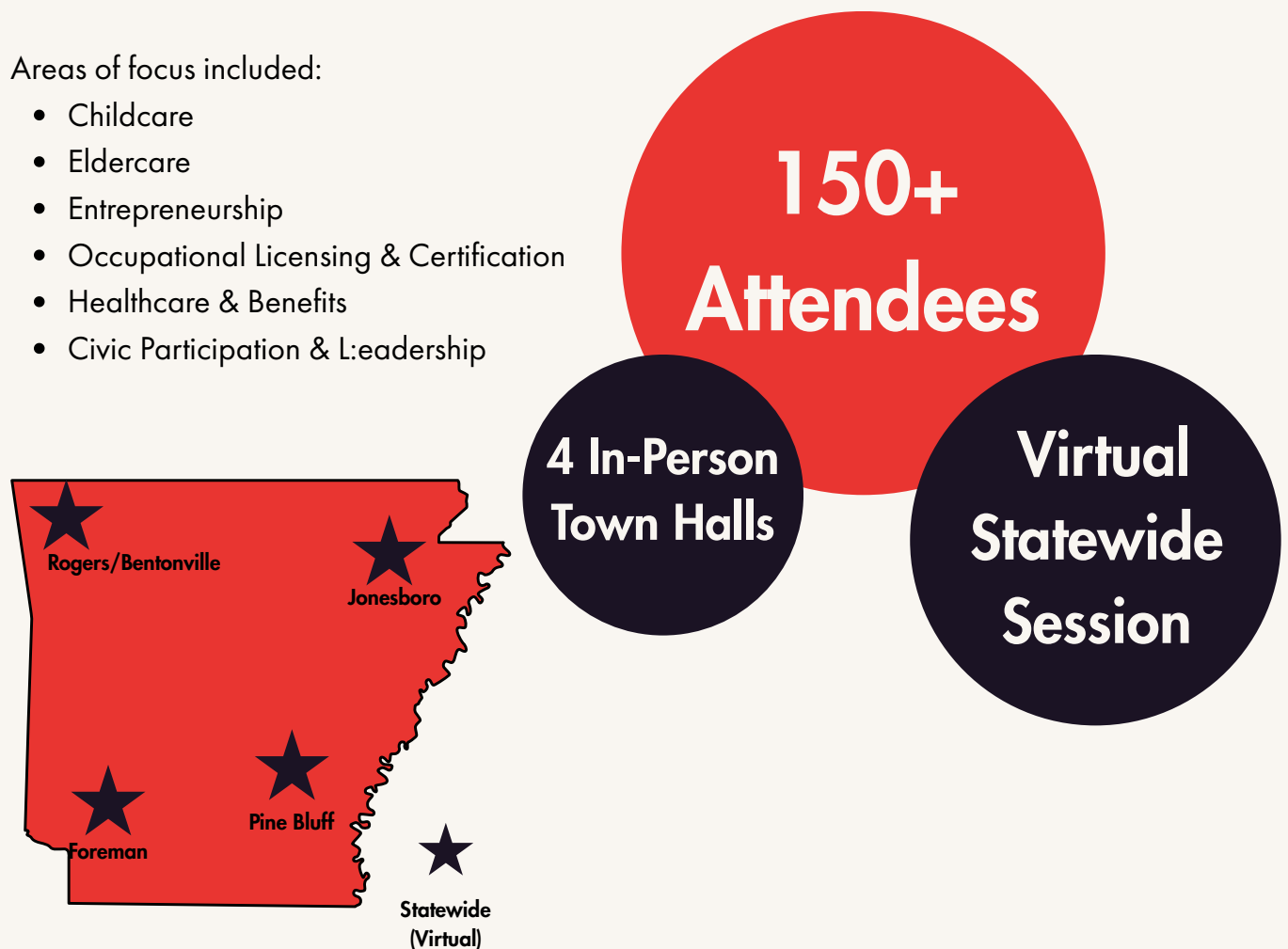
With leadership from statewide partners and in strategic partnership with the Ash Grove Charitable Foundation, United WE convened women and allies from across Arkansas to participate in a series of town hall discussions. Held between September 2025 and January 2026, these conversations brought together 150+ participants from diverse industries, regions, and backgrounds.

Across each Town Hall, United WE gathered both qualitative and quantitative data. Participants came together to share experiences and perspectives on issues impacting women's economic and civic participation and advancement across Arkansas.

Sessions were free and open to the public. Lunch and a \$25 gift card (in-person) and for participation were provided.

Areas of focus included:

- Childcare
- Eldercare
- Entrepreneurship
- Occupational Licensing & Certification
- Healthcare & Benefits
- Civic Participation & Leadership



Introduction

Why Arkansas?

Arkansas's economy is supported by multisector industries, a growing entrepreneurial ecosystem, and a strong small-business sector. By fully engaging women in the workforce, the state can strengthen families, boost local communities, and support long-term economic growth, ensuring that Arkansas continues to thrive in an increasingly competitive economy.

United WE recently partnered with an economist to take a deeper look at women's labor force participation and economic security in Arkansas. While women's labor force participation has improved since the COVID-19 pandemic, a large majority of the workforce remains untapped

Only Half the Workforce Is Engaged.

Women's employment has risen to about 52%, but that still means nearly one in two adult women in Arkansas is not working.

Jobs Are Available. Workers Are Not.

Female unemployment is around 3.7–4.0%, signaling labor supply, not job demand, is the main constraint.

Caregiving is the Dominant Barrier.

Over 40% of mothers with young children are not working, among the highest rates in the region.

The Earnings Gap Remains Wide.

On average, women in Arkansas earn about \$40,000 annually, compared with a national median of roughly \$57,520 for women in the U.S. ([U.S. Census Bureau](#))

Work does not guarantee security.

About 1 in 20 women who work most of the year still live below the poverty line.

Women's labor force participation in Arkansas is 53% compared to a national average of 58%.



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Statewide Key Findings

Caregiving Is the Defining Barrier to Women's Labor Force Participation

Across every community—urban and rural—caregiving responsibilities were the dominant factor shaping women's economic participation. Childcare and eldercare are layered responsibilities that often overlap, creating what many described as an unsustainable daily pressure.

”

“If we are serious about helping women in the workforce, then we have to solve the childcare and eldercare issue.” – Virtual Participant

”



Statewide Key Findings

Childcare: Availability, Affordability & Alignment

Availability varies by region, but remains insufficient or inaccessible:

- In Foreman, town hall participants were aware of only one operating childcare center; however, it lacked open slots.
- In Pine Bluff, participants noted that childcare slots exist, but families cannot afford them.
- In Jonesboro, families often have to drive 30 minutes in opposite directions to access available childcare.
- In Northwest Arkansas, participants described workforce shortages and long waitlists.
- Summer and third-shift childcare are scarce statewide.
- Participants consistently noted that traditional school schedules do not align with standard 8–5 jobs, creating additional strain.

Eldercare: A Fragmented Infrastructure

- Eldercare is often more difficult to secure than childcare.
- In Pine Bluff, adult daycare facilities have closed.
- Women in Jonesboro described eldercare as “a hodgepodge of whatever you can do.”
- In Southwest Arkansas, Medicaid cannot be used for facilities in nearby Texas, forcing families to relocate loved ones hours away.
- Statewide shortages of skilled nursing and assisted living options were consistently reported.

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“It doesn’t matter if the space is available, if no one can afford it.” – Pine Bluff Participant

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“Center-based childcare is hard to find but even when it comes to in-home care, it’s often more expensive than what families are willing to pay or what they’re able to afford.” – Rogers Participant

”

“There is no system in place for eldercare.” – Jonesboro Participant



Statewide Key Findings

Healthcare Access and Affordability Are Economic Barriers

Healthcare surfaced repeatedly as both a workforce issue and a stress multiplier. Telehealth was helpful for some in Pine Bluff - pointing to potential solutions, but others cited digital divide challenges.

Town hall participants reported:

- High out-of-pocket costs
- Limited specialist access (often requiring travel to Little Rock, Memphis, or Nashville)
- Mental health services inadequately covered
- Loss of benefits when moving into entrepreneurship
- The “benefits cliff” when earning slightly more income

According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, the “benefits cliff” refers to the sudden and often unexpected decrease in public benefits that can occur with a small increase in earnings.

This happens when families receive benefits through a public assistance program, earn a raise and then become ineligible to continue receiving benefits despite being unable to sustain their household.

