

Scott Santens

Thank you for inviting me from my home in Washington, D.C. to be here in person today. I'm excited to share with you all a summary of what's been happening in the US in the basic income movement recently, and how just providing people cash appears to be taking root in the US as program after program continues building the case.

For those who don't know me or my work, I'm just a guy who happened to get really into the concept of basic income ten years ago. I get asked all the time how that happened, so long story short, I was on Reddit one day, read the many comments in a discussion thread about how quickly technology was advancing and yet no one was talking about it, found out about UBI, started researching it, and there was no going back after that. Two years later, I was living with a perpetual crowdfunded monthly basic income floor that has ever since enabled me to focus on UBI full-time.

It was actually through gaining my own basic income floor, that I learned first-hand how truly transformative UBI will be society-wide. First, I learned what it meant to feel a real sense of security, and how little security I ever felt before that. It's like we're all fish swimming in an ocean of insecurity. It's hard to understand what security really means by just reading and talking about it, when all we've ever known is insecurity. I also learned that people underestimate just how big a deal even a small UBI is. A couple hundred dollars a month may not sound like much, but when you know for certain it's going to be there, you know for certain that at the very least, you're not going to go hungry. That feeling of not having to ever worry about coming up with money for food is not at all insignificant. It's paramount.

When describing a significant result from the Stockton, CA pilot, former Mayor Michael Tubbs has said the mental health impact was akin to antidepressants. And even though it was only \$500 a month, an amount some people claimed would have no effect, it also doubled the rate of full-time employment among recipients compared to non-recipients. A story that illustrates that impact is how one of the pilot participants took a day off work to secure a better job. His basic income afforded him the time to do that, and empowered him to take that risk. If all we're doing is trying to come up with next month's rent, it's that much harder for us to afford the time and risk it takes to find a job that fits us best, or at least better.

These are the kinds of stories being generated across the US, in addition to the empirical data. The new wave of American basic income pilots began with one city in 2018, which turned into 11 mayors across 11 cities in June 2020 with the launch of Mayors for a Guaranteed Income, which has since expanded to 116 mayors as of June. Across all pilots, MGI and non-MGI affiliated, over 100 pilots have already launched or completed, with around 60 currently active. What was once just a group of mayors for guaranteed income has also become a group of 28 county officials for guaranteed income across 21 counties, and even a documentary titled "It's Basic" on a national 16-month tour of 50 cities. That's also not the only documentary to be created as the result of a US pilot. A program in Chelsea, Massachusetts that provided monthly cash instead of food to over 2,000 households resulted in a documentary titled "Raising the

Floor” that’s currently in the film festival circuit. In addition, a docuseries titled “Bootstraps” that filmed 10 households across the US living with a basic income of \$1,000 a month per adult and \$333 per month per kid for two and a half years is currently in post-production.

It’s important to note that none of the US pilots are saturation site pilots where income is received universally, but the huge diversity of pilots and the participants they enroll does paint a picture of universality. An unconditional monthly cash program that only enrolls the unhoused is not UBI, but because UBI will include everyone who is unhoused, a good story from a homelessness-focused pilot can show how effective UBI will be at reducing homelessness.

For example, Miracle Messages, a charity in San Francisco that was already focused on helping the unhoused get housed, decided to provide \$500 a month to 15 homeless people for 6 months and the result was that two-thirds of them found housing. It was so successful that it has expanded its cash-giving with the intent of providing \$750 a month for one year to 100 more unhoused people in a randomized controlled trial.

Here is a summary of most of the many different groups of people besides the unhoused participating in America’s guaranteed basic income pilots: pregnant women, unpaid caregivers, former foster youth, youth at high risk of crime, the formerly incarcerated, young parents, single parents, high school students, LGBTQ, artists, community college students, refugees, pre-retirement-age seniors, people with disabilities, welfare benefit recipients, and entrepreneurs. Missing from this list I feel are groups like: coal miners, veterans, first responders, and scientists. Consider who you think is missing. What would make for new politically impactful UBI stories?

Besides the great variety of people in the US pilots, there’s also a diversity of payment amounts, durations, and frequencies. The smallest amount of basic income is \$50 a week and the largest is \$1,204 a month. The shortest duration has been three months and the longest is five years. The various frequencies are weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, quarterly, and semi-annually. All of this variety can help us learn more about optimal payment frequency, and if certain amounts of UBI provide greater bang per dollar than smaller or larger amounts.

