



JANUARY 2026

“LOOKING FOR WAYS TO HELP”

Best Practices in Indiana
Township Trustee Assistance

Executive Summary

In January, 2025, members of this coalition which includes Greater Indianapolis Multifaith Alliance, Indiana Legal Services, the IU McKinney Housing, Health, and Human Rights Clinic, HealthNet Homeless Initiative Program, RDOOR, and the Housing Justice Task Force of Meridian Street United Methodist Church, all of whom work with low-income Central Indiana residents in need of housing and other assistance, published a report on the township trustees of Marion County. Our report provided a comprehensive blueprint for how township assistance could work better for the people who rely on it.

As Indiana debates the future of township assistance and examines how well existing systems are serving residents, this new report documents how township trustees in multiple counties are using their authority and resources to respond effectively to community needs. By outlining what strong township leadership can deliver, the report supplements our earlier blueprint with real-world examples of solutions in action and how township assistance can and should function. These practices include removing unnecessary barriers to aid, creating warming centers and emergency shelters, deploying mobile medical clinics, and providing essential items such as car seats and diapers to families in need.

Our hope is that these examples encourage more trustees to adopt practices that meet the moment and ensure Hoosiers receive the assistance they both need and deserve. We also hope this report helps communities hold trustees accountable who do not meet this standard. As Indiana Township Association Executive Director and Township Trustee Debbie Driskell said in an interview for this report, “A good trustee should be looking for ways to help.”

Introduction

Every four years, in each of the 1,002 townships located across the state of Indiana, voters elect a trustee. Townships are a hyper-local unit of government that date back to the early 19th century method of surveying what would become the state of Indiana.¹

For each of those trustees the legal mandate for the trustees is to help people in their township who are in need. The trustee-provided assistance, historically known as “poor relief,” is meant to cover essentials like rent, utilities, food, and medical care during times of crisis.² For example, the Indiana Code states:

*Upon complaint that an individual within the township is: (1) sick; (2) in need; (3) without necessary financial resources; and (4) likely to suffer, the township trustee, as administrator of township assistance, shall investigate and grant the temporary relief required.*³

The Code also makes it clear that this relief can take many forms—housing assistance, food assistance, utility assistance, medical assistance, and more.⁴ Similarly, the Indiana Court of Appeals has on multiple occasions emphasized trustees’ broad obligations to the poor.⁵

As this report title states, taken from a statement by Indiana Township Association Executive Director and Delaware Township Trustee Debbie Driskell in an interview for this report: “A good trustee should be looking for ways to help.” We are glad to highlight several of those trustees.

This Report

In January, 2025, members of this coalition, all of whom work with low-income Central Indiana residents in need of housing and other assistance, published a report on the township trustees of Marion County. That report, *Marion County Township Trustees: Opportunities Seized; Opportunities Missed*, is available at <https://www.indymultifaith.org/trustee-report>. The report provided a comprehensive blueprint for how township assistance could work better for the people who rely on

¹ *Townships*, IND. STATE BD. OF ACCOUNTS, <https://www.in.gov/sboa/political-subdivisions/townships/> and Jill Weiss Sims, *Democracy for Some: Defining the Indiana Landscape through the Rectangular Survey System*, UNTOLD INDIANA (Indiana Historical Bureau, Dec. 12, 2017), <https://blog.history.in.gov/tag/townships/>

² IND. CODE § 12-20-5-1

³ IND. CODE § 12-20-17-3

⁴ See, e.g., *Id.* and IND. CODE § 12-20-16-2, 3, and 12-20-17-2. Housing assistance includes assistance for both renters and homeowners.

⁵ This coalition has outlined those statutes and court decisions in detail in *Marion County Township Trustees: Opportunities Seized; Opportunities Missed* 4-8 (January 2025), available at <https://www.indymultifaith.org/trustee-report>. See, e.g., State ex rel. Van Buskirk v. Wayne Tp., 418 N.E.2d 234, 241 (Ind. Ct. App. 1981); Center Township v. Coe, 572 N.E.2d 1350, 1356, 1358 (Ind. App. 1991); Office of the Trustee of Wayne Township. v. Brooks, 940 N.E.2d 334, 336–37 (Ind. Ct. App. 2010)

it. That report documented the gap between what trustees are legally empowered and resourced to do, and what many residents actually experience when seeking help, which include delays, denials, and barriers rooted in outdated or inconsistently applied policies.

