



UNITED WAY
Santa Cruz County



COMMUNITY IMPACT

2024-2025 ANNUAL REPORT



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LETTER FROM LEADERSHIP

Dear Partners, Youth, and Community,

Thank you for being part of this journey with us. As we reflect on the past year, we recognize the many challenges our community has faced. Yet even in difficult times, one thing remains constant: our youth continue to show up.

Their leadership reminds us that change is not only possible but necessary and that this work belongs to all of us.

Today, we are proud to formally announce **United4Youth**, the name that brings our shared efforts together under one vision.

United4Youth unites our work to **uplift youth voice**, **leadership**, **mental wellbeing**, and **civic engagement**. It honors the commitment of so many who have helped build a stronger, more connected county, one where young people are not only supported but leading the way.

Our work is grounded in a simple but powerful belief: when we listen to youth, trust them, and walk alongside them, communities thrive.

As we move forward, let's continue to show up for our youth, for each other, and for the future we believe in. Together, we can build a community where every young person feels seen, supported, valued, and heard.

With gratitude and hope,

Pamela Velazquez Janusz

Director of Community Impact, United4Youth



LETTER FROM YOUTH LEADERSHIP

Hello,

My name is Gabriel Isaiah Melgoza. With the end of the previous term, it's led me not only to reflect on my own role as a Community Impact Intern, but also on others' roles who have worked together with me.

I was first exposed to Jóvenes Sanos through the summer partner program of the organization with a local gym in 2022. I was then part of their team and helped work on almost all of their projects they introduced, from simple tabling to team building outdoors and educational family days. It was an opening for me to express a part of myself that I had no idea I possessed. Working for the community I was part of felt deeply fulfilling. During my junior and senior year, I even convinced my friends to join, witnessing for myself the positive Jóvenes Sanos could have on them as well.

Before all of this, I never even gave much thought to mental health. It was not something ever discussed in my home or classes, and I never had to think about it. All of that changed once I was a part of this youth program. Finally, I had people that I could speak with about these matters, people who had similar goals and a similar motivation to improve our community. During 2023-2024, I served as the vice president of the organization, which helped me **develop my public speaking, communication, and specifically organizational skills** in order to keep the leadership on track. These experiences reaffirmed my connections to new friends and friends I've made for life.

Now, as a Community Impact Intern and recent high school graduate, I'm grateful for the hundreds of opportunities I've had to voice my opinion on the issues of student mental health, the stigma around it, and how we can make it an open and safe conversation. I intend to continue voicing these causes, trying to bring them to even larger platforms.

I would like to thank the United Way Santa Cruz County for letting me be part of this valuable work. And I would like to thank Pamela Velazquez especially for encouraging me to do what I love. I encourage all of you to be that role model, to give back by passing on your experiences, engaging with youth, and considering how you can be part of our ongoing mission.

Sincerely,



Gabriel Melgoza
Community Impact Intern, United4Youth



OUR TEAM



PAMELA VELAZQUEZ JANUSZ, DIRECTOR OF COMMUNITY IMPACT

Pamela serves as the Director of Community Impact at United Way of Santa Cruz County. A first-generation Latina and graduate of the Middlebury Institute of International Studies with a Master of Public Administration in Social Change, Pam leads efforts to uplift youth voice, advance equity, and strengthen community well-being. She oversees countywide initiatives that bring together young people, partners, and systems leaders to create lasting, measurable change.

KARINA BETANZOS, COMMUNITY IMPACT COORDINATOR

Karina is a Community Impact Coordinator supporting Jóvenes Sanos, United Way's youth leadership and mental health initiative in Watsonville. She holds a B.A. in Political Science from California State University, Sacramento, and an A.A. in Social and Behavioral Science from West Valley College. Karina is committed to creating spaces where youth feel seen, heard, and supported as they grow into leaders in their community.



LILLY GALVAN, COMMUNITY IMPACT COORDINATOR

Lilly is a Community Impact Coordinator with United Way of Santa Cruz County, supporting both the Youth Action Network and Jóvenes Sanos. She holds a B.A. in Collaborative Health and Human Services with a concentration in Social Work from CSU Monterey Bay. Guided by her passion for education, service, and youth empowerment, Lilly works alongside young people to amplify their voices and strengthen collaboration with partners across the county.



MALENA RONGA, COMMUNITY IMPACT COORDINATOR

Malena is a Youth Action Network Coordinator on the Community Impact team at United Way of Santa Cruz County. She holds dual degrees in Psychology and Community Studies from UC Santa Cruz. Malena brings a strong background in youth leadership, and social justice. She works to build inclusive spaces where youth of all identities can lead, connect, and shape community solutions.



A SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR INTERNS

This work would not have been possible without the invaluable support of our interns- Lizbeth Garcia, Monica Garcia, Alanah Martinez, Nancy Iniguez-Cornejo, Jacky Sandoval, and Janelle Harvey. Their dedication and hard work have been instrumental in achieving our goals and driving our mission forward. We extend our heartfelt thanks to each intern for their contributions and commitment to our community impact initiatives.

UNITED4YOUTH

United4Youth is United Way of Santa Cruz County's countywide initiative that unites our youth-focused programs under a shared vision: to uplift youth voice, expand access to resources, and champion youth well-being.

OUR PROGRAMS



Youth Action Network (YAN) – Countywide

A collaborative of youth and adults working together to **strengthen partnerships**, **expand youth leadership**, and **promote civic engagement**. This includes initiatives such as Youth City Liaisons for the Cities of Santa Cruz and Capitola.



Youth Participatory Action Research (Y-PAR) – Countywide

Empowers youth to **investigate community issues** and **develop solutions** through research that centers their experiences and insights.



Jóvenes Sanos – Watsonville

A youth leadership program focused on **reducing mental health stigma** and **promoting wellness** through peer education, outreach, and advocacy.

Pathways to Possibility – Scotts Valley

A youth-led initiative addressing Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) through **policy advocacy** and expanded access to afterschool programs and supportive resources.

OUR KEY STRATEGIES

- **Centering Youth Voice & Leadership** - Youth lead as decision-makers, researchers, and advocates.
- **Building Collaborative Partnerships** - Strengthening connections between youth, adults, and community organizations to co-create lasting solutions.
- **Skill-Building & Capacity Development** - Providing youth with training and opportunities to develop leadership, advocacy, research, and life skills.

ALIGNED WITH UNITED WAY'S IMPACT PILLARS

HEALTHY COMMUNITY

Improving health and well-being for all

YOUTH OPPORTUNITY

Helping young people realize their full potential





"I'm passionate about helping my community
in any way I can, whether that be by volunteering
time or speaking my opinion ... Before joining, I
felt like I didn't contribute anything to my
community, but now I have the opportunity and
ability to put myself out there and actually make
a change."

"My favorite aspect of the program has been
seeing the results."

Melinna Rocha, Youth Researcher &
Jóvenes Sanos, Youth Leader

Pictured to the left

"Our youth are our future." A mother shared how
her son's involvement in the program has been
"very rewarding," leading to "other growth
opportunities in research and planning." Since
joining, she's seen him grow in "confidence, public
awareness, and a sense of responsibility towards
community." She believes programs like this are
vital because "they provide early opportunities for
youth to develop their leadership skills to make
impacts on their community."

Joyce Ramirez-Alcazar, Parent of Adrian Ramirez
Pictured to the right



IMPACT STORIES

This year, we hosted over 80 youth-led and youth-centered opportunities, engaging youth more than 600 times across these events. These spaces supported young people to lead, heal, and create change in their communities.

3rd Annual Cultivating Hope

Empowering Youth Mental Wellness

Fifty youth led the way at our third annual Cultivating Hope event, an energizing space dedicated to self-care, wellness, and peer connection. Thoughtfully planned by Jóvenes Sanos youth, the day featured hands-on workshops and authentic conversations with eight local partners, including NAMI Santa Cruz County, Conflict Resolution, Community Health Trust, Living Evolution, Yoga for All Movement, PVPSA, Watsonville Library, and the Watsonville Youth Center.

Thanks to the support of the Watsonville Youth Center, the event provided a safe space to destigmatize mental health and promote well-being. Post-event surveys revealed powerful impact:

- 93% of youth increased their understanding of self-care
- 77% deepened their awareness of mental health
- 89% plan to use new self-care strategies learned



Cultivating Community Youth & Family Resource Fair

Connecting Families to Vital Resources

Over 200 community members and more than 30 resource booths came together to spark connection, support, and healing. Co-designed by Jóvenes Sanos youth, Cultivating Community focused on well-being, youth leadership, and access to resources. Families engaged with 34 local organizations offering practical tools—from mental health and housing to education and youth programs.

This event continues to uplift community voices and ensure families have what they need to thrive.



“Pathways to Possibility gave me the view that I can make real changes in my community and **I can have a say about things happening around me in my community.** The best part so far has definitely been having the chance to meet up with and work with local council men and women of Scotts Valley to find out how we can truly make a change for the better.”

“We can help by representing what children in the community actually want and need as well as possibly building up efficient and affordable propositions.”

Emil Schultz,
Pathways to Possibility
Youth Leader



Youth & Adult Partnership (YAP) Summit

Strengthening Collaboration Across Generations

In June, we hosted the YAP Summit, a collaborative gathering of over 60 youth and adults dedicated to **building stronger partnerships** across Santa Cruz County. The event opened with key findings from the YAP Survey—completed by 101 youth and 66 adults—and set the stage for deeper dialogue on Social Justice Youth Development.