The US also just ran what was essentially the largest US-based basic income pilot ever by providing \$250-\$300 a month per kid to 9 out of 10 kids in the US in 2021. On average, that worked out to around \$462 a month to 36 million families. The result was the biggest drop in child poverty in American history, cutting it about in half, with no drop in unemployment. The number of parents selling their blood plasma also fell, and fewer parents started abusing drugs. Symptoms of anxiety also dropped by over 13%. And when the payments stopped, parental unemployment increased, likely due to a decreased ability to afford child care.

America’s UBI that has existed in Alaska for over 40 years now also continues to teach us more about UBI as new studies of it are done. Two recent studies found that an additional \$1,000 in UBI reduced the likelihood that a child is referred to Child Protective Services by 2 percentage points, or about 10%, on average, and also increased voter turnout by 7.6 percentage points.

Some lessons that have been learned in the process of running our many pilots are the following: Input from participants is helpful. Listen to them. Maybe they'd prefer they get paid mid-month versus the first. Or maybe they'd prefer a debit card instead of direct deposit. Control group retention is a challenge. Consider how to create sufficient incentive to keep collecting data from control groups. Local universities can be great research partners, as can local nonprofits be useful for participant recruitment and funding. Trust can be a barrier and basic income can feel like something too good to be true. A trusted local org can help conquer the obstacles of disbelief and distrust. Benefit cliffs can be really tricky, especially for those with disabilities who aren't allowed to earn additional income without losing their disability income. Participants need to know they could lose something they're already getting unless waivers are secured.

Also consider what happens to those who apply to be pilot participants who aren't selected. What happens to them? It's smart to engage them in some way and keep them engaged. These are the people who may be willing to be civically active in support of UBI. Finally, what about storytelling? Don't just collect data. Make a plan for telling the stories. Consider collecting those stories via audio or video. Consider also preparing participants on how to be effective at public speaking and how to communicate with the media. Special storytelling cohorts that aren't part of the experimental group or the control group can be great for training and communicating their stories that the supporting data is only able to tell with cold data.

I can't stress enough how important these stories are. UBI will be won or lost based on stories, regardless of what all the mountains of data from the pilots they originate from have to say. One extremely powerful story can mean the difference between basic income for all actually happening or not, but there is no such thing as one perfect story for all. What's needed are stories that people can see themselves in.

If you're an artist just barely getting by now thanks to generative AI's ability to create the images people want to see in seconds, you need to see a story about how having a basic income transformed an artist's life for the better. You need to experience their story and think, "That could be me if UBI existed." That's how an artist becomes a UBI activist.

That's why I'm especially excited about the artist basic income pilots in the US and also Ireland. With thousands of artists living with basic income for years, that's thousands of stories about a demographic of people who are humanity's storytellers. Hopefully these kinds of pilots can lead to a lot more content about the incredible effectiveness of UBI.

It's the power of the stories of UBI in action that is why I recently founded my own non-profit in the US called the Income to Support All Foundation or ITSA Foundation for short as a nod to what UBI can succinctly be defined as. It's a foundation! The goal of ITSA Foundation is to get the projects launched that will get a small UBI going right now, permanently, and tell the powerful stories that result from people living with UBI. We hope to have over 100,000 people

living with a small basic income of \$50 a week by 2026, and we hope to share the stories with the greatest potential impact to inspire a national movement.

I have hope that the US can get some amount of national UBI going by the end of the decade. Polling to gauge national support has been going steadily up. In 2019 it was 43%. A year later it was 55%. Most recent polling earlier this year showed it now at 61%, including 50% of Republicans. I think OpenAI's launch of ChatGPT last November has helped.

I think OpenAI will also provide another boost in support next year. Sam Altman has said his 5-year UBI pilot using an RCT design with 1,000 UBI recipients and 2,000 in the control group that has been taking place across two states will finish next year, and with those results, in 2024, they will begin pushing for national UBI legislation.

The first permanent local guaranteed income program also now already exists in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where due to the success of their pilot, every resident with a dependent under 21, living at or below 250% of the federal poverty level, now qualifies for \$500 a month for 18 months. It's not UBI, but it's another step forward.

My hope is that we can continue taking these steps in the US, and that other countries, including yours, will also continue taking your own steps, and that one step at a time, some country will get to UBI first, and then the rest of the world will follow. The BIG question is, who will be first?