

# Measuring nonprofit success isn't just a matter of numbers



Shelves that are normally filed with food are empty on Aug. 4, 2025, at Second Harvest Food Bank of the Lehigh Valley and Northeast Pennsylvania in East Allen Township. April Gamiz/The Morning Call

I appreciate the recent opinion piece calling for nonprofit accountability. Nonprofits should absolutely measure outcomes, demonstrate impact and be transparent about how donor dollars are used.

At Community Action Lehigh Valley, we agree that success is not simply

counting how many people walked through our doors. We strive every day to help people become more self-sufficient, build wealth, and create brighter futures for themselves and future generations.

But where I respectfully disagree is with the suggestion that nonprofits should ultimately be judged by whether social problems such as poverty, hunger and homelessness become smaller. The reality is far more complicated.

A food bank can operate exceptionally well while hunger increases. A homeless shelter can be highly effective while more families lose housing. A domestic violence organization can save lives while reports of abuse continue to rise. That doesn't mean these organizations are failing. It often means the challenges facing families are becoming greater.

In recent years, Lehigh Valley families have experienced rising rents, rising utility costs, rising food prices, rising transportation expenses and rising healthcare costs.

Apartment rents in the Lehigh Valley have increased by more than 30% since 2020, outpacing income growth in many households. Meanwhile, Pennsylvania's minimum wage remains \$7.25 per hour, where it has remained since 2009. When wages stand still and the cost of everything else rises, working families are forced to make impossible decisions.

Do I pay the rent? Do I keep the lights on? Do I fix the car so I can get to work? Do I buy my medications? Or do I buy groceries? Too often, food is the expense that gets cut first.

And when a child goes hungry, the consequences extend far beyond an empty stomach. Hungry children struggle to concentrate in school, are more likely to experience health problems and behavioral challenges, and face barriers that can affect them for years.

If more families are turning to food banks, we should ask why. Is it because food banks are failing? Or is it because more families are being squeezed by economic pressures they cannot overcome on their own?

Community Action Lehigh Valley addresses both immediate needs and long-term solutions. When a family needs food, we provide food. But we also work every day to help people build stability and opportunity.

We help families become homeowners. We help entrepreneurs start and grow businesses. We help students access higher education and career pathways. We weatherize homes so families can lower energy costs and keep more of their income. We provide financial coaching, housing counseling and pathways to economic mobility.

We celebrate the success stories of people who buy their first home, launch a business, complete a degree, increase their earnings, reduce their debt or achieve financial stability. Those outcomes matter, and they are carefully measured and reported to hundreds of funding sources that require rigorous accountability.

Yet even these successes do not occur in a vacuum. Whether someone escapes poverty depends on many factors, including:

Stable employment and livable wages

Access to affordable housing

Childcare availability

Transportation reliability

Physical and mental health

Educational opportunities

Family support systems

Community safety

Public policy

Economic conditions

Discrimination and systemic barriers

Unexpected crises such as illness, job loss, or domestic violence

No single nonprofit can control all of those factors. What we can do is stand beside people as they navigate them.

There's an old saying: Give a person a fish and they'll eat for a day. Teach

a person to fish and they'll eat for a lifetime. At Community Action, we are proud of every person we've helped learn to fish. We are proud of the homeowners, entrepreneurs, graduates, and families who have achieved greater stability because of our programs.

But we also understand that sometimes a storm destroys the boat, closes the river or washes away the dock. In those moments, people still need to eat.

The true measure of a nonprofit is not whether it can single-handedly eliminate complex societal challenges. It is whether it uses its resources effectively, treats people with dignity, demonstrates measurable impact, and helps individuals and families move toward greater opportunity whenever possible.

We should absolutely expect accountability from nonprofits. But we should also recognize that solving poverty, hunger and homelessness requires more than nonprofits alone. It requires communities, employers, policymakers, funders and governments working together to address the root causes that drive need in the first place.

The growing demand we see is not evidence that nonprofits have failed. More often, it is evidence of just how much work remains for all of us.

*This is a contributed opinion column. Dawn Godshall is CEO of Community Action Lehigh Valley. For more details on commentaries, read our guide to guest opinions at [themorningcall.com/opinions](https://themorningcall.com/opinions).*