Participants engaged in three interactive workshops led by Youth Action Network partners:

- Supporting Youth Civic Engagement & Policy Change
- Building Strong Youth-Adult Partnerships
- Identifying Assets

Each session activated the summit's core goals: expanding youth voice in decision-making, promoting positive youth development, and increasing access to local resources and support systems.



"Throughout this program, I have gained the opportunity to learn more about the city I live in and the community I grew up in. My favorite part of the program would probably be the fact that I have a role in helping Capitola."

Ila Bonney,
Capitola City
Youth Liaison



Leaders Unite 4 Youth Workshop

Bridging Youth and Local Leaders

Young people and local decision-makers came together for a dynamic workshop focused on **civic engagement and policy change**. With support from the City of Santa Cruz and City of Capitola Youth Liaisons, youth explored local government through engaging activities, including a government-themed Jeopardy game.

Eleven youth leaders connected with eight local representatives, building their confidence, peer networks, and leadership skills. Post-event surveys showed a clear increase in participants' understanding of local government and stronger connections between youth and adult allies.

STRENGTHENING YOUTH VOICE & SUPPORT: PUBLIC POLICY MILESTONES

A Historic Milestone: Children and Youth Bill of Rights Adopted Countywide

In May 2025, United Way of Santa Cruz County and our United4Youth initiative celebrated a major policy milestone: the official adoption of the [Santa Cruz County Children and Youth Bill of Rights](#) by all four cities—[Santa Cruz](#), [Capitola](#), [Scotts Valley](#), and [Watsonville](#)—and the County of Santa Cruz. This countywide commitment affirms every young person’s right to be safe, healthy, valued, and heard.

The final adoption in Watsonville was led by youth from Jóvenes Sanos, the Teen Action Council, and Luna y Sol, showcasing the power of youth leadership in policy change.

“As a graduating senior, and an active member of the youth community through programs like Summer in the City and Jóvenes Sanos, I’ve seen the true difference it makes when young people feel heard and supported,” said [Mitzel Dodge](#). “Passing the Children and Youth Bill of Rights in Santa Cruz County is more than a policy decision, it’s a promise to us... a promise that our county truly values our voices, safety, and future.”

Local leaders including Martine Watkins, United Way Board Member, and Shebreh Kalantari-Johnson, co-author of the Bill of Rights, have been key advocates in making this vision a reality.

This achievement reflects years of work through our Youth Action Network and community partnerships, and sets the foundation for a more just, youth-centered future in Santa Cruz County.

Pathways to Possibility: A Youth-Led Policy Vision in Scotts Valley

Pathways to Possibility is a youth-led initiative advocating for dedicated funding for afterschool programs and youth development in Scotts Valley. With a strong community foundation, Scotts Valley has a unique opportunity to address youth concerns around mental health, belonging, and access. Through Pathways to Possibility, local youth are **transforming these challenges into opportunities** for growth and connection.

In 2025, youth leaders attended the All Children Thrive (ACT) Conference in Sacramento, where they met with Representative Gail Pellerin and shared their vision for youth-centered investment.

We are excited to welcome Council Member Krista Jett to our design team and sincerely thank the adult partners who have supported youth in building relationships with local leaders and advocating for dedicated public funding.

This work is made possible through funding from All Children Thrive.



RESEARCH & FINDINGS

Santa Cruz County Youth Participatory Action Research: Community Safety, Well-Being, and Satisfaction

Since 2021, United Way of Santa Cruz County and UC Santa Cruz have partnered to equip young people with tools to lead meaningful, community-rooted research through the Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) model.

Youth across the county **designed and launched a countywide survey reaching 542 residents—primarily Latinx, multiracial individuals, and youth**. Their findings highlight the strong link between community safety, access to services, and mental wellness: when youth feel safe and supported, they thrive at home, in school, and within their communities.

The research underscores the importance of racial equity, accessible neighborhood resources, and coordinated services to improve well-being across Santa Cruz County.

[Click here to learn more about the YPAR findings and youth leadership impact](#)

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Santa Cruz County

Strengthening Youth & Adult Partnerships

The Youth & Adult Partnerships (YAP) Survey, co-designed with youth leaders, explores how **youth and adults experience collaboration** in programs and decision-making spaces across Santa Cruz County.

The 2025 YAP Survey gathered responses from 88 youth (average age 15.8) and 66 adults from youth-serving organizations, with 63% of youth respondents based in South County.