”

“Our healthcare system places the burden on the patient to remember everything. I just don’t have that mental space.” – Jonesboro Participant

”



Statewide Key Findings

Entrepreneurship: Flexibility with Risks

Across communities, entrepreneurship emerged as both a coping mechanism and a pathway to autonomy.

- Entrepreneurship varied from 18% (Foreman) to over 60% (Rogers) of participants having started businesses.
- Many cited caregiving flexibility as the primary motivator.
- Barriers included access to capital, healthcare benefits, workforce recruitment, and banking discrimination.

”

“I do enjoy the flexibility that I need to take care of my children but at the same time, not knowing how much I will bring home each month has been an adjustment.” - Rogers Participant

”

“[Being underfunded] causes a huge amount of stress to try and stretch a dollar every day to make your operation work. You’re basically in fight and flight everyday, all day.” - Virtual Participant

”

“I used to run my own bakery and had to bring my children with me on deliveries because I couldn’t find any childcare that I could afford.” - Foreman Participant

”



Statewide Key Findings

Workforce & Structural Barriers

Across Arkansas, participants consistently described a workforce system that has not evolved alongside modern family realities, creating structural barriers that limit recruitment, retention, and advancement. In Pine Bluff and Foreman, generational poverty and underemployment limited exposure to professional career pathways.

Key workforce barriers included:

- Lack of paid leave
- Limited schedule flexibility
- Occupational Licensing Costs
- Limited reciprocity across state lines
- Insufficient workforce training in rural regions
- Transportation

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“I feel like the workforce is still set up for the 1950s and not for a household where the mom works outside the home.” - Foreman Participant

”

“You’d be surprised how many women simply don’t know how to even start looking for a job outside of waitressing or maybe retail.” - Foreman Participant

”



Statewide Key Findings

Housing, Wages, & Cost of Living Pressures

Across Arkansas, participants consistently described a widening gap between earnings and everyday expenses. While wages have increased in some sectors, participants said those gains are quickly erased by rising housing costs, childcare tuition, groceries, insurance premiums, and transportation expenses.

Participants across regions reported difficulty finding affordable, quality housing:

- In Rogers, rapid population growth has driven up rents and home prices, making it difficult for middle-income families to stay in the area.
- In Pine Bluff, lower housing costs are often offset by limited availability of safe, updated homes.
- In rural areas like Foreman, fewer rental options mean families have limited flexibility if they need to relocate for work.

Participants described spending well over 30% of their income on housing—leaving little room for savings, emergencies, or long-term planning.

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“Wages just aren’t keeping up with how much it costs to live and raise a family.” -
Rogers Participant

”

“The deficit of what we get paid versus how much childcare costs is real.” -
Jonesboro Participant

”

“I know so many people in my community who are still working just for the insurance.” - Rogers Participant



Statewide Key Findings

Civic Engagement: High Voter Participation, Low Capacity for Leadership

Participants across communities are frequent voters. However, most feel they lack the bandwidth to run for office or serve in appointed roles.

Common themes identified:

- Exhaustion and burnout
- Meeting times conflicting with caregiving
- Political incivility
- Lack of awareness about leadership pathways

The virtual town hall introduced the concept of compassion fatigue, with participants describing chronic emotional and physical depletion.

A participant reported decreased civic engagement due to fear and uncertainty for immigrant communities in Jonesboro.



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“I multitask well because I don’t have a choice. My tank is empty.” - Jonesboro Participant

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“There aren’t enough hours in the day.” - Foreman Participant

”

“Juggling appointments and civic obligations make it hard to even attempt to maintain work life balance.” - Virtual Participant

”



Opportunities for Impact

Through research, policy solutions, and civic engagement, United WE works to identify structural barriers and advance practical, data-informed strategies that unlock women's economic potential.

Drawing on findings from five Arkansas town halls in Rogers, Foreman, Jonesboro, Pine Bluff, and a statewide virtual session—alongside relevant labor force, childcare, healthcare, and wage data—clear priorities have emerged. Women across rural, urban, and border communities described systems that are misaligned with modern family life, creating avoidable barriers to workforce participation.

The findings point to key policy areas Arkansas leaders can prioritize to strengthen recruitment and retention of women in the workforce and support long-term economic growth.

CHILDCARE:

Access to affordable, quality, and workforce-aligned childcare

- Analyze Arkansas childcare data to identify regional gaps.
- Engage stakeholders on childcare as economic infrastructure.
- Coordinate with Arkansas Office of Early Childhood (OEC) on capacity and workforce goals.
- Corporations: Survey and monitor employees' childcare needs

ELDERCARE:

Access to affordable, quality eldercare

- Track state and federal policy on caregiving, aging, family leave.
- Develop coordinated statewide aging strategy for workforce retention.
- Educate businesses on eldercare's impact on mid-career employees.

HEALTHCARE:

Access to affordable, quality healthcare

- Review Arkansas data on insurance gaps during job transitions.
- Meet healthcare stakeholders to improve coverage continuity.
- Track employee healthcare costs and retention impacts for corporations.
- Develop policies supporting affordable statewide physical and mental healthcare.

WORKFORCE BENEFITS:

Support workforce mobility

- Analyze Arkansas benefits cliffs and workforce advancement impacts.
- Align workforce training programs with transitional supports.





HOUSING:

Access to quality and affordable housing

- Engage local governments and housing stakeholders in discussions about workforce-aligned housing development.
- Educate employers on the impact of housing affordability on recruitment and retention.
- Develop cross-sector strategies that connect housing, transportation, and workforce planning efforts.

EMPLOYER PRACTICES:

Strengthen workplace recruitment and retention

- Meet with the Arkansas State Chamber of Commerce to discuss family-supportive workplace strategies.
- Identify best practices among Arkansas employers related to flexible scheduling, remote work, and paid leave.
- Corporations: Assess internal policies to determine how workplace practices impact caregiver retention

ENTREPRENEURSHIP:

Access to capital for women entrepreneurs

- Share town hall findings with the Arkansas Bankers Association to encourage stronger lending pathways for women entrepreneurs.
- Identify and elevate best practices in community-based lending and capital access.
- Engage nonprofit and economic development organizations supporting small business formation.
- Explore policy options that address healthcare and benefits gaps for self-employed Arkansans.

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT:

Reducing barriers to women's civic participation

- Increase awareness of appointed board and commission opportunities across Arkansas agencies.
- Explore policy options that reduce participation barriers for working caregivers.

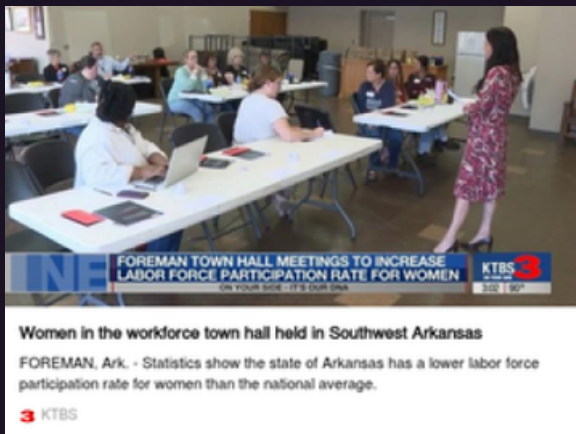


In the News

The town halls generated strong interest from local and regional media outlets, resulting in a range of news stories that elevated the voices and experiences shared in communities across Arkansas. This media coverage expanded the reach of the conversations far beyond those in the room, bringing greater visibility to the challenges families face related to childcare, eldercare, and workforce participation.

News coverage plays a critical role in shaping public dialogue. By highlighting lived experiences and local realities, media stories help inform policymakers, engage community stakeholders, and spark broader awareness. The coverage of these town halls helped move these conversations into the public sphere—creating momentum, accountability, and greater opportunity for action.

KTBS - Foreman



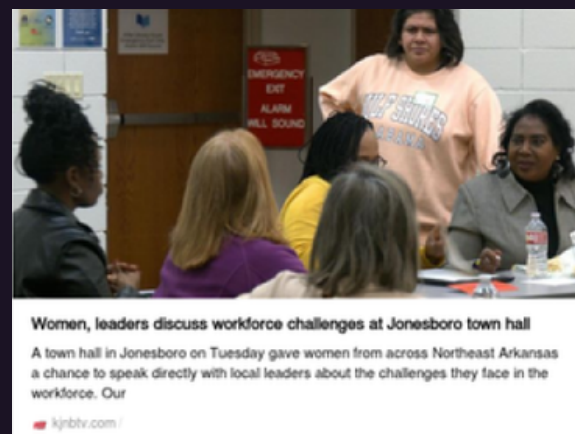
KNWA FOX24 - Rogers



Jonesboro Sun



KJNB News - Jonesboro



Click on each image to view more about each of the news stories.



