

Making a Difference

A United Effort

An Interview with Sheena Wright,
President and Chief Executive Officer, United Way of New York City



Members of United Way of New York City's Women's Leadership Council volunteering at the Bowery Mission

EDITORS' NOTE Sheena Wright was named to her current post in October 2012, the first woman to lead the organization in its 75-year history. From 2002 to 2012, Wright served as President and CEO of the Abyssinian Development Corporation (ADC). She previously served as Chief Operating Officer of ADC. Prior to ADC, she served as the General Counsel and EVP of Business Development for Crave Technologies; a Senior Associate at the law firm of Reboul, MacMurray, Hewitt, Maynard and Kristol; and an Associate at the law firm of Wachtell, Lipton, Rosen and Katz. Wright serves on the board of trustees of the Vera Institute for Justice and the New York City Regional Economic Development Council. She is a graduate of Columbia University, which she entered at age 16, received her law degree from Columbia Law School, and is a member of the New York State Bar.



Sheena Wright

ORGANIZATION BRIEF United Way of New York City (unitedwaynyc.org; UWNYC) is a non-profit, community service organization with a long and rich history of helping build resilient communities. As one of the best-known nonprofits and part of the worldwide United Way brand, UWNYC helps to mobilize communities to break down barriers and build opportunities that improve the lives of low-income New Yorkers for the benefit of all. UWNYC envisions caring communities where all individuals and families have access to quality education, and the opportunity to lead healthy and financially secure lives. UWNYC partners with and provides resources to over 500 nonprofit organizations to address the needs of hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers every year.

What excited you about this opportunity and made you feel it would be the right fit?

It was the potential for creating a wide and deep impact in the biggest and most significant city in the country.

What's unique about United Way is it brings together three sectors that typically operate in a silo. We were born out of the corporate silo. It was 75 years ago in response to the Great Depression that Hearst, Rockefeller, and other corporate leaders formed the Greater New York Fund in response to the fiscal crisis to address what could be done to undergird the social safety net.

Sixty-five percent of our revenue comes from the corporate sector, but not just from a boutique group: it's from retail, corporations, law firms, etc., and it ranges from the CEO to the cashier at Macy's. So the whole corporate community answers the call.

The second sector we are deeply engaged with is direct service organizations in every borough in the city. We know what programs are good and where to make bets that will pay off, and we are trusted by the non-profit community.

The third sector is the public sector, where you get the broad-scale systemic change. We have a strong relationship with the public sector because we have been partners and grantees, and we have helped drive large-scale change based on pilot innovative initiatives in partnership with the corporate sector.

We work to leverage those three disparate groups to create significant impact.

Has the mission evolved through the years?

The mission has been refined in response to market demands. United Way was initially a community chest, so it collected a lot of resources, and its mission was advancing the common good. It was great, but we didn't know how to measure if we were moving the needle.

Ten years ago, we shifted from simply being a community chest to a collective impact organization that can demonstrate that it has moved the needle in education, financial strength and stability, and health. We make strategic investments where we're bringing together the players that influence a positive outcome in those areas.

Our mission continues to be about good works and societal improvements, but it has been more defined and the approach has changed significantly.

You touched on education. Why hasn't more impact been made to improve and reform the system?

There has been a lot of dialogue; some helpful and some not. Because we're still having these conversations in silos, we're missing the proper collaboration.

Building a strong educational system is critical in making sure we produce a well-skilled workforce, but the corporate sector has not been at the table in the way it should. It needs

to help determine the competencies and skills that are needed in the workforce and that have to be included in curriculums. Today, there is still a sense that the corporate sector will have to play catch-up in retraining and reeducating those who come out of the education system.

Macy's is one of our top corporate sponsors and Terry Lundgren (Chairman, Macy's) was formerly on our board. He said the amount of time and money he has to spend pre-training new recruits before he actually trains them to do their job is enormous. He would obviously like to reduce that spend but he cannot figure out how to move the Department of Education (DOE).

Workforce development organizations and nonprofits are trying to train people but they don't have the perspective of the corporate CEOs to help them understand what training they need to provide.

We need to have one conversation with all those involved so we can capitalize on what everyone brings to the table. There are pockets of success, but the three key sectors aren't coming together to collectively have one goal to strive towards.

What is the primary focus for United Way of New York in terms of health?

Health care access is a huge issue. We predominantly focus on low-income communities across the city, and address that 50 percent of New Yorkers who are at or near the poverty level. Since the last recession, 31 percent of Americans have experienced some form of poverty. Health care expenses are huge and can really drive people over the edge.

Prevention is also important. A lot of what plagues low-income New Yorkers is asthma and diet-related diseases, like diabetes. We work to come up with better solutions around access and service delivery, and to understand how these issues impact educational outcomes, and people's ability to work steadily and not lose their jobs.

How are you attempting to address the issues of financial strength and stability?

We're in the process of investing in a self-sufficiency index that addresses how much it actually costs to live in areas of New York by pricing out housing, child care, groceries, and other basic expenses. We will then be able to link that to what kind of jobs will drive the income necessary to live there. It will also allow us to address other necessary support, like affordable housing. ●