This report builds on that foundation in two ways: First, we broaden our lease beyond Marion County, recognizing that the need for response and effective township assistance extends far beyond Indianapolis.

One of every eight Hoosiers live below the poverty line, with the poverty rate even higher for Indiana’s children.⁶ Over 70,000 evictions were filed in Indiana courts over the past year.⁷ More than 600,000 Hoosiers receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Benefits (SNAP), aka Food Stamps, and almost a half-million Indiana children qualify for free and reduced lunch at school.⁸

“One of every eight Hoosiers live below the poverty line.”

Second, this report shows what is working. We highlight township trustees across multiple counties who are setting a higher standard and who are using their authority, funding, creativity, and compassion to provide timely, effective assistance to Hoosier households. Their practices demonstrate that better outcomes are possible and already happening.

This focus on exemplary trustees is especially urgent. Federal legislation passed in July 2025 will cause many Hoosiers to lose access to food assistance⁹ and health coverage¹⁰, placing additional strain on already vulnerable families. In this context, township trustees can play a crucial role in mitigating harm, if they choose to use the tools available to them.

By showing not only what the law requires, but also what strong township leadership can achieve, this report supplements our earlier blueprint with real-world examples of solutions in action. Our hope is that these examples encourage more trustees, and the communities that hold them accountable, to adopt practices that meet the moment and ensure Hoosiers receive the help they need and deserve.

⁶*Hoosiers by the Numbers*, INDIANA DEPT. OF WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT, https://www.hoosierdata.in.gov/profiles.asp?scope_choice=a&county_changer=18000&id=2&page_path=Area+Pr+ofiles&path_id=11&menu_level=smenu1&panel_number=1, last visited Nov. 24, 2025

⁷ *Indiana*, EVICTION LAB, <https://evictionlab.org/eviction-tracking/indiana/>, last visited Nov. 24, 2025

⁸ *Hoosiers by the Numbers*, *supra* note 7.

⁹ Katie Bergh and Dottie Rosenbaum, *Many Low-Income People Will Soon Begin to Lose Food Assistance Under Republican Megabill*, CENTER ON BUDGET AND POLICY PRIORITIES, Sept. 10, 2025, <https://www.cbpp.org/research/food-assistance/many-low-income-people-will-soon-begin-to-lose-food-assistance-under>

¹⁰ Amelia Coffey, Heather Hahn, *Medicaid Cuts in the One Big Beautiful Bill Act Leave 3 in 10 Young Adults Vulnerable to Losing Health Care Access*, URBAN INSTITUTE, August 7, 2025, <https://www.urban.org/urban-wire/medicaid-cuts-one-big-beautiful-bill-act-leave-3-10-young-adults-vulnerable-losing>

Efforts to restructure or even eliminate township government have periodically surfaced in Indiana policy discussions. For example, in 2007, then-Gov. Mitch Daniels tasked former Indiana Chief Justice Randall Shepard and former Gov. Joseph Kernan to lead an Indiana Commission on Local Government Reform, which ultimately called for township governments to be eliminated.¹¹ The influential Indiana Chamber of Commerce has long echoed that call, with its president saying in 2023, “There’s really nothing that townships do that couldn’t and shouldn’t be done at the county level.”¹² As recently as the 2025 session of the Indiana General Assembly, legislation was introduced to dissolve Indiana townships.¹³ That legislation did not pass, but Senate Bill 1 did, which is projected to cut township funding by as much as \$1 million annually for some of the larger townships.¹⁴

While these proposals are aimed at governmental efficiency rather than the specific work of township trustees, they form an important backdrop for understanding current pressures on the system. Critics of the township model have not identified alternative structures that would reliably maintain or improve the level of assistance trustees currently provide, and recent legislative actions have reduced township resources without establishing replacement mechanisms for emergency aid or poverty-response services. For communities that rely on township assistance, the question is not institutional loyalty to township governance, but the practical need to ensure that any restructuring preserves or strengthens the support available to vulnerable Hoosiers.