UnitedWE

Rogers, Arkansas

Rogers is located in Northwest Arkansas and is one of the state's fastest-growing cities, with a population of over 70,000. Its economy is driven by retail, healthcare, manufacturing, and professional services, supported by proximity to Bentonville and the Walmart supplier ecosystem. Rogers plays a critical role in Arkansas's economic growth by attracting talent, investment, and workforce participation.

In September 2025, United WE brought together 63 participants from Northwest Arkansas for a town hall luncheon at the Center for Nonprofits at St Mary's in Rogers, Arkansas. The group represented a wide variety of participants from all backgrounds across age, profession, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Several elected officials from a wide political spectrum joined the event to give welcome remarks, participate in the conversation, and take back potential policy solutions for community problems raised by the participants.

Participants engaged in conversation as a large group, broke into smaller groups at their tables, and submitted feedback using a QR code. This data is aggregated and analyzed below.



Key Findings - Rogers

Caregiving

Increased access to caregiving for children and elderly family members was a major factor that could positively impact this group's labor force participation.

- Close to **30%** of participants said caregiving was a barrier to labor force participation.
- **90%** of participants reported that they have caregiving responsibilities, this issue drew considerable conversation.

In large group discussions, we heard that caregiving is a two-pronged issue for women's labor force participation.

Childcare and eldercare are layered issues for many women that either completely prohibit their labor force participation or make working outside the home extremely difficult.



— ” —

“I’m making it work, but it’s so hard. I can’t imagine not being there for my family, but it comes at a price.” -

Rogers Participant

— ” —



Key Findings - Rogers

Caregiving

We heard about a childcare program in Fayetteville that helped families access childcare services. However, that program ended when American Rescue Plan Act (AARPA) funds were depleted. “Even though that funding isn’t available, it certainly doesn’t mean the need isn’t there,” one town hall participant said. Another issue for the childcare landscape in Northwest Arkansas is a lack of childcare workforce. We heard that waitlists at childcare centers are often long because the providers are unable to find workers. Low pay, long hours, and stressful conditions create difficulties in attracting new workers to the profession. Securing childcare for third shift employees is also a significant challenge in the region. Participants also shared that summer care for school-aged children is also a barrier for their families.

Eldercare opportunities may be even harder to come by in Northwest Arkansas than childcare. Facilities who do offer eldercare assistance struggle to stay fully staffed, which creates concerns about the care received. Participants remarked that this reality makes them more inclined to try and navigate eldercare alone. One participant even told the group she had to leave the town hall early in order to take her father to a medical appointment.

Small group conversations illuminated many of the same concerns and feelings regarding caregiving as the large group discussion. The small group format allowed us to dig deeper into these issues and we learned that Northwest Arkansas has more nonprofits than any region in the country. These organizations offer assistance to families in the region that struggle with caregiving, however, our town hall participants considered their community “resource rich and communication poor.” “Even if you’re well connected, you may not know of all the programs that are available to help,” one participant remarked. One table shared eldercare resources with each other that were previously unknown to many of the participants.

“Center-based childcare is hard to find but even when it comes to in-home care, it’s often more expensive than what families are willing to pay or what they’re able to afford.” - Rogers Participant



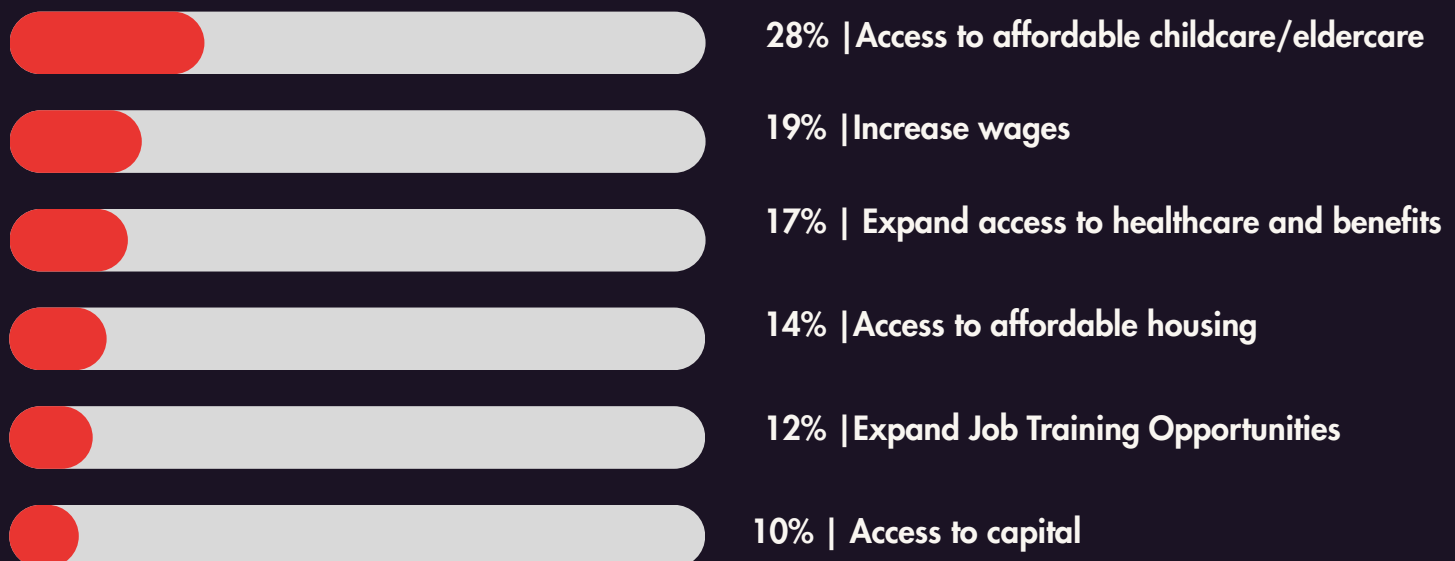
Key Findings - Rogers

Recruit and Retain Women in the Workforce

Higher wages, access to healthcare and benefits, and the cost of housing were also top concerns. Increased cost of living was a key concern for participants. "Wages just aren't keeping up with how much it costs to live and raise a family," one working mother told the group during our large group discussion. Another participant considered wages as "stagnant" and explained that renting has become so expensive that it often makes more sense to purchase a home, but many families can't save for a down payment. One small group participant said, "I know so many people in my community who are still working just for the insurance." Another gave specific context for her situation, explaining that she pays about \$1400 in out-of-pocket healthcare costs a year. This amount is on top of \$500 a month for private insurance that doesn't include any care for pregnancy and only includes five doctor visits a year. Another small group participant said she is paying cash for doctor's visits because she was kicked off Medicaid after the pandemic.

The table below breaks down how participants at this town hall viewed common issues perceived to be helpful in recruiting and retaining women in the workforce.

What would help recruit or retain women in the workforce? [check all that apply]



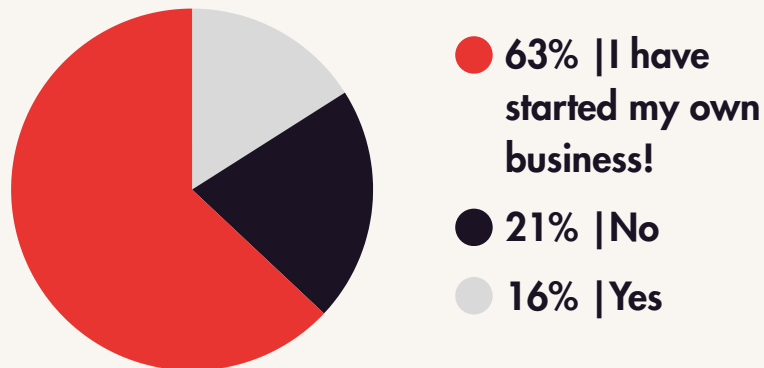
Key Findings - Rogers

Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship was another topic that participants elevated as a key element to their labor force participation.

The chart illustrates how participants had considered, or acted upon, starting their own business.

Have you ever thought about starting a business?



Over 60% of participants indicated that they had already started their own business.

”

“As a small business owner, I have to provide my own benefits and things like healthcare are insanely expensive when you don’t work for a large company.” - Rogers Participant

”

“I do enjoy the flexibility that I need to take care of my children but at the same time, not knowing how much I will bring home each month has been an adjustment.”