Preliminary Findings:

- 93.5% of adults report supporting youth leadership; only 76.1% of youth agree
- 72.4% of youth feel they have a voice in decision-making, but just 56.3% say they have real influence
- 90.8% of adults say they encourage youth to take on leadership roles

A full technical report will be released later this year, with the goal of strengthening intergenerational partnerships countywide.

Youth As Changemakers Survey

Impact Measures: 2023–2024 Youth Participatory Action Research Cohort

This post-program survey captures the experiences of youth researchers from the 2023–2024 cohort, highlighting the program's impact on **leadership development, advocacy, and civic engagement**.

Highlights:

- 78.6% of youth plan to engage in social change efforts in their communities.
- 71.4% feel confident in their ability to lead and collaborate to make meaningful impact.
- 100% of respondents plan to attend college, reflecting strong academic commitment.
- 71.4% intend to take on leadership roles, volunteer work, or other extracurricular activities.

These findings demonstrate the program's success in building youth confidence, leadership capacity, and a long-term commitment to community involvement.

OUR PARTNERS

Heartfelt thanks to all our partners for their contributions in helping us build a better community!

- Assemblymember Dawn Addis & Staff
- Assembly Member Gail Pellerin & Staff
- Black Health Matters
- Congressman Jimmy Panetta & Staff
- Cabrillo College
- Capitola City Council & Staff
- Capitola City Police Department
- Community Printers
- City of Watsonville Parks & Community Services
- City of Watsonville
- Community Health Trust of Pajaro Valley
- Community Action Board of Santa Cruz County
- Community Bridges
- Conflict Resolution Center of Santa Cruz County
- County Board of Supervisors & Staff
- Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)
- Cradle to Career
- Digital NEST Watsonville
- Diversity Center
- Encompass Community Services , TAY
- Encompass, Head Start
- Empower Watsonville
- FoodWhat
- Growing Greatness
- Lionel Cantú Queer Resource Center - UCSC
- El Centro - UCSC
- Living Evolution
- Monarch Services
- Mariposa Arts Council
- NAACP
- NAMI Santa Cruz County
- Pajaro Valley Unified School District Expanded Learning
- Pajaro Valley Prevention and Student Assistance
- Regeneración - Pajaro Valley Climate Action
- ParkRx Santa Cruz County
- Raíces y Cariño
- Salud y Carino
- Salud Para La Gente
- Santa Cruz Barrios Unidos
- Santa Cruz County, Friday Night Live
- Santa Cruz City Council & Staff
- Santa Cruz Community Health
- Santa Cruz County Behavioral Health
- Santa Cruz County Clerk & Elections
- Santa Cruz County District Attorney's Office
- Santa Cruz County Parks & Recreation Committee
- Santa Cruz Teen Center
- Santa Cruz County CPVAW Commission
- Santa Cruz County Family & Children's Services
- Santa Cruz County Office of Education & Youth Leadership Alliance
- Santa Cruz County Probation
- Second Harvest Food Bank of Santa Cruz County
- Santa Cruz County Office of Response, Recovery & Resilience
- Scotts Valley City Council & Staff
- Scotts Valley High School
- Scotts Valley HOPE Squad
- Somos Watsonville
- Teen Health Outreach
- UC Santa Cruz Campus + Community
- Watsonville High School
- Watsonville City Council
- Watsonville Teen Center
- Watsonville City's Teen Action Council
- Walnut Ave. Family & Women's Center
- Watsonville Youth Center
- Watsonville PAL
- Your Future is Our Business
- Yoga for All Movement

Special Thanks to Campus + Community and UC Santa Cruz Partners

We extend our heartfelt appreciation to Campus + Community and our dedicated partners at UC Santa Cruz. Your collaboration, expertise, and commitment have been essential in advancing youth voice, equity, and community well-being across Santa Cruz County. Together, we are building stronger connections between higher education and local impact.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank You, Malena!

We're deeply grateful for your dedication and impact on the Community Impact team. Your work has helped shape a stronger, more connected community. Wishing you the best in your next chapter!



Here are some words as she says goodbye:

"The mentorship, friendship, and experience gained at United Way Santa Cruz will never leave me. I started out on the team as an undergrad in our Youth Participatory Action Research Project, advanced as an intern, and then became a part time & eventually full time coordinator. My journey is just one of many examples of what United Way Santa Cruz makes possible for the people in its community. I'm excited to take everything I've learned here and bring it back to my community in Southern California. Don't be a stranger – let's stay connected on [LinkedIn](#)! I can't wait to see all the amazing work you continue to do in Santa Cruz. A piece of my heart will always be here."

Malena Ronga, Community Impact Coordinator

We are deeply grateful to our donors and funders. Your support drives real change and creates meaningful opportunities for youth and families.
Thank you for making a lasting impact!



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California**

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