

KNOWING & HELPING ALICE

 Prepared by: Marilee Enus

 marilee.enus@unh.edu

 t2.unh.edu



It's likely that you have at least one, if not several, "Alices" on your team. ALICE: **Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed**. ALICE describes households earning above the federal poverty level but below what it takes to make ends meet. They are employed, often full-time and even juggling multiple jobs, but unable to consistently afford housing, food, childcare, transportation, healthcare, and other essentials without sacrifices. Many live paycheck to paycheck with no opportunity to build a savings account for life's unknowns.

Many of our essential staff are ALICE, including plow drivers, mechanics, sign shop crews, and administrative staff. When paying rent, buying groceries, and covering utilities depletes their paycheck, they may find themselves deciding whether to put gas in the car or pay for a prescription, whether to hold off on replacing the tires on the car in order to purchase winter jackets for the kids. They may sacrifice hosting a small birthday party with cupcakes and pizza for a young child to pay a doctor's copay, or pay the invoice for the plumber with a high-interest credit card. Each decision may put them further into debt, or further from having the small safety net of a savings account.

What Does ALICE Look Like in NH?

For a family of four in New Hampshire, being "just above poverty" and thus just outside many social safety nets means earning slightly more than \$32,000 a year. But to realistically support two children, both parents working full-time would need to earn a combined household income of about \$90,000–\$130,000 per year (or about \$22–\$32/hour each), depending on which part of the state the family lives in.

Estimates suggest this is 1 in 4 NH households; **potentially 1 in 4 of our team members**. These are people with incomes above the federal poverty level but below the minimum cost of housing, childcare, food, transportation, healthcare, technology, and taxes in New Hampshire. That means one in four of your team members may be facing difficult financial decisions and sacrifices regularly.

Many ALICE households have two adults working, but regionally high housing, childcare, and transportation costs consume much of their income. A single worker earning around \$23/hour may not qualify for government assistance but also may not be able to build savings or handle unexpected expenses comfortably.

The Hidden Choices ALICE Households Make

ALICE households routinely navigate tough financial trade-offs, including:

- Postponing medical procedures or dental care because costs exceed their budget.
- Choosing between sending a child on a school field trip or paying a utility bill.
- Deciding whether to pay a babysitter when a child is sick or to miss work and lose a day's pay.
- Skipping car repairs until breakdowns occur, leading to potentially higher costs and unreliable transportation to work.

These daily stressors drain mental energy and can impact safety, focus, and well-being at home and on the job.

Why Should Public Works Leaders Care?

Your operations depend on employees arriving prepared and focused. ALICE stressors can lead to:

- Increased absenteeism and “presenteeism” (being at work but mentally disengaged and distant, which can be dangerous when working with equipment and along roadways).
- Higher turnover as workers seek slightly higher pay or better benefits elsewhere.
- Lower morale.

Human Well-being

Your staff's mental health is as important as their physical safety. The weight of constant financial worry can lead to depression, anxiety, and fatigue. And in construction, the concern with mental wellness is even more stark; construction represents just 7% of the U.S. workforce but nearly 18% of suicides, showing the industry carries more than twice the burden. Supporting financial stability helps employees be more present, safer, and healthier.

The Call to Action

Our local public works teams show up to plow roads at 3 AM, to repair water breaks in sub-zero temperatures, and to keep our communities safe. For many, simply getting to work on time requires quiet heroics to navigate financial burdens and life's curveballs. Investing in our municipal ALICE employees is smart workforce management that improves safety and reliability, supports retention and recruitment, and demonstrates commitment to those who keep our communities running.

What Managers Can Do About ALICE in Public Works

Understanding ALICE is the first step. Acting to support ALICE is next. Aside from understanding wage and salary trends, and advocating for wage increases where appropriate, here are a few things managers can do:

Recognize & Normalize the Issue

- Acknowledge that nearly 1 in 4 NH households are ALICE; this includes your staff. Naming it makes the problem less invisible.
- Share that financial stress is as real a safety hazard as fatigue or equipment failure.

Flexible Supports

- Adjust scheduling where possible (e.g., consistent shifts, advance notice for overtime) to help staff juggle childcare, second jobs, or elder care.
- Consider how to integrate schedule swap systems or creative scheduling that reduce stress without adding cost.

Connect to Resources

- Partner with HR, local nonprofits, credit unions, or employee assistance programs (EAPs) to connect staff with food access, fuel assistance, childcare help, or financial coaching.
- Create a “resource board” or discreet resources highlighting local supports (housing, utilities, transportation, food pantries).

Workplace Practices that Save Money for Staff

- Supply proper PPE, uniforms, and gear so employees aren’t paying out of pocket.
- Provide coffee, water, and occasional meals during storms to reduce their home food costs and stress.

Talking Points for Supervisors to Reduce Stigma Around ALICE Conversations

- About one in four households in New Hampshire fall into ALICE. That means it’s not unusual; it’s reality for a lot of good, hardworking people.
- ALICE doesn’t mean someone isn’t responsible. It means the cost of living is outpacing wages, even when people are working full time.
- This isn’t about bad choices; it’s about high housing, childcare, and transportation costs in New Hampshire and beyond.
- When people are under constant financial stress, it shows up as fatigue, distraction, or health issues, just like any other workplace hazard. Reducing that stress makes our whole team safer.
- Promote openness: “If you’re feeling financial pressure, you’re not alone. We have resources and connections we can share. It’s okay to talk about it.”
- Encourage respect among crews: “We don’t know what someone’s carrying outside of work. Let’s treat each other with respect, because money stress doesn’t make anyone less of a worker or teammate.”

For more information about ALICE, visit [UnitedForAlice](https://www.unitedforalice.org) at <https://www.unitedforalice.org>.