Key Findings - Rogers

Healthcare and Benefits

The discussion about entrepreneurship provided an interesting segue into examining the audiences' in-depth experiences with employment benefits.

- Only 20% of participants had access to health insurance as a result of their current employment
- 22% had a retirement plan
- 30% received paid time off to care for themselves or family members/dependents.

The table below shows the percentage of participants that have access to several categories of benefits:

Does your employer offer any of the following benefits?

29% Paid time off for care of self or other dependents	8% Not Applicable
22% Retirement Plans	2% Onsite childcare
20% Health Insurance	2% None of the Above
17% Dental/Vision	0% Childcare Stipend

”

“I think companies are beginning to see that their employees can actually be productive for them and take paid time off when they need it to take care of their families.” - Rogers Participant

”

” I wish I had known how important it was to start saving early. If your employer offers a retirement match you should absolutely take advantage of it.” - Rogers Participant

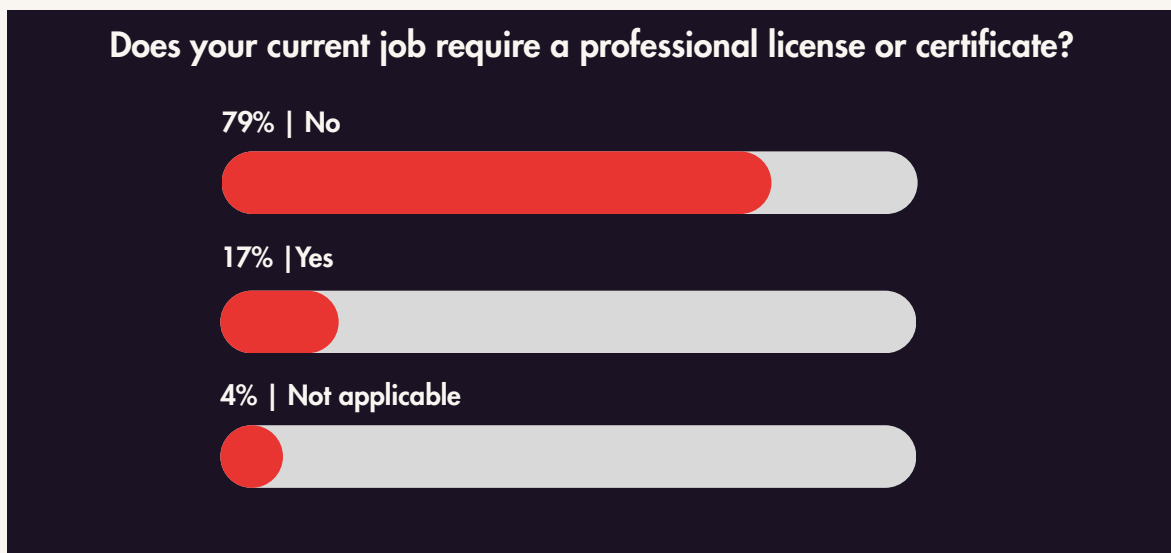
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Key Findings - Rogers

Occupational Licensing and Certification

As of 2021, women in the workforce were more likely than their male counterparts to hold a certification or license (27.6% vs. 21.1%). Only 17% of the town hall participants currently hold positions that require a license or certification, however extended dialogue revealed that many participants did have experience in previous positions navigating occupational licensing requirements.



Each town hall participant said that mentorship and relationships with peers in the workplace were helpful tools in ameliorating impostor syndrome and boosting confidence. "My network has helped me survive as a business woman," a participant told her small group. Several participants mentioned a women's financial literacy program in Northwest Arkansas that helps level the playing field in the labor force - particularly when it comes to retirement planning. Town hall participants said they'd like to see more support for first generation professionals because "you don't know what you don't know."

”

“Keeping up with my license is really hard. Between being a mom, a wife and being active in my community, it's hard to keep up with all the requirements and stay current on tracking everything I'm supposed to.” - Rogers Participant

”



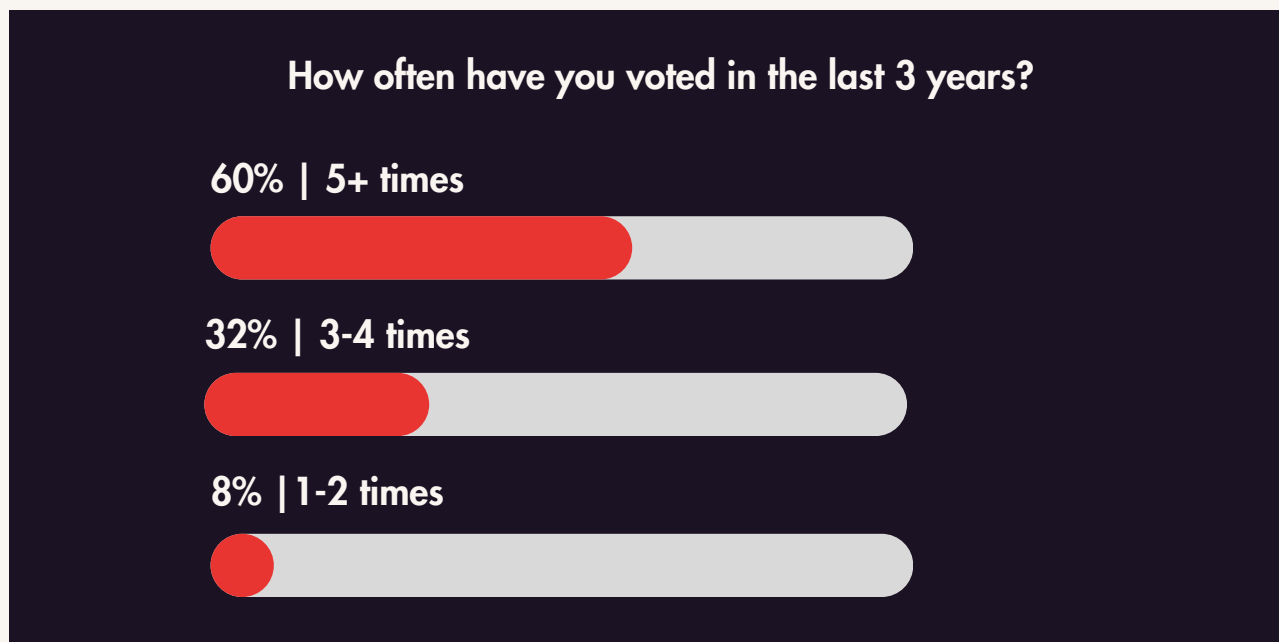
Key Findings - Rogers

Civic Engagement

Participants emphasized that voting is one of the most impactful ways individuals can support their communities and shape what happens around them. The conversation underscored a shared belief that civic participation is both a right and a responsibility.

In small group discussions, participants spoke more personally about what civic engagement means to them. Some expressed a passion for helping others learn how to advocate for themselves, drawing on careers in education and mentorship. Others shared that they take pride in supporting and uplifting those around them. While not everyone feels ready to run for office, many acknowledged that there are numerous meaningful ways to contribute and make a difference in their communities.

The participants of this town hall were frequent voters, with 60% indicating they had voted five or more times over the past three years



“Community service is rent to Mother Earth.” - Rogers Participant



UnitedWE

Foreman, Arkansas

Foreman is a small rural community in Southwest Arkansas with fewer than 1,000 residents. Its economy is rooted in local services, small businesses, and nearby manufacturing and agricultural activity, reflecting the workforce challenges and opportunities common in rural parts of the state. While small, communities like Foreman are essential to Arkansas's regional labor supply and rural economic stability.

Eleven participants from the Southwest Arkansas region came together in October 2025 for an in depth discussion about the barriers and opportunities they see for women in the area.

The town hall was held at Foreman's Community Center, located in the town's city center close to local shops and City Hall. The group included local school district leaders, women at differing points in their lives - from retirees and late career entrepreneurs to several new moms who are navigating the complexities of juggling their continuing education, parenthood and working full time.



Key Findings - Foreman

Caregiving

The Foreman area was described as a childcare desert, a similar experience to many other rural communities across the country. Strikingly, participants were only aware of one childcare center that is currently operational in Foreman and at the time of the townhall, it did not have any slots available for new families. This reality creates extremely difficult conditions for women who wish to enter or stay in the workforce.