So, during October and November of 2025, students from the Indiana University McKinney School of Law, working with the Housing, Health, and Human Rights Clinic, and the Indiana University School of Social Work, working with Indiana Legal Services, conducted interviews with trustees and collected data and information to document the best practices.¹⁵

The trustees interviewed included:

Jeb Bardon	Wayne Township (Marion)
Monica Casanova	Fairfield Township (Tippecanoe)
Jason Critchlow	Portage Township (St. Joseph)

¹¹ IND. COMM. ON LOCAL GOV'T REFORM, STREAMLINING LOCAL GOV'T: WE'VE GOT TO STOP GOVERNING LIKE THIS 2, 25 (2007)

¹² Leslie Bonilla Muniz, *Townships Hope to Prove their Worth – and Get More Support – In New Report*, INDIANA CAPITAL CHRONICLE, (March 2, 2023), <https://indianacapitalchronicle.com/2023/03/02/townships-hope-to-prove-their-worth-and-get-more-support-in-new-report/>

¹³ House Bill 1233, (January 2025), <https://iga.in.gov/legislative/2025/bills/house/1233/details>

¹⁴ Enrique Saenz, *Wayne Township Faces Tough Choices Following Property Tax Reform*, MIRROR INDY, April 28, 2025, <https://mirrorindy.org/wayne-township-indianapolis-property-tax-shortfall-indiana-senate-bill-1/>

¹⁵ Michaela Thomas, J.D. expected 2026, Indiana University McKinney School of Law, and Emily Keifer, M.S.W. expected 2026, Indiana University School of Social Work, led the interviews.

Debbie Driskell	Delaware Township (Hamilton)
Andrew Durham	Center Township (Howard)
Ladonna Freeman	Center Township (Marion)
Jesse Harper	Center Township (Porter)
Austin Knox	Wayne Township (Allen)
Thomas Lopez	Center Township (Hancock)
Lisa Pierzakowski	Center Township (LaPorte)
Kelli Tanger	New Durham Township (LaPorte)
Angel Valentin	Wabash Township (Tippecanoe)

This report summarizes those findings.

Trustees Best Practices

In our coalition’s January, 2025 report, we made several recommendations for improving Marion County trustees’ services, recognizing that some of the trustees were already complying with some of these recommendations:

1. **Allow Walk-in Applications:** Let people apply in person without needing an appointment, so help can be accessed quickly in emergencies.
2. **Faster Response Times:** Commit to responding to all applications within two business days to prevent delays that can worsen a crisis.
3. **Clear and Accessible Information:** Publish eligibility rules, application processes, and office hours on trustee websites so residents know how to get help.
4. **Fair Guidelines:** Ensure that eligibility rules are reasonable and do not unfairly block people from getting the help they need. Guidelines should reflect the real cost of basic necessities like housing, food, and utilities.
5. **Use Funds to Help More People:** Trustees should use a significant portion of their budget to assist those in need, rather than allowing large surpluses to go unspent while residents suffer.
6. **Support for Appeals:** Provide information about legal aid for applicants who want to appeal a denial, making sure people understand their rights and options.

We were pleased to learn that many of the trustees we interviewed for this best-practices report are following these recommendations. More broadly, five themes emerged from our interviews with these trustees: the need to maximize assistance, the benefits of proactive programs, creating community partnerships, the value of hyperlocal assistance; and the importance of a trustee network.

Maximizing Assistance

When Monica Casanova took over as Fairfield Township Trustee in Tippecanoe County, she was surprised by how few requests for assistance her office was receiving. It turns out that her predecessor trustee had a track record of not helping applicants. When Casanova started to change that, she got pushback from former members of the staff. “Oh no, you don’t want to do too much,” she was told. “If you do, word is going to get out.”

Casanova refused to see that as a negative. “Word *should* get out that we are helpful, that we are rebuilding trust,” she says. The words of caution Casanova received were correct in part: Fairfield Township has exceeded its current budget for assistance and has dipped into its reserves. But Casanova makes no apology for

that. “Our numbers are growing in two ways: one, people know that we do help, and two, there is just an incredible need in the community.”

Other trustees agree. “We should be doing as much as we possibly can, and filling in gaps where they exist,” says Jason Critchlow, Portage Township Trustee in St. Joseph County. “We want to do everything we can to help, even bending the rules but not breaking them,” says Jeb Bardon, Wayne Township Trustee in Marion County.