”

“I feel like the workforce is still set up for the 1950s and not for a household where the mom works outside the home.” - Foreman Participant

”

“We lean on family to help. Thankfully, due to my spouse’s teacher schedule, we have more flexibility than most and that helps us navigate childcare schedules and timing for drop-offs and pick up.” - Foreman Participant

”

Foreman Public Schools’ ABC program is one bright spot in the area’s childcare landscape. This program is formally known as the “Arkansas Better Chance Program” and serves children from birth to age 5 who are from low-income families. Other eligibility factors for the ABC program are: being in foster care, developmental delays, family violence, having a parent on active overseas military duty, having a teen parent, low birth weight, low parental education level, or non-English speaking family members. The ABC program also provides funding for early childhood educators to receive college degrees in the field. While this program does create access for families across southwest Arkansas, space is limited due in large part to stringent ratio requirements.

Broadly speaking, the town hall attendees lamented the lack of available locations where new centers could be housed. At least one provider has expressed interest in expanding operations and opening a new center in Foreman. However, options for physical spaces are extremely limited because of the costs of upgrading older structures and building appropriate outdoor play equipment as well as finding available existing buildings suitable for children. “My childcare provider would love to open a new location, but there simply aren’t any spaces where she could go,” a participant told the group.

Summer care is especially difficult to find in southwest Arkansas. “We really just piece it together during the summer,” one working mom reflected. “It’s not pretty but we make it work.” Many participants noted that they drive long distances in the summer for summer care.



Key Findings - Foreman

Caregiving contd.

A lack of eldercare infrastructure in Southwest Arkansas also complicates women's labor force participation. Participants described a complex Medicaid system that could help offset the expense of some eldercare needs, however; Arkansas residents cannot utilize Medicaid to pay for eldercare services located in Texas. The Texas border is only 30-45 minutes from the Foreman community and residents of Southwest Arkansas frequently look for specialized healthcare services in larger communities in Texas.

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“Because Medicaid wouldn't approve us using the nursing home in Texas that was located just 30 miles from me, we had to move my mom to a facility in Little Rock (located about two hours away).” - Foreman Participant

”



Key Findings - Foreman

Recruit and Retain Women in the Workforce

The majority of this conversation centered on learning more about barriers to women's labor force participation in the Southwest Arkansas region.

Factors that participants shared that would positively impact labor force participation were increased flexibility in schedules, more remote work where practical, more formal networking and mentoring opportunities, and support for adults who work full-time and are simultaneously trying to attain higher levels of education or training. A stronger community focus on affordable housing options and access to transportation options were also mentioned as economic opportunity issues. Aside from caregiving, women in this region also cited a lack of basic workforce training opportunities as obstacles to the labor force.

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“Families in this region often navigate generational poverty and underemployment, so that means generations of women don't have the skills needed to be competitive on the job market.” - Foreman Participant

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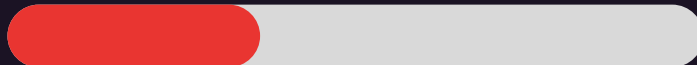
“It's not uncommon for women in this area to come from environments where no one in their orbit has ever worked in an office setting or a professional environment.” - Foreman Participant

What would help recruit or retain women in the workforce? [check all that apply]

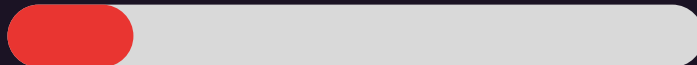
54.5% | Higher Wages



36.3% | Health Insurance Coverage



18.1% | Expand Job Training Opportunities



Key Findings - Foreman

Entrepreneurship

Occupational licensing was not a burden experienced by the majority of participants at this town hall. However, several participants were educators and mentioned that their profession did require a license. Different states have different licensing requirements but all require some level of continuing education courses or professional development in order to maintain an active teaching license. In addition, education is a female-dominated field and the participants expressed that women find the field appealing because they share the same schedules as their children.

Participants noted several key challenges that came with business-ownership:

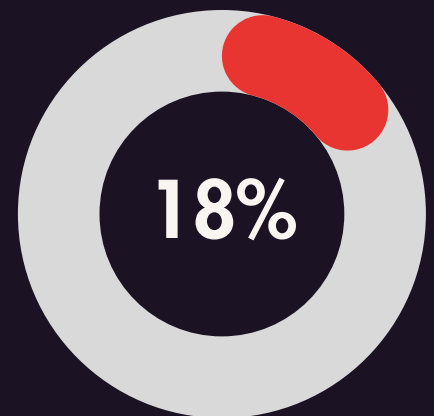
- rarely taking days off work
- struggled with finding employees that reflected the type of commitment to their business they wanted to see
- not being able to provide benefits (like health and retirement) to themselves to employees

”

“I used to run my own bakery and had to bring my children with me on deliveries because I couldn’t find any childcare that I could afford.” - Foreman Participant

”

18% of participants indicated that they had followed an entrepreneurial path.



Key Findings - Foreman

Healthcare and Benefits

Additional conversation on the topic of benefits revealed that all participants reported at least some access to health, dental, vision, and retirement benefits. However, most town hall participants admitted that they did not have full awareness of their employers' leave policies - including paid time off for caregiving.

Research shows that women are more likely to prioritize caregiving of others and put their own healthcare on the back burner. The participants of this town hall were no different, with the vast majority admitting that they prioritize their children's preventative exams, and the medical appointments of their elderly family members, before carving out time for their own healthcare.



Key Findings - Foreman

Occupational Licensing and Certification

Occupational licensing was not a burden experienced by the majority of participants at this town hall.

However, several participants were educators and mentioned that their profession did require a license. Different states have different licensing requirements but all require some level of continuing education courses or professional development in order to maintain an active teaching license. In addition, education is a female-dominated field and the participants expressed that women find the field appealing because they share the same schedules as their children.



Key Findings - Foreman

Civic Engagement

The conversation about civic engagement revealed a striking dynamic: 100% of the participants considered themselves to be frequent voters, yet not a single participant expressed any desire to run for public office.

Reasons for this reticence included:

- Not having any time to focus on anything other than caring for their families
- A desire to focus on their jobs while balancing family life
- Not having any mental bandwidth to give such an endeavor

”

I'd love to run for school board and help support my children's school even more, but there aren't enough hours in the day to accomplish everything on my list.” - Foreman Participant

”



of participants
voted in the last 3
years



UnitedWE

Virtual Town Hall

United WE understands that not all people can take time away from their work place or family during the day, yet their voice deserves to be heard. This understanding was the underpinning for a virtual town hall, held in October 2025, where 18 participants joined to discuss barriers and opportunities to their labor force participation and civic engagement. The group who joined the virtual town hall event represented many walks of life and were diverse in age, race, ethnicity, employment status, and industry.



Key Findings - Virtual

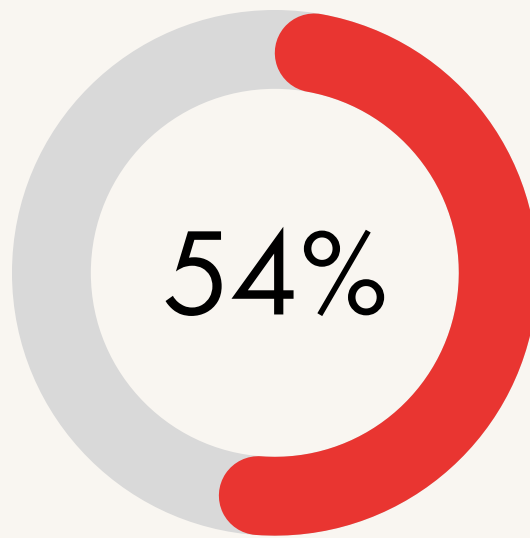
Caregiving

Caregiving was reported as an overwhelming barrier to labor force participation with this audience. In fact, **80%** suggested that increasing access to affordable childcare and eldercare would help recruit and retain women in the workforce.

Over half of the town hall participants currently have caregiving responsibilities for children, elderly family members or other dependents. One woman mentioned that, “skilled or assisted care for the elderly is limited in most areas across the state.”

The fact that so many participants navigate caregiving responsibilities surfaced the issue of paid time off at work places. Less than half of this audience reported having paid time off to care for family members.

Do you currently have caregiving responsibilities for children, aging adults, or other dependents?



”

“If we are serious about helping women in the workforce, then we have to solve the childcare and eldercare issue.” - Virtual Participant

”



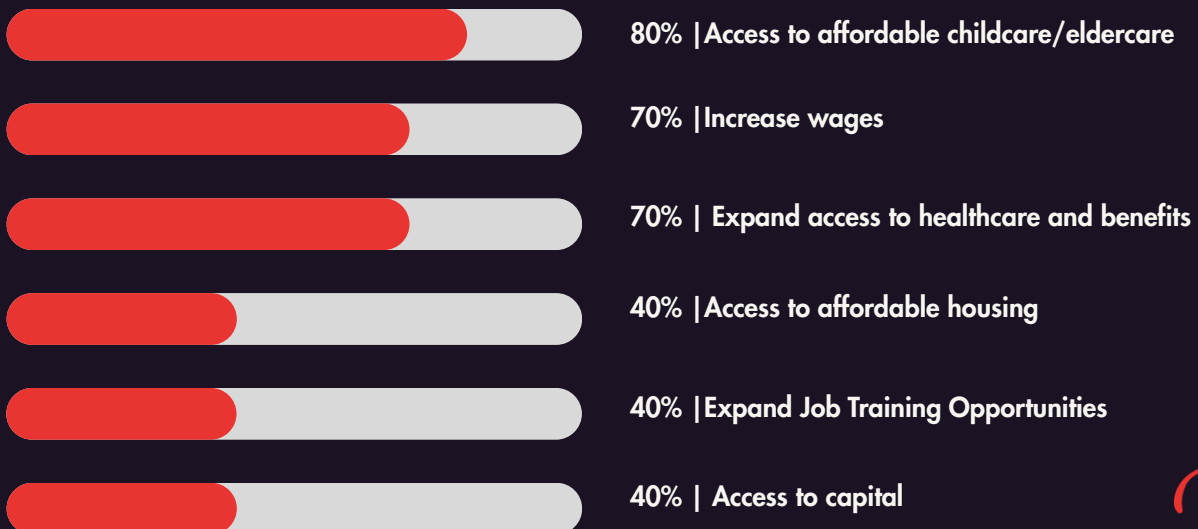
Key Findings - Virtual

Recruit and Retain Women in the Workforce

Participants identified several factors as most important to recruiting and retaining women in the workforce. In addition to access to affordable childcare and eldercare, participants emphasized the need for increased schedule flexibility, expanded remote work where feasible, higher wages, and stronger access to healthcare and benefits. Participants also highlighted the importance of formal networking and mentoring opportunities, support for adults balancing full-time work while pursuing additional education or training, affordable housing options, reliable transportation, and access to capital. Beyond caregiving responsibilities, participants cited limited workforce training opportunities as additional barriers to sustained labor force participation.



What would help recruit or retain women in the workforce? [check all that apply]



Key Findings - Virtual

Entrepreneurship

Following a theme from the in-person town halls, these participants gravitated towards entrepreneurship as a means to achieve flexibility in scheduling, particularly when engaged in caregiving.

However, the flexibility gained from running their own businesses did create other obstacles for these participants, including:

- access to benefits like healthcare
- low wages
- increase burden and stress
- inadequate access capital

An entrepreneur remarked that she's only able to work as a "solo-preneur" because her husband carries the family's health insurance.

Another business owner elevated the fact that black founders are typically underfunded at a higher rate than white founders.

”

“It's hard to make ends meet in general and then you add in the expense of childcare, healthcare, and rent and it becomes nearly impossible to get ahead.” - Virtual Participant

”

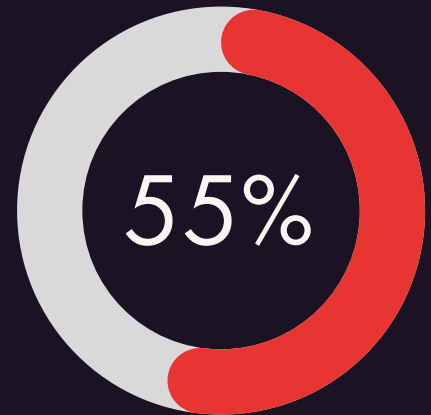
“Inadequate capital due to low wages is a huge hill to climb.” - Virtual Participant

”

“I tried opening my own business to have more control over my schedule, but now I'm just trying to find any job.” - Virtual Participant

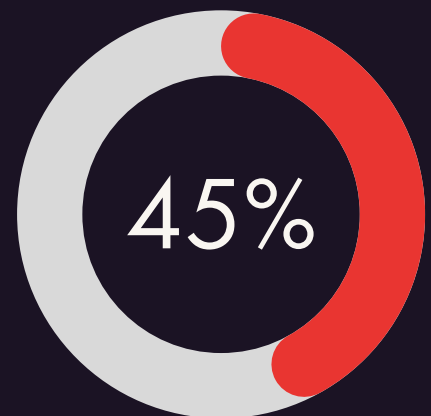
”

Have you
thought about
starting a
business?



● Yes

Have you
started a
business?



● Yes



Key Findings - Virtual

Healthcare and Benefits

Arkansas ranks 48th in a nationwide assessment of health access and affordability. This conversation revealed that only 36% of the group currently have access to health care, including dental and vision insurance, with 55% disclosing that they have access to retirement plans.

”

“When you go out on your own, you lose access to employer health insurance and other benefits like unemployment insurance, etc. It’s much more costly than many people realize.”

- Virtual Participant

”

Arkansas
ranks 48th in
a nationwide
assessment of
health
access and
affordability

Does your employer offer any of the following benefits? [check all that apply]

55% | Retirement Plans

18% | Not Applicable

45% | Paid time off for care of
self or other dependents

9% | None of the Above

36% | Health Insurance

0% | Childcare Stipend

36% | Dental/Vision

0% | Onsite childcare



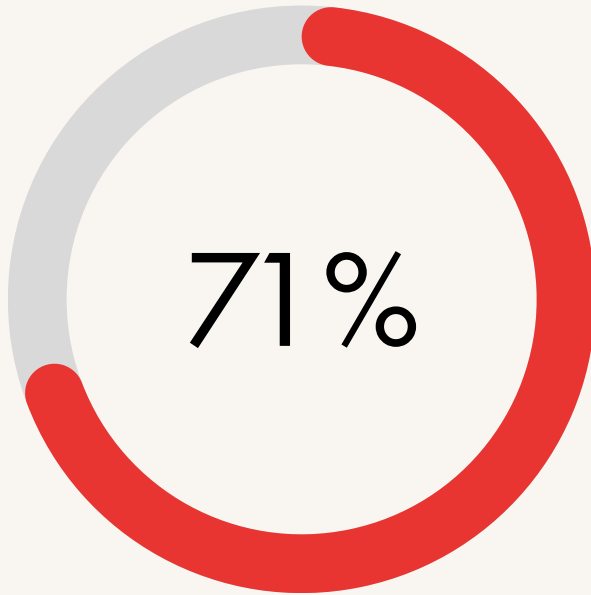
Key Findings - Virtual

Occupational Licensing and Certification

Because women are more likely to be part of regulated industries, the town hall had a focus on better understanding participants' experiences with occupational licensing.

Challenges identified included,

- Out of pocket costs if not associated with a large firm
- Time requirement for licensure
- Maintenance and upkeep with continuing education



of participants
said their current
or previous job
required a license

”

“Depending on the license, some of them can be very expensive to maintain if you are working part time or stepping out of the workforce for a while.” - Virtual Participant

”



Key Findings - Virtual

Civic Engagement

While top of mind for this audience, many participants admitted that civic engagement beyond voting (applying for an appointed role or running for office) is simply not feasible on top of their daily work and family obligations. Others who did have experience serving in appointed roles and in elected office expressed that their roles were impactful and left them with meaningful contributions to their communities. At the same time, even these respondents expressed the struggle to balance civic engagement with their other commitments.

”

“Juggling appointments and civic obligations make it hard to even attempt to maintain work life balance.” - Virtual Participant

”

The concept of "compassion fatigue" was also a centerpoint of some small group discussions where participants lamented their feelings of chronic exhaustion and inability to find any energy, empathy or desire to take on community issues.

”

“This is real for women and has direct health and wellness implications.” The constant stress related to caregiving, managing finances, etc. takes a toll on women's bodies - everything from higher cortisol-levels to more intense menstrual cycles.” - Virtual Participant

”

The National Institute of Health has studied compassion fatigue and reports:

With compassion fatigue, the caring, feeling, and acts of compassion decline, replaced by an outwardly impassive detachedness. The person becomes more task- and less emotion-focused, and may increasingly pull away from others, becoming socially isolated. The other classic symptom is profound physical and emotional exhaustion. It has been described as, “feeling fatigued in every cell of your being.” Such fatigue can significantly affect thinking, feeling, and behavior — the keystones of day-to-day functioning.