As Driskell, who is both the Delaware Township Trustee in Hamilton County and executive director of the trustees’ association, told us, “The measure of an exceptional trustee is how far outside the box they are willing to go to see that no one in their township suffers from lack of services.” But Casanova is not the only trustee who has faced pushback for this approach. “I’m sick and tired of people telling me, stop doing your job,” Lisa Pierzakowski, Center Township Trustee in LaPorte County, says. “My job, according to the statute, is to help the less fortunate. And that’s what I am doing.”

For these trustees, a threshold priority is making it easier for community members to apply for assistance. Ladonna Freeman, Center Township Trustee in Marion County has added weekend and evening hours for applicants to request help in-person. Allen County Wayne Township Trustee Austin Knox’s office brings applications to community events.

Portage Township in St. Joseph County aims for a 24-hour turnaround for all applications received. Center Township in LaPorte County has a 24-hour/7-days-per-week emergency number. Many trustees have cut their application length by more than half. “We have an obligation under the law to investigate applications,” says Driskell. “But making the application easier is within the discretion of each trustee.”

Proactive Programs

Once the process of applying for help became easier, unmet needs were revealed. Those needs have inspired multiple impactful local programs. Center Township Trustee Thomas Lopez in Hancock County launched a warming center that offers shelter, a meal, and a hot shower any day that the temperature drops below 32 degrees. Delaware Township in Hamilton County responded to the lack of accessible medical facilities by contracting with a mobile health clinic to set up on site to serve trustee clients. Center Township in Marion County offers free diapers, car seats, and haircuts, and opens its doors to unhoused people during daytime hours.¹⁶

¹⁶ Peter Blanchard, *Here’s What’s Happening in Center Township in April*, MirrorIndy, April 10, 2025, <https://mirrorindy.org/center-township-marion-county-indianapolis-events-april-2025/>

Sometimes a simple policy change can make a big impact. Wayne Township in Marion County has one of the highest numbers of evictions in the state, with over 4,000 evictions filed in 2024.¹⁷ So when the Trustee changed its practice and began providing rental assistance even after an eviction was filed, that opened up the process for a lot of residents.

When the Portage Township Trustee in St. Joseph County learned about unsafe, unhealthy conditions in rental apartments where they were reimbursing the landlord, the trustee successfully sued the landlord and enlisted the help of the Attorney General of Indiana.¹⁸ The Center Township Trustee in LaPorte County set up a separate nonprofit organization to raise funds and pursue grants for needed services. The Fairfield Township Trustee in Tippecanoe County transformed a township-owned house for use as a temporary shelter.

Community Partnerships

Every trustee interviewed emphasized the importance of partnering with community organizations. Since people in need are coming to the trustees' offices so consistently, they found it helpful to seek donations of food, clothing, and other necessities that can be distributed. For example, Andrew Durham, Trustee of Center Township in Howard County, reports partnering with two dozen local agencies.

Many trustees contract with local nonprofits, shelters, and churches. Fairfield Township in Tippecanoe County has awarded funds to an eviction prevention program and to a shelter in order to expand its space, and supports a United Way program that incentivizes landlords to rent to tenants with past evictions or criminal backgrounds.

The Value of Hyperlocal Assistance

The interviewed trustees say that some trustees' failure to provide assistance and/or follow responsible practices obscures the value that trustees can provide.¹⁹

¹⁷ *Indiana Trial Court Statistics by County: Wayne Township, Marion County*, PUBLIC.COURTS.IN.GOV, <https://publicaccess.courts.in.gov/ICOR/>, last visited Nov. 28, 2025.

¹⁸ Camile Sarabia, *Is It Enough? South Bend Apartment Complex Settles Complaints After Loss of Heat, Hot Water*, South Bend Tribune, Aug. 23, 2024, <https://www.southbendtribune.com/story/news/local/2024/08/23/cedar-glen-apartments-give-affected-tenants-192-in-rental-credits-south-bend-no-heat-no-hot-water/74870642007/>

¹⁹ For critiques of trustee performance, see Scott L. Miley, *Indiana Township Government: It's An Anomaly, It's Wasteful*, TIMES-MAIL, (Dec. 18, 2018), Patrick M. Cline, *The Quiet Crisis: The Kernan-Shepard Report and Indiana's Need to Eliminate Township Government*, IND. LAW REV. Vol. 48, (2015); IND. COMM. ON LOCAL GOVT REFORM, *supra* note 12, and *Marion County Township Trustees*, *supra* note 3.