UnitedWE

Jonesboro, Arkansas

Jonesboro sits in northeast Arkansas on Crowley's Ridge and serves as a regional hub for education, healthcare, and industry, with a population of more than 80,000. Anchored by Arkansas State University, the city supports a diverse economy that includes manufacturing, retail, and agriculture-related industries. Jonesboro is a key economic engine for northeast Arkansas and workforce development statewide.

In early January 2026, United WE kicked off 2026 by hosting 17 women for a town hall event in Jonesboro, Arkansas. The event was held at Craighead County Public Library, a well-known community asset, which made the event highly accessible for all participants. The demographic breakdown for this town hall included a majority of black women, a Latina women and representative of the Hispanic Center, and an overwhelming majority of women who engage in caregiving.



Key Findings - Jonesboro

Caregiving

Caregiving — both childcare and eldercare — emerged as the primary barrier to women’s labor force participation in Jonesboro, cutting across income levels, family structures, and cultural backgrounds.

Caregiving themes centered around:

- **Overwhelming caregiving burden:** Single mothers and primary caregivers shoulder disproportionate responsibility, often without meaningful support.
- **High cost of childcare:** Wages — particularly in low-paying jobs — do not keep pace with childcare expenses, creating financial strain and difficult trade-offs.
- **Limited availability:** Shortages of childcare slots force families to travel long distances or piece together unreliable arrangements.
- **Schedule misalignment:** Traditional school hours, breaks, and summer schedules conflict with standard 8–5 work expectations.
- **Career trade-offs:** Women consider leaving the workforce due to childcare costs, despite long-term consequences for earnings and retirement.
- **Cultural expectations:** Gender norms often default caregiving responsibilities to women, even when fathers have flexibility.
- **Eldercare strain:** Care for aging parents or spouses adds to the caregiving load, with no coordinated system in place.
- **Insufficient eldercare infrastructure:** While the local Area on Aging provides critical support, it is under-resourced and unable to meet growing demand.

”

“Even when you have all of the help in the world, and I do, it’s a nightmare. If I had a third child I’d probably quit my job because it’s all just too much.” - Jonesboro

Participant

”

“I’m a single mom, so everything is on me. From taking care of taking care of my kids, including one with special needs, to work - I do a lot and cover a lot. Where is the help for me to get some help?” - Jonesboro Participant



Key Findings - Jonesboro

Caregiving

”

“There is no system in place for eldercare. It’s a hodgepodge of whatever you can do to make it work.” - Jonesboro Participant

”

“Even in the year 2026, machismo still exists in the Hispanic community. Women are expected to defer to men, men are expected to provide for the entire family and that leaves women to shoulder caregiving alone.” - Jonesboro Participant

”

“I’m the oldest of my siblings and I am the one taking care of my mom while I am taking care of my kids. I was driving back and forth between her home and Jonesboro daily while maintaining what I needed to do for myself and my kids. That was an hour and 15 minutes in one direction.” - Jonesboro Participant

”



Key Findings - Jonesboro

Recruit and Retain Women in the Workforce

In Jonesboro, women were clear about what would help recruit and retain them in the workforce: practical workplace flexibility, stronger wage growth, clearer advancement pathways, and support systems that make career progression realistic — not risky.

Key opportunity areas were:

- **Higher wages:** Pay that keeps pace with living costs.
- **Flexible schedules:** Work hours that align with real life.
- **Paid leave:** Sick leave and reasonable attendance policies.
- **Education access:** Affordable training and certification pathways.
- **Benefits reform:** Smoother transitions off public assistance.
- **Culturally responsive support:** Language access and community-informed outreach.
- **Mentorship:** Confidence-building and professional guidance.
- **Resource navigation:** Clear, accessible workforce supports.



Key Findings - Jonesboro

Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship emerged as both a flexible workforce solution and a pathway to fulfillment for many women — particularly those balancing caregiving responsibilities.

Several women described prolonged and unsuccessful attempts to obtain loans through traditional banks. For some, alternative community-based lenders became the turning point that made business ownership possible. Participants emphasized that expanding awareness of and access to mission-driven lending institutions could significantly lower barriers for women — particularly women of color — seeking to start or grow a business.

Participation & Motivation

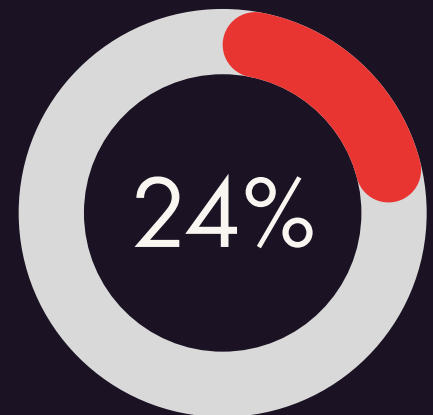
- 24% of participants currently own a business.
- 10% previously operated a business.
- Many pursued entrepreneurship to gain flexibility, manage caregiving demands, and maintain income.
- About 30% of participants work remotely, with most citing caregiving as the reason flexible arrangements work best.

Key Challenges

- Limited access to start-up capital.
- Difficulty securing traditional bank financing, even with strong credit histories.
- Workforce recruitment and retention challenges.
- Lack of awareness of alternative financing options.

“My bank gave me the run around for over two years. I had perfect credit but was still not able to secure a loan. The bank said I had to wait two years, which I did, but was still denied.” - Jonesboro Participant

Do you
currently own
your own
business?



● Yes



Key Findings - Jonesboro

Healthcare and Benefits

The majority of the town hall participants expressed frustration with accessing healthcare. Nearly all of the participants shared that they are responsible for ensuring their children and elderly family members get to doctor appointments, stay current on vaccines and prescriptions, and navigate health insurance. "I have a hard time prioritizing my own healthcare when there are so many logistics I'm needed for in order to make sure everyone else gets what they need," a working mother shared. "I think I've recently had a mammogram but I couldn't tell you the last time my labwork was checked. Our healthcare system places the burden on the patient to remember to do all of this. I just don't have that mental space."

Recruiting quality healthcare providers to the area and the current access to specialists were elevated as significant challenges. "I often have to travel to Memphis, Nashville, or Little Rock to find specialists and that's a problem for my job and for my family," shared a participant.

Another discussed coverage of her current health insurance plan: "I wish mental health was covered more by health insurance policies. When you have to play all these roles and do all these things then your mental health suffers. It becomes overwhelming to have all those people dependent on you."

— ” —

"I often have to travel to Memphis, Nashville, or Little Rock to find specialists and that's a problem for my job and for my family,"
- Jonesboro Participant

— ” —

Arkansas
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affordability



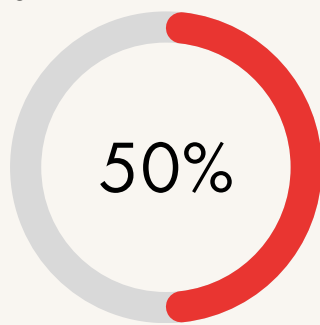
Key Findings - Jonesboro

Occupational Licensing and Certification

Licensing and certification requirements were an additional layer of the labor force participation dialogue. About half of the participants were in professions that required a license or a certification, including a nurse, therapist, lawyer and housing manager. Participants emphasized that while they were able to meet licensing requirements, the financial, time, and mobility constraints create additional friction — particularly for women balancing caregiving responsibilities or considering multi-state career opportunities.

Key Challenges

- **Cost of renewal and memberships:** Annual fees, required memberships, and continuing education expenses add up quickly.
- **Continuing education requirements (CEUs):** Maintaining hours and certifications is time-intensive, especially during caregiving demands.
- **Limited reciprocity:** Licenses often do not transfer across state lines (e.g., AR, MO, MS, TN), requiring additional exams or duplicative processes.
- **State-specific restrictions:** Some licenses are valid only in Arkansas, limiting mobility.
- **Administrative burdens:** Processes such as name changes can be complex and time-consuming.



of participants
said their current
or previous job
required a license

”

“I wish there were more reciprocity, especially considering in this area many people work in more than one state over the course of their career.” - Jonesboro

Participant

”



Key Findings - Jonesboro

Civic Engagement

The overall sense of discussion surrounding civic engagement was for most participants engagement in frequent voting and follow public policy issues was important, there was limited additional capacity across their day to day lives and responsibilities to consider running for an elected office.

Many participants expressed being unaware of the civic leadership opportunities available in their communities, and most noted that meetings held after 5 p.m. create conflicts with family responsibilities. A participant in her mid-20s noted that younger women may often feel hesitant to engage, expressing a sense of hopelessness or the perception that they should prioritize personal life over civic involvement.

Engagement among immigrant communities has also declined, with a participant describing fear and inward focus around more urgent matters.

Women highlighted the need for empowerment to challenge and navigate systemic barriers, emphasizing that existing structures often make it difficult to achieve meaningful impact.

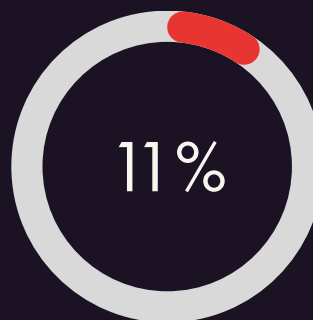
”

“I need to know what is involved in it {civic leadership roles} and what I will get out of it because I’m already maxed out on commitments.” -
Jonesboro Participant

”



of participants
had ever
considered
running for
elected office



of participants
had ever
considered civic
leadership
through an
appointed role



UnitedWE

Pine Bluff, Arkansas

Pine Bluff is located along the Arkansas River in southeast Arkansas, with a population of just over 38,000 and has historically been a center for agriculture, manufacturing, and transportation. Pine Bluff is also home to the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, a public historically black university (HBCU) founded in 1873. Today, healthcare, government services, and food processing are major employers as the city navigates economic transition. Pine Bluff remains an important regional workforce and service center with significant implications for economic equity and growth in the state.

In early January 2026, United WE convened twenty participants in Pine Bluff who were eager to discuss and share their own stories about what opportunities and barriers to labor force participation and civic engagement they see in the community. The town hall took place at the Pine Bluff Public Library, which is the newest structure built in Pine Bluff in almost twenty years. This reality set the stage for a deep conversation about fostering growth and opportunity for women in a community that has experienced steady population decline and underinvestment over the past decade.



Key Findings - Pine Bluff

Caregiving

Caregiving dominated the conversation about barriers to labor force participation. While some services exist, affordability gaps, infrastructure contraction, and logistical challenges prevent families from accessing the support they need. Caregiving themes centered around:

Childcare Affordability and Alignment

- Affordability Gap: Childcare slots may be available, but many families struggle to afford them.
- Nontraditional Work Hours: Higher-paying industrial jobs often require 12-hour or third-shift schedules. Childcare centers do not operate during those hours, effectively blocking access to better-paying employment.
- Special Needs Care Shortages: Families with children who have special needs face extreme difficulty securing appropriate care and often rely on patchwork arrangements until school entry.
- Geographic Burden: Working parents frequently travel significant distances to access childcare before commuting to work.

Eldercare Infrastructure Gaps

- All adult daycare centers in Pine Bluff have closed.
- Women disproportionately provide unpaid eldercare.
- Employers offer limited flexibility for employees managing dual caregiving responsibilities.
- The local Agency on Aging is understaffed relative to community need.
- Families who do not qualify for Medicaid fall into a coverage and affordability gap.

Transportation Constraints

- Coordinating school drop-offs, medical appointments, and work schedules is logistically complex.
- Funding cuts eliminated school district transportation to aftercare programs.

”

“The workforce isn’t set up for that type of life. My boss doesn’t want to hear that my kid has a doctor’s appointment in the morning and my dad needs physical therapy in the afternoon and I’m the only person that can get them there.” - Pine Bluff Participant

”



Key Findings - Pine Bluff

Recruit and Retain Women in the Workforce

A unique dimension of the Pine Bluff town hall centered on a discussion about the dearth of men that are absent from that community's labor force. "Some of it is incarceration but some of it is that our men don't have the education and job skills that the job market requires. They've been left behind," one participant reflected. Another suggested this reality creates layered obstacles for women who find themselves shouldering their family's entire wellbeing and livelihood.

Key opportunity areas discussed were:

- **Flexible, Family-Friendly Schedules:** Work hours that help women balance real life.
- **Expanded Caregiving Support:** Quality and affordable childcare and eldercare
- **Entrepreneurial Support:** Access to capital, business incubators, and mission-driven financing.
- **Healthcare Access:** Improved specialist availability and telehealth support
- **Training and Licensing:** Local credentialing and guidance in trades, healthcare, and technical fields open pathways to higher-paying roles.

”

“As a single parent, I love my children deeply, but I wouldn't wish my day to day on anyone. It's tough just to hang on and get by.” - Pine Bluff Participant

”



Key Findings - Pine Bluff

Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship emerged as both a necessary income strategy and a pathway to flexibility for many participants — particularly women balancing caregiving responsibilities. However, while entrepreneurial interest and activity were strong, systemic barriers were described as limiting sustainability and growth.

Limited Access to Capital - All entrepreneurs cited access to start-up and growth capital as a significant barrier. Many described prolonged and unsuccessful attempts to secure loans through traditional banks.

Biases in Lending - One participant operating an agribusiness shared that after Pine Bluff was designated a low-income community by the USDA — a designation intended to expand lending access — she was denied a loan while her son was approved. She reported receiving no explanation for the denial and noted that other women had similar experiences.

Shrinking Business Support Infrastructure - The business incubator at the University of Arkansas–Pine Bluff was described as a critical resource. However, several pandemic-era supports ended when emergency funding expired, leaving ongoing needs unmet.

Awareness Gaps - Participants noted limited awareness of alternative or mission-driven financing options that could lower barriers to entrepreneurship.

Do you
currently own
your own
business?



● Yes



Key Findings - Pine Bluff

Healthcare and Benefits

Participants described difficulty navigating the healthcare system while managing work and family responsibilities. While many prioritize preventative care, follow-up appointments are often delayed as caregiving for children and aging parents takes precedence. As one participant shared, “I just make do with what little time I can carve out to care for myself. My children will always come first.”

Telehealth and the Digital Divide

Although some found telehealth helpful, many felt uncomfortable navigating digital healthcare platforms. Participants cited limited digital literacy and uncertainty about how to access virtual services.

Specialist Shortages and Travel Burdens

A lack of local specialists — particularly in gynecology and cardiology — was a major concern. Families often travel to Little Rock for specialty care, requiring time off work and reliable transportation. Participants also described coverage cliffs at age 18 for individuals with chronic conditions, creating additional financial and logistical strain.

”

“Children with sickle cell have access to a lot of resources, but we always had to drive to Little Rock to get that medical care because nothing existed here in Pine Bluff. But when she turned 18, all of that healthcare coverage went away. It’s so expensive, plus her health issues mean she can’t drive to appointments so I have to take time off work to get her there.” - Pine Bluff Participant

”



Key Findings - Pine Bluff

Occupational Licensing and Certification

Participants highlighted that credentialing requirements often create barriers to workforce entry, particularly in healthcare and skilled trades. Key challenges included:

- **Local Access Barriers:** Required certifications, such as CPR for nurses, homecare workers, and therapists, are not available in Pine Bluff, forcing residents to travel long distances.
- **Unclear Pathways:** Many participants lacked guidance on where to start or how to complete certifications, including trade professions like cosmetology.
- **Time and Cost Burdens:** Traveling for training or certification adds financial and logistical strain, limiting access to in-demand jobs.



”

“I see so many opportunities in trade professions that could lead to good-paying jobs without college debt, but women don’t often see themselves in those roles.”

- Pine Bluff Participant

”



Key Findings - Pine Bluff

Civic Engagement

A **quarter** of participants either currently serve in an appointed role or have considered an appointed position as part of their civic leadership path. Only **15%** of participants have ever seriously considered running for office. Two major reasons emerged as to why participants were not more engaged in civic affairs,

Lack of Bandwidth - Many women cited overwhelming personal and professional responsibilities, leaving little capacity for additional commitments.

”

“Women are so overwhelmed. We work to put food on the table and the demands on us are so high. People don’t want to do this stuff because we are burned out and tired.” - Pine Bluff Participant

”

“Most of the meetings for these roles are after 5 pm. So, do we miss our child’s activities or attend another meeting?” - Pine Bluff Participant

”

Lack of Civility in Political Discourse - Many cited negative perceptions of civic culture, including public officials behavior and frustration around political agendas that discourage them from running for office or seeking formal leadership roles.

”

“I care deeply about Pine Bluff and this state but there is no way I’d run for office. It’s too nasty. I’d rather do what I can in my own little corner of the world.” - Pine Bluff Participant

”



UnitedWE