They insist that immersion in the community provides them with intimate knowledge of both the needs of their neighbors and the resources available nearby.

“When my phone rings at 4:30 in the morning and it’s the city police calling because they had an attempted murder at an apartment, I get up and go meet with the family and get them into a hotel,” Pierzakowski says. “The county and the state are not going to do that.”

Similarly, several trustees emphasize their ability to be flexible with assistance guidelines during emergencies, compared to federal or state programs that deny applicants who are just a dollar or two over income. “If we lose township government, homelessness is going to be worse,” Pierzakowski says.

“...immersion in the community provides [trustees] with intimate knowledge of both the needs of their neighbors and the resources available nearby.”

Trustee Network

If the values of hyperlocal assistance are close connection to the community and flexibility in providing help, an associated risk is a system of 1,002 programs that exist in siloes, failing to benefit from other trustees’ lessons learned and models created.

So the interviewed trustees emphasized the value they have gained from regular exchanges between each other and fellow trustees. Some of those exchanges come in the way of formalized trainings and standardized forms and procedures, often provided by the Indiana Township Association. But the trustees also cited the value of less formal networks of exchanging ideas as they face shared challenges.

Reforms Suggested by Best-Practices Trustees

The trustees interviewed are well aware of the checkered reputation of township trustees in Indiana. “There are yearly attacks against our system in the General Assembly, which are incredibly stressful for the townships that are doing well,” says Knox of Allen County’s Wayne Township.

The trustees interviewed readily agree that criticism of many trustees is justified. Casanova says her predecessor aimed to give away as little assistance as possible. Until 2020, a predecessor trustee in Portage Township in St. Joseph County capped the township rent assistance at \$90 per month. “We have too many townships that don’t meet people, don’t answer their phones, that don’t help them,” says Pierzakowski. “And it breaks my heart because it makes us that are doing our jobs and doing the right thing look bad.”

Driskell boils it down to a simple comparison. “A good trustee is always looking for ways to help. A bad trustee is looking for ways to deny them,” she says.

In 2022, the Indiana Township Association, in collaboration with the Indiana University Public Policy Institute, convened a task force made up of township officials, state agency representatives, and other stakeholders. The task force issued a report that included multiple recommendations for reforms of the township trustee system.²⁰ Those recommendations included:

- Supporting townships that choose to merge
- Standardize some guidelines for administering township assistance
- Mandate continuing education for trustees and critical staff
- Penalties for trustees that fail to provide township financial information and fail to perform critical duties

Several of the trustees we interviewed strongly endorsed these reforms. And some of the merger activity is already occurring. In 2022, Franklin, Needham and Union townships in Johnson County merged into a single township — Franklin Union Needham (FUN) Township. Three township trustees in LaPorte County proposed merging before a vote by one township’s board rejected the plan in November, 2025. But support for mergers remains strong. Kelli Tanger, trustee of the relatively small New Durham Township in LaPorte County, provided valuable perspective. Tanger, who runs a part-time trustee office out of her home, takes applicant calls herself. She supports a merger so that her township residents can gain access to the more robust programs available in the larger townships.

Conclusion

Our coalition supports the recommendations made by the Indiana Township Association and IU Public Policy Institute report. And we repeat the recommendations made in our January, 2025 report. Implementing these specific reforms would provide enormous value to the many struggling Hoosiers across our state.

In many ways, the township trustee system is broken. But the best-practices trustees across the state demonstrate that it can be repaired. They provide a roadmap that shows the path toward township trustees creating a more humane and safer Indiana, protecting Hoosier households during a historically challenging time.

²⁰ INDIANA UNIVERSITY PUBLIC POLICY INSTITUTE AND INDIANA TOWNSHIP ASSOCIATION, THE STUDY OF EFFICIENCY & EFFECTIVENESS OF INDIANA TOWNSHIP GOVERNMENT (2022), available at https://www.ita-in.org/site_page.cfm?pk_association_webpage_menu=10936